



Rev Susan Adams
Will it make a difference/
Can we make a difference?
Ordinary 15 / Matariki Sunday
Isaiah 55:6-11
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23
16 July 2023

An important question for me, in relation to the church and theology, has always been *“what difference will it make?”* It is still a guiding question for me when I’m thinking about theology and the role of the church today: *“what difference will it make?”*

So when I came to consider the reading set for today I asked the same question

“what difference will it make?” to hear this familiar parable once again?

I started my pondering by recalling the context for Matthew’s gospel, and wondering what was going on at the time, and what difference the writer we call Matthew might have hoped his writings would have made for his audience in those last decades of the first century.

This gospel, written - perhaps about 90 CE - addresses Matthew’s Jewish-Christian community. Those last decades of the first century, as we have heard many times, was a period of heightened hostility between the growing Jewish-Christian community and non-Christian-Jewish community. This tension was likely exacerbated by the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem by the Romans in 70CE. Following the destruction there was a turbulent time in which there was a reassertion of power and control in the cities by the Roman colonial powers and a decrease in the Jewish population as many were pushed out of the cities and relocated in the countryside. Within the cultural confusion it was likely there was a renewed emphasis on Jewish identity with the Pharisees rising to power and reasserting Jewish protocol and religious practices as they coped with Roman rule and cross-cultural confusion.

There was concurrently an increase in the gentile population with Romans and Greeks, including Gentile-Christians, entering the cities. The situation is volatile.

Matthew is caught in a conundrum: he is Jewish, and sees the Jesus story as deeply rooted in Judaism, and, he is a member of the emerging Christian community. He sees the proclamation of Jesus teaching with its affirmations about God's relationship with humanity: it's ethical imperatives, and instructions, and it's promises, as the salvation story for all humanity - Jews and Gentiles.

It was into that hostile and volatile context that Matthew's Jesus is speaking. Historians suggest Matthew's audience was largely comprised of Jewish peasants, many of whom may have been resettled outside the new and refurbished cities. We know some were given land grants in upper Galilee, (and others not so lucky had to find livelihoods as best they could). This area was a much drier and more difficult climate than southern Galilee, so making a living from the land was hard work.

Matthew uses lots of food and food growing references in the parables his Jesus tells, like the one we have this morning. You can imagine, given the conditions, how shocking it would have been to the ears of the struggling peasants to hear of a wasteful farmer throwing expensive seed everywhere. In the best of conditions at the time not all seed grew, perhaps one in six, one in four if you're lucky, so to cast it amongst the weeds and on the stony paths where they had no chance was just downright wasteful. What was Matthew hoping for? What difference did he hope this parable would make to his hearers in the midst of their daily life and struggle?

We can surmise from the gospels in general that Jesus seldom explained the parables he used. But Matthew, perhaps not sure his audience would get the message, or perhaps by interpellation of a later redactor, does explain. He challenges his audience to think about which sort of ground they are as the seed comes to them. (Jesus, and his vision, his generous love and compassion, *being the seed, and God the sower*).

When the people heard the messages embedded in the stories of Jesus that were accumulating and circulating, what difference would they make? How would they understand these coded messages?

They same question applies to us. *What difference will those same stories make to our lives?*

What impact on us will the vision of a renewed and restored human community living peaceably, at one with the earth that sustains us and all living things, make to our choices about our lives and relationships with others: with other sentient beings and with the earth herself?

It seems to me, unless the stories we hear week by week make a difference, somehow, big or little, we are stony ground - and the potential of the seed available to us is wasted!

As individuals and as church it is good to reflect on the difference we would like to make in our time: *in this time* of climate crisis; of disgruntlement; of despair and fear that is circulating in our community. Unless we can imagine how the world could be we have no alternative vision to strive for!

So, as we face the intensification of the fossil-fuel fed climate crisis, - with its impact on food production, homelessness, identity, and livelihoods - it behooves us to ask "what difference our stories will make?"

Matthew was challenging his hearers to accept that God was with them - urging them not to forget the covenant between God and humanity that can be relied on - *so make your choice he seems to be saying.*

You can be passive, you can fall into despair, or **you** can choose to make a difference and be hopeful.

Are **you** offering hopeful ways ahead, or exacerbating fear? Are **you** passive commentators and critics, making self-protective responses and not wanting to move from the places **you** know how to manage.

What difference will our proclamations (- our words and actions) - make?

In the main, people today are urban dwellers. In Aotearoa, Statistics NZ report almost 87% of us in 2021 lived in urban situations. So it fair to say many of us are somewhat distanced from food production, and land fertility issues - but we know about supply lines!. And, it is possible to assume that most of us have an awareness of how climate is impacting our economy, and, how decisions about opening 'green fields' for housing development will impact the future we are bequeathing to future generations.

This is the Matariki holiday weekend. The time when the Matariki constellation of stars rise in the night sky. In times past it was a seasonal marker in the annual cycle of planting and harvesting of food crops, and a time of recalling and retelling the stories of ancestors who watched over the whanau.

We might ask ourselves what sort of ancestors will we be for generations in the future who look back remembering and recalling our lives and actions in this period of history.

In the face of the fear and dissatisfaction that seems to be infecting our communities currently, and contributing to the increase in vitriol against Māori and people we identify as 'other', we need to ask:

- Are we feeding the fear, or feeding a hopeful confidence that together we can choose a different future.
- Are we passively circling the ground in which an uprising of self-centered protectionism is growing; where the seeds of intolerance toward those for whom society has become a confusing and hostile context are growing;
- Are we 'poking' at the soil in which anti-social behaviours that we all find upsetting! are acted out.

It is imperative we ask ourselves "what difference we want to make?"

"What difference will our stories of faith make" is a critical question as we select a new vicar; what difference do we want St Matthew-in-the-City to make?

How we answer these questions will help us, along with our vicar and leadership team, to shape a strategic plan for the next period of time - 5 - 10 years.

What difference do we want St Matthews to make?

are we able to provide the quality soil in which the seeds of faith and hope can grow?

Will we, honour the covenant and do our bit to disperse seeds of hope and abundant wasteful love?

We each have a part to play in the salvation story we tell.

As Matthew says "Let anyone with ears listen!" (Matt13:9)