

Living as parables and artists

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 13 June, 2021

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkin

Pentecost 3B

**Contemporary Reading: *A Blessing for Artists at the Start of the Day*
by John O'Donohue; Mark 4; 20-34**

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

Today's Gospel lectionary reading invites us into Jesus' way of communicating, which is not just about speech, even accompanied by silence and action. It is a way of being, a way of living; a way of living as parables, a way of being as artists.

Many of us are obviously gifted as specific artists – whether that be, for example, as theatre performers, musicians, dancers, or painters. Thanks be to God for those of us who are! Our churches have not always fully valued such people as wonderful embodiments of what God in Jesus calls us all to be – namely artists of divine love and mystery. For that, following Jesus' example, is what we are all intended to be. Artists of divine love and mystery – in my view, that is one creative way of expressing what Christian traditions have called 'the priesthood of all believers'.

Whilst some may take on particular aspects of priesthood, we are all involved. Like birds and other creatures, like the seeds of which Jesus spoke in today's Gospel, we are each called to give voice to the divine song which seeks to be expressed through us, to give life to the new forms and flourishing which lies within us. We need not worry how small or insignificant we are, or how possibly limited or despised we may be. Like the mustard seed we are not only intended to flower. In doing so, we can provide life for others. Nor need we be stressed by thoughts of how we are to do this. We need only trust that we will, in the mystery of life which has called us into being.

I have deliberately used words of the great Irish priest-poet-philosopher John O'Donohue in our liturgy today. For his Celtic understanding of Christian spirituality was so rich, nuanced, and redolent of the deeply earthed life and teaching of Jesus. Like Jesus, O'Donohue's writings encourage us to draw on our experience of the world around us and within us, and to do so as artists: to '*tell the truth but tell it slant*', as the poet Emily Dickenson famously put it. This is certainly what we see in Jesus. Jesus' disciples may have desperately wanted teaching and action that was straightforward, and prose. Jesus however continues to 'tell it slant' – teasing and challenging in their teaching, encouraging poetry in spirituality and life, rather than mere prose.

I could talk for ages about what I have found valuable in John O'Donohue's work, but perhaps one insight stands out above all. '*When you see God as an artist*', he used to say, '*everything changes*.' It does. Too much religion has missed this.

It is not that metaphors for God like Judge, or King, are not valuable. Rightly understood they are helpful, if we use them wisely and in proportion to other metaphors. However, as John O'Donohue said, '*we have so over-emphasised the will of God at the expense of the creativity of God.*' Understanding God as artist is to renew our understanding of divine creativity, and, as we are made in the image of God, it is to renew our own callings as artists of the same divine life and mystery.

That is a little of what Dr Doru Costache was sharing with us last week. Whilst aspects of the Orthodox traditions can seem quite forbidding, their heart lies in understanding and contemplating the mystery and artistry of God among and around us – which can be expressed in all manner of evocative metaphors, including, as Doru illustrated, ancient Christian images of the Holy Spirit like a mother bird brooding over creation and bringing it to life, like warming and hatching her eggs. Jesus similarly, in their teaching, uses images and metaphors drawn from the world around them, enticing their hearers into deeper awareness of truth and reality.

As we are reminded in today's Gospel, Jesus' teaching is therefore particularly in parables. I did have a chuckle about that this week when I Googled for an image for the front of our worship sheet. The first one that came up said 'meaning, definition, explanation' and I thought how interesting. Part of the wonder of parables is that their meaning is not straightforward, easily defined, or simple to explain.

Whilst Christian commentators have read all kinds of things from them, and sometimes defined them in narrow, even destructive, terms, they were deliberately told to evade capture. Like Zen koans, or spiritual sayings in other wisdom traditions, and all great art, the parables of Jesus were told to open up questions rather than provide answers, to tease us into deeper understanding and wonder rather than solve our problems, to transform our consciousness rather than provide us with laws or direct guidance for living.

As you can see, the image I chose to accompany our worship on parables, was therefore very different. If a parable can in any way be represented visually, it surely must be done so artistically – as by the great artist Vincent Van Gogh, another human being, like Jesus, vibrantly alive with wonder, in the creativity and profound artistic mystery of God.

We are not Jesus, nor even Vincent Van Gogh, but, similarly, we are all called to live, like them, as parables, and as artists. That is the outflowing intended by our Gospel today. For we can interpret the parables in different ways, as scholars and other followers of Jesus have done down the ages. How though ultimately, are we to live them?

Others can certainly help us to see more in the parables than we might immediately perceive. For the most obvious 'lesson' to be drawn from today's Gospel is that Jesus is telling us that we do not have to be big, powerful, or obviously well gifted, to share in God's love and make a difference in the world. That is all very positive. Yet there is much more.

John Dominic Crossan, for example, is among those who have helpfully reflected upon the specific significance of the mustard seed. For it is an interesting choice of seeds by Jesus, isn't it? In typical Semitic teaching style, Jesus has also exaggerated its literal capacities. After all, does the mustard seed really grow to become the largest of all bushes? That has been a handy idea for the proponents of imperial forms of Christian Faith, advocates of the prosperity Gospel, and even, dare I say it, the active encouragers of 'church growth' across so many Christian denominations in recent times.

We may wonder however whether Jesus really had in mind all the mission statements, and church growth strategies to which we have become accustomed, never mind more grander designs. Is that really the end goal of Jesus' dynamic, organic, ecologically grounded teaching?

Like the taste of mustard, there is at least a definite strong impact intended in Jesus' teaching. As I say, John Dominic Crossan is one scholar to highlight the fact that the mustard seed was regarded as a weed in Jesus' context, and that it could run wild, and be seen as pestiferous and persistent as Patterson's curse. Positively, this means both that the spirit of God simply cannot be eradicated, and also that it will involve all kinds of seemingly 'undesirable' elements. Even where it is resisted however, it will keep on existing and growing.

The consequence is also that the seeds of God are not really starters for imperial, or church, growth, as many people have tried, and still try, to make them be. Rather they are metaphors for the wildness and subversiveness of God and the kind of relationships and world God creates.

The original text uses the word 'basileia' for this art work of God. Some recent translations, like that of the Inclusive Bible we heard earlier, render this as 'the reign' of God. I have to say that the Inclusive Bible is not always helpful in such things, as in this case. For the word 'basileia' is also traditionally translated as 'kingdom' of God.

It is this very concept that Jesus is subverting, as he does elsewhere in his teaching and actions. All around Jesus could be seen large constructions of the Roman kingdom, or empire, and the puppet kingdoms of Judaea. These however, Jesus is saying, are not the model for true relationship. God's 'kingdom' is not about 'bigness'. Actually, it is not only small – super, nano, small - but wild, like nature. It is not forced but it flows. It is not based on clever political or religious thinking or prosaic formations. It is a mystery, poetry, art, to be entered into. It looks, sounds, feels, touches, tastes, differently. Always, it seems, with God in Jesus there is this tang of mustard. And those who enter into this transformative 'kingdom' are likely to be, or become regarded as weeds.

Robert Funk similarly pointed out how there is an allusion in the Gospel to references in the book of Ezekiel (in both chapters 17 and 31) to the great cedar of Lebanon as a towering image of God. Instead, Jesus offers this wild, weedy, mustard seed. It is, as Funk says (in *The Five Gospels*), yet another example of Jesus' subversive humour. Jesus '*deliberately chose the symbol of the weed and its seed to represent the poor, the toll collectors, and the sinners: they are pesky intrusions into the ordered garden of society.*'

Others have also recently re-explored today's Gospel parables with more ecological eyes. Bruce Sanguin (in *The Way of the Wind*) thus suggests three interrelated features in these parables for a what he calls a more 'evolutionary' spirituality: firstly, how the growth of the seed describes how God's grace works in the universe, from the inside out and within the impulse to become; secondly, how we ourselves are divine seeds, with the same natural grace that animates seeds working within us to bear fruit; and, thirdly, how the very image of God is within us in potential form, just as an oak is within an acorn. Again, there is so much more to the parables, and to the Bible, than we immediately think, as we dig deeper and reflect upon them. For there is some truth in Lloyd Geering's observation almost twenty years ago (in *Christianity Without God*), that: 'the Jesus most relevant to us is the one who provided no ready-made answers but by tantalising stories prompted people to work out their own most appropriate answers to the problems of life. That is why the parables... will be remembered long after the historic confessions and creeds have been forgotten.'

So where does that leave us today, this morning? How do these parables challenge you, and us together? What might we see in them? The temptation is always to some kind of false 'kingdom', to some illusions of 'bigness' in our lives, to some form of prose spirituality. Jesus reminds us of the only true God who is like an artist, calling on us to be artists too.

Nor do we need to strive in such a vocation. One of the great and healing features of today's Gospel is how this creative work of God is happening anyway, whatever we do. We do not need to stress ourselves to try to get things right. Rather, can we let the creativity of God flow in us?

Let me therefore conclude with a brief meditation (from the NCCA Seeds of Peace CD some years ago) into which I invite you:

Sit quietly in a comfortable position and close your eyes. Allow the tension to fall from your body as you breathe gently in and out.

After a time, picture a single seed in your mind's eye. This is a seed of peace.

Imagine this seed planted deep within the good soil of your heart. It lies there in the sheltering earth.

The rain of God's mercy and the warmth of God's love work upon this little seed, until it splits open.

Roots and shoots begin to appear, pushing their way through the moist soil.

The first shoot pushes its way to the surface, striving for the light. It is tender and vulnerable, not determined. Its roots sink deeper into the rich soil within you.

You look and see that there are other young shoots just like this one. Some are deep within you, others within the hearts of those known to you. Some are small. Some are sturdy and strong the size of a tree, giving shelter to those who gather beneath them.

The rain continues to fall and the sun to shine upon your shoot, and it begins to grow.

You give thanks for its growth, and for all the other trees of peace growing in our world.

You promise to tend the seeds of peace planted within you, and when you are ready, you bring your attention back to the present and open your eyes.

In the love and grace of God. Amen.