



Listen, Understand & Bear Fruit

KATHLEEN RUSHTON discusses the parable of the sower in Matthew 13:1-23.

Painting: *Parable of the Sower* by Jacqueline Norman © Used with permission www.artistsandillustrators.co.uk/jacqueline-norman

Jesus was steeped in the Scriptures which are Earth-centred – focused on the land and the agricultural life humanity builds around it. Beginning with Genesis the relationship between God and humanity is interconnected with the relationship between humanity and Earth.

A fertile, habitable Earth indicates the health of the covenant relationship between God and the people. Thorns and briars abound when the people are disobedient (Gen 3:17-19); rain is withheld (Deut 11:11-17) and the land mourns (Is 18:8). In the Prophets and the Psalms, we find extravagant images of the loveliness of lavish growth. Therein people are living in, or are restored to, right relationship and intimacy with God.

Sitting in a boat, Jesus tells of a sower casting seed on a path, on rocky earth, among thorns and on good earth. The crowd on the beach would have grasped the agricultural allegory and understood that Jesus was evoking their ancestors' relationship with God and the fertility of Earth.

This parable is one of seven in Matthew 13 dealing with the hostility and rejection which Jesus has provoked. His ministry is failing. Only a few come to believe in him. Opportunity does not guarantee response. People are free to respond. How does this earthy parable, with a surprising ending of abundance, make space for fresh insight to hear both the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor?

Outer Landscape

Matthew expresses God's vision of right relationship as "the basileia of the heavens." God's vision contrasts with the basileia (empire) of Rome's version of reality. Elites exploited the land and the local people who depended on it. "The heavens" name what we would call the universe in which the Earth and human communities are interconnected.

If we wish to understand the Scriptures deeply today, we need to learn about the nature of the ecological crisis and especially its agricultural dimensions because it is principally a moral and theological crisis. What do we hear regarding a path, rocky earth, thorn-covered earth and good earth? The reader will notice I am using "earth" instead of "soil" or "ground." I do so because Matthew uses one word (*gē*) for these words and for the wider sense of Earth.

Earth (soil) is one of nature's most complex ecosystems and one of the most diverse habitats on the Earth. One cubic centimetre can take up to 1,000 years to form. Nowhere else are species so densely packed as in earth communities. Many terrestrial insect species are earth dwellers for some stage of their life-cycle. A gram of healthy earth can contain millions of species of vertebrate animals, worms, mites, insects, fungi and several thousand species of bacteria. We don't notice this diversity because it is invisible to human eyes.

I find the poet and farmer Wendell Berry's words challenging: land must be "kindly used" so that it may be available from generation to generation. The kindness we showed during our COVID-19 Lockdown needs to extend to the land which directly and indirectly produces about 95 per cent of our food.

Inner Landscape

Jesus appeals to our awareness of earth because our outer and inner landscapes are interconnected. His parable is a statement to hope, of confidence in God to transform communities in social and environmental situations. It is not about a single response but about weaving hope into the pattern of our lives. We are invited to explore more deeply the fertility and harvest in the "earth" of our inner landscape. Jesus offers a spirituality not for one season but for the long haul. "Listening" and "hearing" must be accompanied by "understanding" and the action of "bearing fruit".

We could reflect on why the ecological crisis is principally a moral and theological crisis. I suggest this is because people approach life with one of two attitudes. We can adopt an "exploitative" attitude to everything – approaching all people and creation from the standpoint of our own advantage. But having a "contemplative" attitude ensures reverence and respect for the uniqueness of every person and all creation outside ourselves – it's seeking to live whakawhanaungatanga/making right relationship happen with God, Earth and people.

Bearing Fruit in Our Time

Land grabbing and the cutting down of forests led to loss of traditional values. Kenyan Professor Wangari Maathai, seeing that women and girls were walking miles for water and firewood each day, founded the Green Belt Movement (GBM) which has planted over 51 million trees. GBM works at the grassroots, national, and international levels for environmental conservation; to build climate resilience and empower communities, especially women and girls and to foster democratic space and sustainable livelihoods. Wangari explained that "in the course of history, there comes a time when humanity is called to shift to a new level of consciousness, to reach the higher moral ground. A time when we have to shed our fear and give hope to one another." And that time is now. We can act locally with a "contemplative" attitude.

We can be more aware as we shop, maybe asking: Where was this made or grown, locally or overseas? For example, a pandemic-induced potato glut in Europe has led to cheap imported frozen chips being dumped here. This

threatens local growers and processing industries in places like South Canterbury and Pukekohe.

We can tend to earth in our backyard. The average household throws about a kilo of organic waste into landfill daily, that could be composted. All organic matter will eventually break down through the action of hungry bacteria, fungi and larger creatures. But composting speeds up this natural process. In just a few months, it can create topsoil to add to earth improving its structure by allowing air and water to enter easily and be retained.

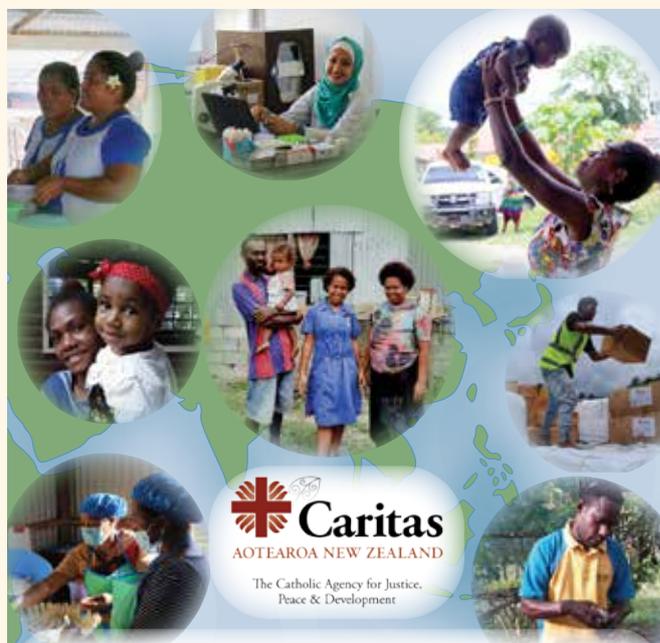
A recent *Country Calendar* TV episode featured the conversion of a hill country station in Maniototo, to regenerative agriculture. The farmer replaced monoculture with a diversity of plants and found the water retention and nutrient availability benefited the land and animal health.

Benedict XVI wrote: "The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast." What can we learn from the ecosystems of Earth to prepare our inner landscape for "listening" and "hearing" and "understanding"? How can we "bear fruit" and move to regenerative ways in whakawhanaungatanga/making right relationship happen with God, Earth and people? 🙏

12 July Matthew 13:1-23 – RL 15th Sunday Ordinary Time
Matthew 13:1-9: 18-23 – RCL 6th Sunday After Pentecost



Kathleen Rushton RSM is the author of recently published *The Cry of the Earth and the Cry of the Poor: Hearing Justice in John's Gospel* (SCM Press 2020).



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