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In the beginning of any really significant human endeavour, be it a marriage, parenthood, a new job or a business venture, there is usually a high level of idealism and hope. We expect to do the thing we are beginning with great success. This was certainly true of Jesus' ministry. Who can read how he emerged out of Galilee saying, "The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of heaven is at hand, repent and believe the good news," and not sense the excitement and anticipation that was present in that act of beginning? And such hopefulness was not a matter of fantasy either. Incredible things did begin to happen immediately. "The common people heard Jesus gladly"; they sensed in him an authority and a vitality that was not present in other rabbis. He began to heal all kinds of diseases and quickly generated an enthusiasm that spread like wildfire throughout Galilee. This is how it all began, but then many months later — well into his ministry — we find Jesus telling the parable that is in our Gospel, and there is a notable shift of mood to be detected here. As he spoke of the sower who went out to sow and all the factors that began to interact with that process, a new kind of realism seems to be emerging in Jesus. By this time he appears to be coming to terms with partial failure, with the recognition that there are many factors other than his own intentions in the great interactions of the daily and of history.

To use an analogy that is not very biblical but I think will be understood here, Jesus is facing up to the fact that he was playing only one hand in the great game of human existence. There were other forces besides himself around the table of life, and when it came to the formation of the final outcome, they would play a crucial role as well as his effort. In addition to the sower and the seed and the desire for a full harvest, there was also the beaten path, the rocky soil, and all that undergrowth of thorns, and these too would play a part in the eventual outcome of all this action. It is noticeable that the uttering of this parable is at the midpoint of his career, and Jesus has a clear recognition that human existence really is a complicated affair. To get anything done in our kind of world is by no means simple or easy.

Now, this is always a critical moment in any human process, when the idealism of childhood and adolescence collides head-on with the complexities of the real world. It is easy at such a moment to go from one extreme to the other. Martin Luther, often gave his famous image that humanity is like a drunken peasant who falls off his horse on one side, only to remount and fall off on the other side. It is also our tendency to career from one extreme to the other, which in this case would be to move from total idealism to total despair; that is, to be so bewildered by complexity and failure that one would decide to abandon the project altogether. "What's the use of doing anything," one might conclude, "in the face of so much complication?" Because of this very tendency in human nature, this particular parable is highly significant I think, because going from one extreme to the other is emphatically not what Jesus is doing here. This parable is in the end a counsel of encouragement, not of despair, encouragement that is rooted in realism rather than fantasy. Jesus moves to solid middle ground here, away from both extremes, and this becomes a place from which he can function both realistically and at the same time hopefully and creatively.

By this time in his ministry, Jesus had come home to the fact that about three out of four of the things he would like to see happen would not materialise because of factors beyond his control. Here is the humble recognition that the reach of human aspiration does exceed our ability to grasp or achieve. Three out of four of the seeds that left the sower's hand in hope did not come to flower. It is interesting to note Jesus' numbers at this point. They parallel rather accurately what is true in the realm of cricket. If you know anything about the great game you realise that a batsman who averages 35 is considered about an average performer. To get as high as 50 is considered exceptional, and if anybody like Don Bradman who managed 99.94 that is regarded as legendary. But have you ever considered how much failure is involved even in such a legendary achievement? In Don Bradman's first test he scored 18 and 1 and was summarily dropped from the Australian Test team, which underlines how far from total perfection even the most extraordinary human

efforts fall. We do ourselves a great disservice by applying perfectionistic criterion to any form of human activity. This is particularly true in parish life, where expectations and “oughts” as I like to call them can cripple any endeavour. “The Vicar ought to do this, the Churchwarden’s ought to do that....” In the past we used to do this and we used to do that.....” “In the good old days everything was perfect...” (subtext- when we were in control).

Our species was simply not built to function in such an environment and at such a level, and we either come to terms with this or else. There is a veritable scrapheap of burnt out clergy put to the sword by unrealistic expectation. Our capacity to rise to the heights is matched by our capacity to fall flat on our faces, and realistically most of what we do falls somewhere in between. Most endeavours are between 35 and 50! In this parable, I see Jesus coming to terms realistically with this characteristic of our human species, and that is a significant step of growth for any human being to take in moving toward maturity. But alongside this chastened sense of realism is a note of hopefulness as well. One has missed the whole point of the parable and of life if the beaten path and rocky soil and devouring underbrush is all one sees.

Some of the seed makes it to good ground and flowers into full harvest, and this is what justifies the whole process and is why one continues “to keep on keeping on” in any creative endeavour. Not everything we would like to do are we able to do because of factors beyond our control, but some good does come from our efforts; in fact, enough good that we do not “grow weary in well-doing,” but faithfully stay with the process and keep at the task. This is the stance of authentic maturity, in my judgment, and one that can be hopefully applied to all the creative ventures in which one finds oneself involved. Be it a marriage, a new job, parish life, a business venture, whatever, the double aspect of this image of “playing one hand” should give helpful and liberating perspective.

On the one hand, it underlines the reality of one’s limits, of the fact that many forces other than our own also impinge on the process and will affect the outcome. Therefore, neither excessive pride nor shame is appropriate in any endeavour. On the other hand, the image also underlines the real importance of human efforts. The fact that I do not do everything does not mean my efforts amount to nothing. The harvest in Jesus’ parable was not as great as it would have been had all the seed come to flower, but had the sower given up altogether there would have been no harvest at all, and there was in fact a good one because he kept on sowing. This is precisely the balanced perspective that Jesus intended to set around the business of living, and it can be applied helpfully to all of life’s important ventures, including the Church.

This brings me back to where we started. Jesus began his ministry in exuberance, and halfway through he told the parable of the soils. It represented his coming of age, I believe, coming to terms with both failure and potency, with the kind of creature he was and the kind of world in which we all live. Three out of four of his seeds did not make it, but some did. This is how he came to see life, and what kept him from blowing up or going down but keeping on. Listen, we only play one hand in the game of life, but the hand we do play matters! Wherever you are in some important endeavour this morning, be it marriage, parenting, the literal running and participation in this Church, a new job or a business venture, take this vision to heart. Let it become the frame of perspective you set around all your endeavours. It may humble you in relation to how you thought in the beginning, but rightly understood, it may enable you to finish and not give up too soon. One hand, not everything to be sure, but something. Is it not time to start doing what we can with relish and enthusiasm? I think so! What about you?

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