Sunday 22nd May 2022

Acts 16: 9-15 and Revelation 21: 10, 22-22:5 – Godly Farmers

As we give consideration to the passages that have been read, I would like to just use the following scripture as a backdrop. Matthew 9: 35-38

**35**Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. **36**When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. **37**Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. **38**Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”

I am fairly certain that very few of us here today, if any, are farmers. But can we try to put ourselves into the shoes, or sandals, of those farmers at the time that Jesus was speaking.

What sort of processes would have been around? Was there machinery to plough the fields? Yes, ploughs, but nothing motorized. How about sowing the seeds? Fertilizing the soil? Labour intensive to say the least.

What about the costs involved? What was the purpose of sowing the crops? Was it all for industry or would it be to feed their own families and extended families?

Imagine everything that would have been invested in planting that crop? Are you imagining it?

Now, imagine if that crop became ripe – the joy that you had not been blighted by crop disease, or succumbed to an infestation of insects or locusts, or the weather had not been too wet or too dry. Look at that beautiful field or ripe corn – or wheat – or barley. I have no idea what crop you had sown.

But it is fully grown and ready to be harvested. You only have a set amount of time in which to gather your crops in. No combined harvesters to help you – just people. You have to rely on the labour force that has chosen to come to your field. And they all have to be busy, busy, busy!

Hang on – why is that group just sitting in the field? They have come to enjoy the view, to sit in the midst of a peaceful scene. Oh my word – look at those ones just walking around all over the crops and pulling them up so forcefully – they are being crushed.

That group over there – they are in the wrong field altogether!

Can we truly imagine the distress that a farmer would have felt, if their rich, ripe crop just went unharvested or harmed?

Not just disappointing, but the investment that had gone into each ear of crop. And what about the affect it would have on the community? Are we not experiencing some of that today? The increased cost of living because of a shortage of basic food crops?

In the days of Jesus on earth it could mean extreme poverty, homelessness and starvation. Not much different to today. Unharvested crops for a farmer would be devastating!

Now, how do you imagine Jesus feels when He sees the seeds that have been sown in people on earth, ready to grow, but needing a labour force who are willing to go to the fields, to work hard, to attend the crop gently and rescue them from the weeds that would be robbing them of light and nutrients. No workers willing to go to the field will bring God sadness beyond words.

Every worker counts!

So how do we link this to the passage in Acts?

Before this part of the passage we had heard how Paul, with his travelling companions Timothy and Silas, had wanted, but been kept, by the Holy Spirit, from preaching in Asia. It gives no details on how that happened – but they were stopped from going. Eventually, Paul had a vision of a man begging him to go to Macedonia.

Is this a case of the farmer not wanting His labourers in the wrong field? Jesus can and will meet with everyone – but the messengers and labourers will have particular giftings for different types of crops.

Paul and the others were instead led to Phillipi, a Roman colony, filled with veteran Roman soldiers, that had no synagogue – due to the lack of Jewish men in that place (had to have a quorum of 10 Jewish men for a synagogue to be built). When there was no synagogue the Jewish community would meet by running water to pray.

What do you imagine Paul was expecting to find? It was a man begging him to go to Macedonia – but instead there are only women there. Let’s face it – if there had been just one man the bible would have reported it. A different culture in those days.

Rather than Paul just leaving, as it did not fit his vision, he remained obedient and preached the good news of Jesus. The crucified, risen and living God.

If only women there it would imply that they were mainly widows, women with no husband, outcasts of society. Lydia is mentioned as being one of the women.

She was a worshiper of God – no mention of Jewish ancestry – and again the Lord opened her heart to respond to the message.

It does not tell us how many other women responded if any – but Lydia did. And from all of those gathered, she was a dealer in cloth. She had a good reputation, a means of income and contacts.

When Paul preached, he had no idea who was listening. No judgement was made as to who should hear the gospel, or whether there would be any response to it or what that response may be. Rich, poor, humble, proud – the message should be presented. But it was in response to where the Holy Spirit was leading them. God opened her heart with the help of Paul. Paul was doing the work prepared by the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit worked through Paul’s obedience so the truth of Jesus was revealed to her fully.

How do we know where we are being led as a church today? We sang earlier “every prayer is a powerful weapon”. Do we believe that?

When Alan Donaldson spoke at the assembly last week, he re-iterated “for where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them” (Matthew 18).

When one person prays the relationship with our triune God is built, prayer is heard, encouragement, peace, comfort, grace, forgiveness is given – it is still a powerful time.

But when we gather with two or three others, then a calling can be discerned – for the benefit of church growth (being the people who make up church), we discern who to reach in community, where God has already been at work. Where the Holy Spirit is leading us – or keeping us.

In Acts Paul had the vision, but the group chose to go too, they would have discussed it and weighed it up together. They were led to a woman that was already worshiping God. He knew her, he knew that she was ready to hear the truth of Jesus. The crop was ready, a beautiful sight to Jesus, and Paul, Timothy, Silas and Luke were prepared to be the harvesters, in the right field, at the right time, with the tools and gentleness required to bring that stem to safety.

We likewise need to pray and hear where the people are that Jesus knows, where their hearts are hungry and He knows the truth that they are ready to hear. We have the precise tools required to harvest for him – but we need to discern the right field.

Then we turn again to Revelation. A book written to encourage a small church, with promises made by Jesus to remain true and that the fullness of His kingdom will come.

His kingdom where the people of God will be in His presence forever, with justice and righteousness, where He will reign supreme and satan is relinquished of power completely. Where there is no darkness, no night, as God is light and as His presence will be there unceasingly, there can never be darkness.

There is no temple – as that is where God was supposed to dwell – but we will be welcomed into His dwelling place. The river and tree of life will be ever present for us.

Healing in the leaves of the tree – but if there is no illness or disease, what will need healing? Perhaps we should interpret that as wellbeing. We will continue to be cared for and loved when in His kingdom. His love will always remain with us.

Until that happens, we are the kingdom of God. WE bring the living water to others, the healing leaves that bring wellbeing to the nations. If we are the kingdom, then we must have all the above within us.

All the things of the kingdom do not belong to us – it is not our power – but they are within us.

With the help of the Holy Spirit, where does He want that part of the river within us to flow now in this community? Where are those leaves of healing and wellbeing, care and love required? And how are we going to discern where and how we should act?

One thing I know, we are not going to be the group who just turn up to the field and sit amidst the peace and do nothing, we are not going to be apathetic about the harvest, and we are not going to simply trample around all the fields roughly.

I have no doubt, we have a part to play in being the labour in harvesting – and we will obey, together.