

Farmers want a good crop

Our daughter lives in Walgett, a town in the central west of NSW. It is a very dry area with low rainfall. Her husband is the minister in town. The last four years have been a drought, the silos have been empty, the farmers have had no crop. The country has been bare and grey.

But this year they have had good rains. The countryside is nice and green and the farmers have had a good crop. Our grandchildren had a chance to ride on an enormous header machine while it was harvesting.

This is what farming is all about, getting the crop: all the ploughing, sowing, fertilising, all the praying for rain, all the waiting. It is all because the farmers want a good crop. But there are lots of things that can go wrong: lack of rain, no follow-up rain, storms can flatten the plants, locust plagues can strip the plants bare, fire can destroy all the hard work and rain at the wrong time can ruin the crop. Just putting the seed in the ground is no guarantee that you will get a good harvest.

For all our technology today it is much the same as in Jesus' time.

1. Jesus tells a story

Jesus is speaking to people in small rural towns. They are familiar with farming. So Jesus tells this story of a farmer sowing seed. In those days he would scatter the seed by hand.

Jesus points out the things that could go wrong. Seed falling on hard ground along a path will just feed the birds.

Seed with shallow soil springs up quickly with some moisture but the sun soon scorches it. The plants die and there is no crop there.

There are places where there are lots of weeds. (Any gardener will know that weeds always grow better than good plants!) The weeds choke the growing plants and again no crop is gathered there.

Finally there is good deep rich soil. The seed sown there grows well. It grows to maturity and produces a good crop up to 100 times what was sown. This is just what the farmer wants.

That's the end. Well, nice story! But what's the point?

Jesus says, "*Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.*"

Hear what? What is he trying to say?

2. Jesus explains

Privately the disciples ask him to explain what he means. The story needs an explanation to get the message. Jesus explains that sowing seed is like preaching God's word. The results can be patchy.

The Path

Some people just don't want to listen. You try to tell them about God's love and salvation but they reject it without thinking about it. This is like the seed that falls on the path.

Rocky ground

Some people do respond enthusiastically. They seem to have really believed the message. But when things get difficult they give it away. It may be pressure from family or friends, some persecution. They just find the Christian life too hard. They stop coming to church or praying. They give up their faith.

Sometimes this happens to young people who are keen members of a youth group when they are young. Then they go to university or start a job and their faith comes under attack and they give it away. This is like the seed sown in shallow soil.

Weeds

There are others who make a good start. They have good intentions. They start praying, reading the Bible and coming to church. But then life gets too busy: the job requires more overtime, the kids start sport on Sundays and they can't get to church, they move house away from their old church, or there is sickness or they buy a new boat and so on.

It is church and prayer or Bible reading that drops out. Finally they have drifted away from faith completely. This is like the seed that falls among weeds. Their faith is choked by all the other activities of life.

My father had a yacht and we did a lot of sailing when I was young. Sometimes we would be involved in races. Sometimes we would go for a picnic lunch. I remember one beautiful day. We anchored near a beach and sat on board enjoying lunch. After a while I noticed we were not far from the rocks. We didn't think much about it. But some time later we looked again and we were almost on the rocks. We had been dragging the anchor and had drifted. Because it was only a slow drift we hadn't noticed it. We had to quickly get the engine going and get out of danger.

It can be like that in Christian life. We don't suddenly decide not to go to church, not to pray or read our Bibles. We drift away. Other things take over our life. We can wake up one day and find we have drifted so far from Christian things that it is hard to get back again.

Good soil

Jesus warns us only some people truly accept God's word. Like the seed sown in good soil their hearts are ready to receive the word, their lives are changed and they grow in faith. They don't just start, they keep going throughout life whereas all the others drop out at some stage. These people persevere, they keep going.

I used to enjoy cross country running at school. I didn't win any races but had the satisfaction of finishing, of running all the way and getting to the end. We would start all together on an oval. We all charged across the oval and down a hill. Then it was across a creek and up and down hill through the bush. People would drop out at different stages, particularly at a steep hill. They would sit down, collapse beside the track or walk back and have a shower. Only some made it all the way to the top of the last hill and round the oval to the finishing line.

The Christian life is not just about a good start. It is about persevering throughout life to the end. Jesus says, *"The seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop."* (8:15)

These people produce the fruit of real faith and a godly life. It is these people and only these people who belong to God. It is only these who are saved and will have eternal life.

Just like the farmer is looking for a crop. God is looking for a true faith that keep going and growing. Jesus' warning is that none of the other people are saved.

It was like that in Jesus' time. Not everyone believed and followed him. Some rejected him and wanted to kill him. Some started to follow but fell away for different reasons. Only some became disciples, truly believed in him and continued to follow him and serve him no matter what.

It is the same today. The first thing to ask ourselves is, what group am I like? Have I let the word of God sink in? Have I truly believed? How do I handle opposition or the pressures of life? Do I let other things squeeze God out of my life? Am I determined to follow Jesus no matter what?

If there are things you don't understand do you ask questions like the disciples did? Are you trying to find out more about the Christian life?

"Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear." Think.

3. Growing strong, bearing fruit

Imagine a little tomato plant that has grown from a seed. It is still small and weak in a very small pot. What will I have to do to it if I want it to have fruit? I'll have to plant it in a bigger pot, or in the ground. It will never grow big in this pot. I'll have to fertilise it and water it. I'll have to continue actively caring for it if it is going to have fruit.

It is the same with our Christian life. God wants our lives to bear fruit. He wants our faith to grow so it will be strong through good and difficult times in life, a faith that trusts God no matter what may happen.

He wants us to become more like Jesus, to do things that please God and turn away from things that are against his will.

He wants us to serve him, to act in love caring for other people, to teach our children how to follow Jesus, to share our faith with other people, and to be involved in ministry in the church. We need to grow in our understanding so we can do these things.

As you think of the year ahead how are you going to nurture your faith? What will you do so that it will grow? What about your own Bible reading and prayer? What about a bible study group where you can ask questions and discuss the Bible together? If you are just getting started you could do a short course like Christianity Explored.

How will you make sure your faith grows, perseveres through the up and downs of life and bears pleasing fruit for God?