

The GREEN Good News

Jesus' call to the garden—to a positive, joyful vision of earthly life—is too often obscured by our tendency to separate material, social, and spiritual domains. Jesus' teachings and actions are commonly taken to be only spiritual or symbolic. For example, my sister was recently reading the Gospel of Mark with her son and she asked me: "Bread keeps coming up. What do you think that symbolizes?" To which I responded, "This is one I can answer. The bread is about...bread. He is really concerned with feeding people." Now on a certain level, my sister is right, and my answer is obnoxious (a right I reserve as the eternal little brother). There is more at stake than just referencing single and specific loaves of bread from two thousand years ago. If that is all the story was about it would be quite stale. But, because of our habits of reading past the material and the social, it is worth underlining the importance of the incarnational, earthly stakes of scripture.

Along these lines, though many Christians recite the Lord's Prayer weekly, if not daily, its material and agrarian petitions seem to have been lost. This is a prayer that asks for God's kingdom to come, for the Lord's will to be done "on earth as it is in heaven." It petitions for our daily bread and the forgiveness of debts (Matt 6:9–12). It is the prayer of a peasant Jesus for peasants that calls for the restoration of the covenant between God, neighbors, and land. While this has spiritual consequences, it also calls for the incarnation of material and social change—that everyone be fed and that debts be released. Jesus is the Christ, anointed for the task of overturning the table of values and the extractive economy of the Empire that has left the people poor and the land stripped.

Jesus' constant appeals to agrarian life are often interpreted as illustrations used to reach the Palestinian peasants to whom he was speaking. The real message is, on this reading, concerned with higher matters. From this it follows that when teaching in a different context one can discard the flowery images of the land for other more relevant metaphors. When Jesus sets out to teach the crowds and the disciples about the kingdom it is no accident that he constantly refers to different ways in which people care for or exploit the land. In so doing, he weaves together the material, the social, and the spiritual.

For example, in chapter 13 of Matthew, Jesus repeatedly speaks of the kingdom of God in botanical images rooted deeply in the field and the garden. He begins the series speaking of a sower who

goes out and casts seed on different surfaces. Jesus tells a gathered crowd about a sower, who threw seeds over parts of the field that have been tread over, but birds came and devoured and consumed them. The sower cast some other seeds on a thin layer of earth just above rock. The seeds sprang up quickly but had "no depth of soil." When the sun rose, it scorched that earth and "they withered away." Still other seeds fell among thorns, and, even after being ploughed, the thorns grew back and choked them. But some seed was cast "on good earth and brought forth grain, some a hundred-fold, some sixty, some thirty" (Matt 13:3–9).

Far from being an earthly story with a heavenly meaning, the parable was directed toward the political and economic situation of Jesus' hearers. The closest analogue to Jesus' little stories in our culture would be a political cartoon, in which an exaggerated fiction is drawn to lay bare a truth that is covered over by what we take to be real. For instance, while an image of politicians in bed with oil executives might not be the most factual representation of the relationships that dictate policy in our time, it would be truer than video footage of one criticizing the other.

In this story, Jesus points to the abundance of the land and the violence of political and cultural obstacles. Whereas a Palestinian farmer might expect anywhere from a four to eleven-fold return from his seed, the good land without obstacles in Jesus' story yields grain ten times greater. This image reminds hearers that the gift of God's land is one that should provide abundantly. But the violent verbs of the forces that inhibit this growth—of birds that devour, fire that scorches the earth, and weeds that choke—lead hearers to think about what really produces scarcity in the villages. The peasant, then, is left to draw the connection that God's land provides abundantly, but it is the violent ways of the elite that truly consume the harvest, leave their land barren, and choke out their community. The laborers know that while they may work fruitfully in the fields, the extractive economy of the Empire has led to scarcity and destruction in their villages. This simple story allows Jesus to say this in public, and it allows peasants to make connections that are obscured by the ruling order.

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The parable's implied critique overturns the ways of the wealthy that want to render everything unto Caesar and trust that wealth produces abundance. The parable also points to a different domain

of values: the Kingdom of God and the abundance of God's good earth. In the Empire the rich get richer. But in God's kingdom, those who cultivate the good earth and value the relationships of the covenant, will find that there is more than enough for all. Jesus undermines the Empire's gospel of prosperity with the good news of the kingdom of God where the poor and the hungry will be given more and live in blessed community.

To his disciples—Christ's followers who take up his ministry and his forms of organizing—Jesus gave a further interpretation of the parable that underlines the social and spiritual obstacles along the path to the kingdom. Here the parable doubles to illustrate how our social and work relationships, the demands of our households, and the status symbols that we cling to for our identity will make the radical change required to follow Christ profoundly difficult. Jesus explains that the seed that falls on the path and is devoured by the birds is like the good news given to someone whose heart is deeply shaped by the powers of the Empire: they will simply not be able to understand. The seed that is sown on rocky ground, that springs up quickly, will be like those who might hastily move toward transformation, but at the first sign of conflict with the norms and powers of the world, they will go back to their old ways. The seed that is choked out by the thorns are those who hear the good news, "but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing" (Matt 13:18–22).

Christ is emphasizing for his disciples that our material problems are tied up with social and spiritual formations. Jesus warns that bringing about transformation does not simply require that one shares information. People shaped by empire, especially those with privilege and power, simply cannot understand because their hearts are shaped by a world that claims competition, growth, self-reliance, and wealth to be the governing values of nature. Others do not have the blessing of relationships and living situations that will foster moral courage in the face of resistance. To change how they eat, work, live, and relate goes against social norms that could mean their utter isolation. And still others are too tightly gripped by the immediate concerns of next month's mortgage payment or the distant hope of wealth to even contemplate a change. They might worry about what they will wear, about the loss not just of subsistence but of an identity if they no longer have that house, job, or lifestyle. I confess that I find myself stumbling over these obstacles all of the time. Simply learning the facts and becoming informed does not take these away. Rather, we need to be invited into a community that is already embodying a different way of life.

Jesus underlines not just the challenge that the disciples will face, but he notes that when they start to live in the ways of the kingdom,

they will have abundance. He tells them, "as for what was sown on the good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty" (Matt 13:23). They will have more than they need, and from their abundance they can cultivate and nourish, serve and preserve God's good earth so that others may be invited and transformed.

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Jesus' parable is directed toward material, social, and spiritual transformation. It challenges the very earthly ways of extraction that lead to the exploitation of people and the degradation of the land. But it is not only about getting the poor the calories they need. It is about renewing the covenant—the relationships that shape and animate life. The parable challenges the social structures that make these dynamics difficult to see for the poor. The teaching to the disciples further highlights the obstacles that those who are shaped by the empire of wealth will face in becoming agents of the kingdom of God. These are social and spiritual issues that lead people, even those who are informed, to hear the good news of new life and retreat into that which is familiar and secure—even if it is the security of a prison.

Christ's parable directs our attention to the ways that we care for the land and our neighbors. This confrontation forces us to ask: who do we ultimately serve, Caesar or God? We answer this question in the ways we structure our houses, direct our labor, shape our relationships, and dress our bodies. The ways of empire devour the commonwealth, scorch the fertility of the earth, and choke out loving community. Do we have ears to hear how the scriptures point us toward the ways of the kingdom of God come to earth?

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