

*Trinity 8 2008*

I thought it would be pleasant to grow some sweet peas this year. So, I went into the garden centre to buy some seeds.

There were so many varieties of sweet pea – which to choose? I wanted ordinary ones, that smelled nice, came in a range of colours and climbed up poles and flowered prolifically. I wasn't absolutely certain if any of the seeds fitted these criteria, they all claimed to be striking or stunning or sensational, none of them seemed ordinary, so I bought two varieties to increase my chances.

I wasn't stupid enough to sow them on the path, or on stony ground or amongst the ground elder, but I had failed to think about the slugs. The survivors haven't flowered yet, so I am still not sure if they are the kind of sweet peas I envisaged.

In the parable that Jesus tells, the seeds are the word of the kingdom – useless unless they bear fruit.

In the Anglican Communion today, or even in the Church of England, you will find many different seeds labelled 'the word of the kingdom'. The plants they produce are far from identical, and as one might expect from such a variety, the fruits are equally diverse.

Which seeds do we want to sow – and I am assuming here that we do want to sow the word of the kingdom?

Most people who come to church would probably say we want the seeds of ordinary Christianity, that teach about Christ's love for us, his death and resurrection, his example of how we can love God and neighbour. Well, some of the seeds recently planted are beginning to bear fruit, but they are bitter ugly fruits. We are seeing Christians refusing to share in communion with each other. We are hearing one Christian call another an apostate. And I fear that there may be worse fruits to come, as people turn away from the church in disgust at this behaviour.

So what is the difference between these seeds?

Rt Rev Peter Akinola, Archbishop of Nigeria speaking at Gafcon said: *'we want to renew our commitment to our sacred duty to preserve and proclaim uncompromisingly, the undistorted word of God written to a sinful and fragmented world'*.

In that statement lies the crux of the matter – the undistorted word of God.

When I was ordained I had to swear an oath that everything necessary to salvation could be found in the scriptures. That is my belief. I did not have to swear and could not have sworn that scripture represented the undistorted word of God. I do not believe that it was dictated by God. Divinely inspired, yes, but interpreted through humans with all their fallibilities.

There are those, though, that claim that scripture is the final authority - although, it has to be said, that they emphasise some parts of the bible more than others. The issue of homosexuality which has been much in the press, highlights this difference of opinion but is not the cause.

A century ago the Anglican Communion was united by its liturgy, so whilst there probably never has been one world view shared by Anglicans, those differences were masked by the common liturgy from the Book of Common Prayer. Now, liturgy reflects both local custom and the beliefs of the local church. The differences in interpretation of scripture are reflected in the songs and prayers, and churches that previously could happily co-exist are now drawing up boundaries.

The Bible is a heady mix of history, poetry, books of instruction and wisdom, and books of prophecy. The history attempts to make sense of a people's journey with God throughout politically turbulent times. If you were to read only the history books of the Old Testament, you might be forgiven for believing that God was a bloodthirsty tyrant, who hated everyone apart from Jews, and, in fact, often hated them too. For example, from the book of Joshua, *'the Lord said, 'see I have handed over to you the king of Ai with his people, his city and his land. You shall do to Ai and its king as you did to Jericho.'* And according to the story, Joshua and his army killed 12 000 men and women, and hanged the king.

But these struggles of a people to live according to the rules laid down by God are counterbalanced by the writings of the prophets, but even then, how do you balance the wonderful words of Isaiah 2: *They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.*

With the words written in the Book of the Prophet Nahum:

*'A jealous and avenging God is the Lord, and rages against his enemies.'*

The bible is full of contradictions. God himself changes his mind several times in the stories of Abraham, and Noah and Moses.

The new testament too has internal tensions, it is full of paradox. But the Bible, New Testament and Old, is our route to knowing God. We have to read it, study it, meditate upon it. From Genesis we get an image of God who is approachable, intimate, who moulded man out of clay, this is the God with whom Abraham bargained, and Jacob wrestled. It is a far cry from the terrifying splendour of God as described in the Book of Revelation or Ezekiel – you cannot imagine this God making mud pies in the creation of man. Both are true, so images and words can only strain at representing the power and the love, the splendour and the tenderness.

So, in attempting to balance and understand the judgment and the compassion of God, Christians have turned to Christ, for we are told that to know him is to know the Father.

When we read the gospels, as we attempt to get closer to the mind of Christ, it is worth remembering who is on the receiving end of Christ's anger. Not prostitutes whose presence offended respectable people, nor tax collectors whom no-one liked, nor women accused of adultery that people were keen to distance themselves from, nor beggars who got in the way and annoyed everyone by their constant demands for help. No. The people he got angry with were the religious, those who were certain that they, and only they, were morally right.

I would claim that my faith is biblically based, rooted in scripture, and yet I find myself at the opposite end of the spectrum from those who are forming a church within a church in the Anglican Communion.

The seeds I want to sow are seeds that lead to growth, growth in faith, growth in love, growth in relationship with God, growth in freedom to live as God intended us to live, growth in the building of kingdom values here on earth. I want to sow seeds that will bring hope to the poor, and comfort and healing to the despairing. I want to sow seeds that will bring unity rather than division, liberty rather than oppression, compassion rather than condemnation.

Yet, it is hard at the moment not to feel anger. Anger at those who are separating themselves out from the church, anger at those such as Jim Packer who said:

*There is something dispensable about the Archbishop of Canterbury and it is not of the essence of Anglicanism to be in communion with him when he becomes part of the doctrinal problem. Pray for the next Archbishop of Canterbury and that he may be with us sooner than we might have thought.*

So I have to remind myself that God loves those I disagree with as much as he loves me. I also have to accept that we cannot both be right about how we read scripture. If Orombi and Akinola and their fellow signatories are right, then I must be wrong. But if I am wrong and perhaps damned for it, then I would still rather live my life attempting to sow seeds of love and compassion, working to build the kingdom of God on earth. So all Christians, all, whatever their views, whatever their lifestyle, are welcome to share communion here at this altar.

By your fruits shall you know them, said Christ. Let us work to produce fruits worthy of his love and sacrifice, fruits that will bring life and joy. Amen.