

Readings: Genesis 25:19-34; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

The theme that will guide our reflection this morning is: *A journey into the wonderful and weird world of Jesus of Nazareth*

This is a true story, but I have lost the reference. So I'm invoking Hebrew 2:6 referencing style here: '*someone has testified somewhere*'. A researcher had asked an illiterate, Iranian Muslim woman whether she had read the Koran. After a pause to collect her thoughts, the woman said, 'Well, of course, no, because it's in Arabic and I don't speak Arabic. But... I know everything in the Koran...yep...know everything from my Imam.'

There was a time when all Christians were like that Muslim woman: only the priest read the Bible, because it was in Latin, the Vulgate, and the people learnt about the Bible from what the priest would share with them. But even today, with access to an almost limitless amount of online resources, many still prefer to learn from others, rather than doing their own research. It results in poor knowledge of the Bible and almost everything in it.

How well do you know Jesus of Nazareth?

Today, we will explore a little of Jesus of Nazareth and his wonderful and weird world, so we may appreciate his coming to provide a liberating and fulfilling way to relate to God without having to put our brains through the wringer and performing some humanly impossible tasks.

At Theological College, I found out that there were two Jesuses. The Jesus that we read about in the Bible and preached on the pulpit, and the real Jesus, or the Jesus that walked the earth in flesh and bones, or simply, the historical Jesus. Some have made it their life work to know the historical Jesus, while others feel that the Jesus that we preach is all that we really need.

For me, I have been holding the two Jesuses in my hands. As an economist, this is familiar territory. On the one hand is the historical Jesus and on the other hand is the Jesus that we preach. And this has worked well for me as I continue in my own quest to know more about the One that became the Christ, or Son, of God.

One of the fascinating things that I have found about Jesus is his relationship with the scribes and the Pharisees and the differences in their ways of doing things. Consider the Law or the Torah. We first encounter the Law in Exodus 20, where there are only Ten Commandments. The scribes and the Pharisees interpreted the Law and stretched those 10 commandments to 613 precepts. Then Jesus came and took those 613 precepts and collapsed them to just two: love of God; and love our neighbours.

Or consider the way they learn and their teaching styles. The scribes and the Pharisees strain and scramble their brains reading the Hebrew Bible and trying to figure out the meanings of the Law and their implications for the human being. Jesus reads the scriptures and he sees answers in nature and in the ways that people live their lives and in the ways they tell their stories, which in the Near East, it is the parable. The Pharisees and the scribes' strangled the people, while Jesus' approach freed the people.

Think about it. It is virtually impossible for any person to follow 613 laws, when we struggle to follow Jesus' two. Also, it is very hard to follow pages and pages of interpretation, compared to listening to simple stories about the life of your community. And we should not

be surprised that Jesus would see God's creative hand writing in creation. He is, after all, the incarnate Word of God, according to John. And as John has written, "*All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being* (Jn 1:3).

In today's gospel reading, he is teaching the people that are following him, about God's kingdom, using the story of a sower. This is something that the people can relate to. It is a simple story, but it is loaded with information and questions. For example, who is the sower? What kind of sower would drop precious seeds all over the place? Who are the birds? Are the different soils a reference to different kinds of people, or is Jesus saying that, all the types can be found on the same person from time to time, remembering that soil can be improved or damaged by cultivating practices? Those are the likely questions he would have asked, and would have told you to figure out the answers, because only you would know the answers for yourself.

There is, however, something in today's reading that, the Jesus that I know, does not do. And that is interpreting his own parables. Jesus does not do that. He is like a fire bug who likes to light up fires everywhere and never bothers to put them out. He likes to see the people trying to work out the meanings of lessons that he teaches here and there. He is like the ancient Greek philosopher, Socrates, or a Jesuit priest, who answers questions with more questions. Remember the lawyer who asked, what he should do to inherit eternal life? He answered: "What is written in the law?"

A good example of Jesus' style of telling parables is shown in the parable we have called, the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). Scholars refer to this story as a gospel within the Gospel. That story has no end, since the older son is still outside and refuses to join the party, the symbol of God's kingdom.

The late Near East scholar Kenneth Bailey says, the reason why the story has no resolution is because, the decision of whether to join the party has to be made by the older son, which is the Jewish officials and those that rejected Jesus, and not Jesus. So Uniting Church and New Testament scholar, Bill Loader, has argued that the interpretations of the parable in today's reading and in other cases might have been attempts by the early church to place parameters on how to interpret Jesus' parables.

Now given how Jesus sees God's hand writing in nature, how might he read the story of Jacob and Esau?

Questions like these make me feel grateful that I studied mathematics and science, before I studied economics and then later on the Bible and theology. My hunch is that, Jesus would say that we have been paying too much attention on the presumed wrongs, or evils, that Jacob and his mother, Rebekah, might have done. Instead, we should look at God's purpose, for God is behind everything that is happening in Abraham's family.

Further, Jesus is likely to say that, we should not forget that the boys are fraternal twins. That means they were conceived at different times, but not far from each other. So how would we know which was formed first, and who was last? It means, our criterion of awarding 'older' to the first born may not apply to fraternal twins.

Now, God's purpose has to be the salvation story. God has assigned it to Abraham and his family to carry it to its fulfilment. God would need to best people with the ability to survive

all kinds of situation and challenges; people that are physically and mentally strong. And which of Jacob and Esau, do you think, is best suited for the job? The measured and smart Jacob or the reckless Esau, who would sell his birth right for a bowl of lentil soup?

Now, it so happened that the physical and mental characteristics that Jacob and Esau display are related to the order in which they were born. I studied pigs when I was doing a degree in applied genetics. What I found was that the first born was always the smallest piglet in a litter. Without care, it would usually die; this is also common in the wild. We call it a rant' if it lives.

It seems like the main role of the smallest foetus is to open the birth canal for the bigger and more robust piglets to come out. It is like the pace maker in a race, who goes our fast to set the pace for the main runners and then retires without finishing the race. And this is the same with human fraternal twins. The last born is usually the stronger and more robust of the two.

Australia's most famous fraternal twins are the cricketing Waugh brothers, Mark and Steve. Steve is considered the older of the two, because, he was born first. I had seen a photo of the twins on a newspaper when they were teenagers, and Mark, the last born, looked bigger and stronger than Steve. I think Steve succeeded, because he worked very hard, whereas Mark was elegant and with bucket loads of inborn, natural abilities.

The theme of two sons permeates the Hebrew Bible and it continues into the New Testament. Most of the times in the Hebrew Bible, Israel is modelled as the younger son. For example, Isaac and not Ismael of Abraham's sons; Jacob instead of Esau in Isaac's sons; and Naphtali instead of Manasseh in Joseph's sons. Only Judah's son Perez, who was born ahead of twin brother Zerah, is the older son representing Israel in the Hebrew Bible. And it would be Perez's line through which God's salvation story would be realised. Interestingly, Jesus also refers to the older son in the parable of prodigal son as the one representing his people, the Jews. And they are still outside the house, unwilling to join God's party, celebrating the coming of the Kingdom, where the sinners and the gentiles are already slightly drunk with the wine.

In Jesus' wonderful and weird world, he combines scriptures, creation and peoples' lives and culture to understand the will of God. By doing that, we are able to see God in our poetry, our music, our dance, our arts, and in everything around us.

If you follow Jesus' path, you will be surprised at how enriching and rewarding such a journey can be. You will be able to see life and the dramas in human life in a totally different way.

At this time of the pandemic, as we find ourselves stranded at home with much time in our hands, this is an excellent opportunity to enter into and enjoy Jesus' wonderful and weird world.

The internet offers almost a limitless amount of resources. But I would recommend reading or watching on YouTube Irish and Oxford mathematician John Lennox and Irish, and former atheist, Anglican priest and theologian extraordinaire, Alister McGrath to accompany you in such a beautiful journey.

For the glory of God. Amen.