

## **Sermon, Service in thanksgiving for the Harvest and with prayers for the School Year**

**Sundays, 11<sup>th</sup> & 18<sup>th</sup> February, 2024 – Brookton, Beverley, Quairading & York**

As I was thinking about what I might say in this address which might marry the thanksgiving of a harvest with prayers for our schools I was reminded of my childhood growing up in the Lockyer Valley, where but about a few kilometres from my family's farms was located an institution variously known since its establishment in 1897 as the Queensland Agricultural College, Queensland Agricultural High School and College, and the Gatton campus of the University of Queensland. Originally established by the Queensland Department of Agriculture as the Queensland Agricultural College at Lawes, nearby to the township of Gatton, it opened as a combined agricultural college and experimental farm, with the intention that it would assist farmers to boost agricultural production in the State. In 1923 this originally post-primary schooling institution was integrated into the State schooling system coming under the auspices of the Department of Public Instruction, being restructured as the Queensland Agricultural High School and College. Of course, as people of this locality we can readily recognise institutions with similar ongoing relationships of education and agriculture; I speak of the Cunderdin Agricultural College and Narrogin Agricultural College. Those of older years will recall with thanksgiving, and I suspect a level of sadness for its loss, the significant place in agricultural education played by the Muresk Agricultural College.

In discussing these nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first century examples of the relationship of harvest and schooling, we should note that while our Biblical verses have been chosen for their references to agriculture and learning, we ought recall that in the days and places of Jesus Christ, and in the Old Testament record, agricultural practices were different and the concept of universal State funded education did not exist! That is not to say that in those societies, education did not take place. As we note from the story of the Book of Daniel schooling, formation, training, of a more formal nature was for a particular and fortunate group or class. Nonetheless I would wish to contend that our readings convey for all of us in our own time, truth as to how to farm, how to gain a good harvest, and what is to be valued in terms of schooling and learning.

Leaving aside the references to young men being without physical defect and being handsome, we note that which is sought after in those in need of skills in good administration and governance is that they be versed in every branch of wisdom, endowed with knowledge and insight, while competent to serve. Added to this impressive list, the student, as it were, is to learn literature and language. Clearly the teaching provided, and learning undertaken by these Jewish men, now endowed with Chaldean names, was of high quality for in every matter of wisdom and understanding

concerning what the King required these men were ten times better than all the magicians and enchanterers of the King's kingdom.

Notwithstanding the good advice, relevant today as it was in Jesus' time, as to the evil of an "unruly tongue" we learn from St James some thoughts on the nature of true wisdom. Here we learn of wisdom's association with good works with gentleness, the need to avoid bitter envy and selfish ambition, while not being arrogant and lying about Truth. To act in such a contrary manner is to be earthy, unspiritual, and devilish. The wisdom we need seek, and I would like to think still permeates the hopes of society, is that which is peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy, good fruits, impartial and without trace of partiality or hypocrisy. It may well be a "tall order" but surely it is wonderful advice!

Perhaps unsurprisingly I chose as the Gospel a section of Chapter Thirteen of the Gospel of St Matthew, where there is a feast of agricultural and harvest stories; be it the Parable of the Sower, the Parable of Weeds among the Wheat, the Parable of the Mustard Seed, or the Parable of the Yeast. I have to admit that the Parable of the Sower, self-evident as its truth is, remains my favourite parable. I think this is because I grew up on a farm where my father would still broadcast, often by hand, oats seed, and by handheld broadcasting implement, lucerne. While my father probably didn't sow seed on paths or tracks, or on any soil already containing weeds or thorns, it was easy to recognise the truth contained in this parable, and of course the resulting impact on the harvest by such bad planting technique.

Jesus teaches through parables, a way of oral teaching whereby a story contains a moral, spiritual, philosophical or religious truth. I imagine most oral civilisations did something similar. Think of the legends and myths of our own indigenous brothers and sisters.

Having been introduced to these stories from the Bible what insights might we wish to take away with us. Central to all is an understanding of the place of God in the whole of creation. Meanwhile we need realise we are to learn to be agriculturalists of good habits. We need also need learn to value insight, wisdom, and understanding as well as knowledge. There needs also to be a recognition that however clever we might think we are, AI included, the truth remains that we need to understand and seek the wisdom of God, by having the humility to walk in his ways, whether we farm, grow animals, teach or learn, or simply endeavour to live a good life, following in the footsteps of he who is both the Good Shepherd and the Good Teacher!