

St Paul's Church Feilding Sermon 14 August 2022 by Bobby Kusilifu

“Without oxen a stable stays clean, but you need a strong ox for a large harvest”.

PROVERBS 14:4 NLT

This morning we will finish off our mission presentation from last Sunday, where we looked at our mission statement and the four (4) areas we need to commit ourselves to, going forward. These are: (1) that we need to prioritise prayer, (2) that we need to be intergenerational, (3) that we need to be missional – committed to our community and (4) that we need to be disciples – making disciples. We also looked at Matthew 9:36 – 38, with the challenge that, if we say that we are “to know Christ and make him known”, then we need to see people the way Jesus saw people, we need to feel towards people the way Jesus felt towards them and we need to do what Jesus did and what he wants us to do. This morning, to further challenge and strengthen our commitment, as a church, we will consider a word of wisdom from Proverbs 14 verse 4.

This proverb acknowledges the fact that we value things that are clean, ordered and stable. Even those of us who aren't necessarily fussy, do find a certain comfort when things are nice and neat and in their place. It's not just for the sake of beautifying that we would want things clean and in order. Time can be saved, and more can be accomplished when things are in their designated place. Knowing where things are and having them ordered also can give a great deal of comfort and security to daily living. Therefore, cleanliness has many benefits. But there is a point at which cleanliness can go too far. This is where Proverbs 14 verse 4 begins, “without oxen a stable stays clean.” Oxen, like all animals, create a certain amount of filth and disorder in their existence. Even if they are well-behaved oxen, they and the place that they are housed will still need to be maintained and clean. If no oxen are housed in a stall, then it becomes very easy to keep it clean.

Therefore, if cleanliness were of utmost importance in life, then it would follow that oxen should always be kept out of stables. But the second part of the proverb makes the contrasting point: “but you need a strong ox for a large harvest.” This means that the additional value the ox brings to the farmer outweighs the inconvenience of a “messy” stable. If we were to modernize this proverb, perhaps we could say something like this: Where there is no tractor, there is no need for repairs, but a large harvest comes by the strength of a tractor.

Think about it, something like a tractor comes with its own problems. You have to buy fuel, you have to spend money to maintain it, you have to have a place to store it, you need to spend money to insure it, etc. One might look at the list of things that come with keeping a tractor, and say, “it's better when there is no tractor, because then there are no responsibilities.” But, the benefits a tractor provides can easily pay for the inconveniences many times over. While this proverb is about harvests and oxen, the wisdom reaches far beyond farming economics. The wisdom behind this proverb is about rightly placing values and priorities on good things. It is good to have a clean stable, but it is better to have a huge harvest, and in order to have that large harvest, we must be willing to part with our clean and tidy ox-less

stable. If we wrongly place too much value on the cleanliness of a stable, we will be missing out on the large harvest we could be experiencing.

This is an important principle when it comes to church life and mission. There are some who, out of good intentions, are obsessed with making sure there is never any kind of “mess” to deal with. Not only is this an offense against Christian witness, but it also creates an environment where, spiritually speaking, there is little increase or productivity – because no one will tolerate any “mess in the stable”. This proverb is a plea for the sacrifice to accept upheaval and a mess to clear up, as the price of growth and increase. An ox must be fed and watered. It must be housed in a shed during storms. It leaves waste that must be cleaned up. In other words, for all the benefit that an ox provides, this animal brings with it much cost and mess. So, the only way to have a clean manger is to not have any oxen. And yet, if one ox can bring so much productivity, oxen will bring even more. Essentially, this proverb reminds us that if we want to advance, if we want to grow, there will be some untidiness about it. Things may get messy at times. This proverb illustrates that there is a sense that a big mess can be desirable, not because it is in itself something to seek but because it may indicate the presence of healthy productivity.

The applications, when you ponder it for a while, begin to lay themselves out very clearly. If we never allow ourselves to love, we will never experience a broken heart, but without love we will miss out on all the wonderful things relationships provide. If we never venture out of our comfort zone, we will never be embarrassed, but we also will never grow and experience the fullness and richness of life. If we always cling to what we believe is safe, we might maintain the life we have now for a while, but we miss out on the blessings God may have waiting for those who live by faith. If a church never welcomes others into their midst, they may not have to deal with certain problems and baggage those people bring, but they will miss out on the command of God to seek and save the lost, and they will miss out on the blessings of having those people in their midst. If we never try to mend bridges with someone we were estranged from, we will avoid a difficult conversation, but we will abandon any possibility of reconciliation. And you may consider other applications as you ponder deeper. These are real and serious applications.

Therefore, our challenge today is that, some things, like large harvests, are worth pursuing, even if it means dealing with a “messy stable”. We must not allow the temptation of a clean stable keep us from pursuing what is better. This proverb, this wisdom, bids us to seriously consider our ways. We must not be inflexible and intolerable but be gracious, long-suffering and be willing to sacrifice. In other words, we must deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus. This is what, “to know Christ and to make him known” really means. And so, the key question we are to ask ourselves, as a church, in light of this and in relation to our mission, is, are we going to keep ourselves from a large harvest because we are unwilling to give up our clean stable?

May the grace and peace of God be with us all,

Bobby Kusilifu