

A Gospel People

The Parable of The Sower

Over the next few weeks, throughout the Summer, we are going to be looking at some of the parables Jesus told. This morning we are going to look at a well-known story: The Parable of The Sower

The parables are recorded to some extent in all the Gospels, but there are a large number in Matthew's Gospel. Matthew places them strategically in his story of Jesus' 'Good News'.

Matthew, or Matthew Levi, to give him his full name. A Jew - writing to Jews, people who had a problem. Their problem was that they were expecting a King, a Messiah, to get them out of the mess they were in with the Romans. They were looking for a Kingdom – and what did Jesus deliver? Well, it wasn't what they were expecting. It was a Kingdom all right, but not the sort of Kingdom they were hoping for! It was the Kingdom of God, and most of them couldn't understand it.

If you look at the majority of what Jesus is recorded to have said, it is about the Kingdom of God: what it was, how it operated, how to live in it, what sort of King was there, what sort of people were in his Kingdom. And most of the time, most of the listeners didn't understand.

This is how Jesus put it in verse 10 of Matthew 13:

10 The disciples came to him and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" 11 He replied, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them.

12 Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. 13 This is why I speak to them in parables: “Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand. 14 In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: “ ‘You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. 15 For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.’

The parable of the Sower is one of the few parables in which we actually have Jesus' own interpretation of the parable. The significance of this particular parable is actually enhanced by the words of Jesus recorded in Mk 4:13 about this same story: “Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? It’s easy to look back smirking at them, but if we were there, first time around, would we have understood?

So, what is the seed, and who is the sower in this story? Jesus explains to his disciples what he meant: verse 19 - When anyone hears the message about the Kingdom ... This is the seed.

We might apply this parable more generally and say the seed is the Word of God and can apply to the whole text of the Bible – and that would be true. But here Jesus is being quite specific: the seed is the message about the Kingdom

So who is the sower, or to be more accurate who is the Farmer, because that’s what the parable says. Well the farmer who sows the seed is not

identified, but later in the same chapter Jesus is telling another parable and in verse 37 says 'The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man' ... so it would be reasonable to say this sower is Jesus. Certainly, he is the one who has been giving the message about the Kingdom. But of course, it doesn't stop with Jesus. In his very last recorded words in this Gospel Jesus commissioned his disciples to spread the message of the Kingdom of God as they were going out in their villages, to the surrounding towns and country and to distant lands.

So the seed is the message about the Kingdom of God, how to be part of it, how to live in it, what sort of people to be. And the sower is the messenger of the Kingdom of God.

Let's try and bring this back to home a bit. Do we think of ourselves as part of the Kingdom of God? Is that what being a Vibrant Family of Christians is all about? Have we been hearing any clear messages recently about how to be part of the Vibrant Family, how to live in it, what sort of people to be? What has the last three months been all about?

Our Values are that we are to be a GOSPEL People:

Grace☐ We will be motivated by God's free gift of love in all that we do

One Another☐ We will be real as we care for one another and work together.

Servant Hearts☐ We will serve those in the local community and beyond with integrity and love.

People☐ We will share the Good News of Jesus with anyone who does not know him.

Equipped☐ We will identify, develop and use our God given gifts.

Lifestyle☐ We will be good stewards of our time, talents and possessions.

And Ian has been our Sower, responsible for scattering the seeds. But once the seeds are scattered the sower has done their part; it is for the seed to germinate, take root and grow into the plant it is intended to be. And that depends on the soil it lands in. So, how are we doing, how am I doing.

Jesus used parables based on things that his hearers would know all about. He lived in a rural, farming community. Amongst people who struggled everyday to make a living out of the soil in agriculture and livestock farming. Agriculture wasn't just a useful metaphor; it was a way of life and means of sustaining life. The people hearing this story would know only too well about the trials and tribulations of getting a good crop of seeds. For them it was an intensely important subject. And Jesus was relating this basic part of their very existence to growth of the Kingdom of God. According to the measure in which they understood and responded to the message he was giving them, the Kingdom of God would grow on Earth. This was the whole point about the parable.

Jesus was to go on and describe four types of soil; each demonstrated a reaction to his message of the Kingdom. As we hear this again this morning, we are all capable of reacting in any one of the four ways. I have to ask myself again: which way am I going to react. This parable is not just about how people outside the church react to evangelistic campaigns. It is about how people inside the church respond to the

message of building and growing the Kingdom of God. Or - becoming a Vibrant Family of Christians, as we like to say here.

So how are we doing?

- Are we motivated by God's free gift of love in all that we do?
- Are we real as we care for one another and work together?
- Do we serve those in the local community and beyond with integrity and love?
- Do we share the Good News of Jesus with anyone who does not know him?
- Do we identify, develop and use our God given gifts?
- Are we good stewards of our time, talents and possessions?

Okay, lets look at this parable of The Sower. Although it isn't really much about the sower, is it? Jesus isn't really talking about what the type of person the sower is. So should it be the parable of the seed – well not really. The seed is the one thing that is constant throughout the story. The seed – or the message of the Kingdom – doesn't change at all. It is good and viable in each case of the story. Maybe the parable would be better described as the parable of the Soils – because that is where Jesus draws his teaching from.

Four types of soil – four types of people. Or, to put it more accurately, four types of reaction to the message of the kingdom. Because I think we are all probably capable of reacting in any of the four ways at different times – possible to some measure at the same time!

Pathway People

The first type of soil Jesus describes is the pathway. These paths wouldn't have been specially constructed of concrete or tarmac. These are not built paths, they are trodden paths – tracks through the field where people had made their way to and fro over the perfectly good soil and beaten it down with the pounding of their feet.

Some years ago in my time in the construction industry we had a large project building part of Surrey University. When it came to the landscaping and external works, we asked the Architect where he wanted the footpaths laid out. He said not to worry, put paths around the buildings and just grass over all the areas in between. After one term, we came back and the Architect told us where to put the paths: it was where all the soil was bare because the grass hadn't taken root. The students had walked where they needed to go and marked out the paths themselves – we then laid proper tarmac on those routes.

Perfectly good soil and perfectly good seed, but it didn't grow. The constant pounding of feet had pressed down a hard, impenetrable layer. If any seed had managed to break through it was soon crushed by the next set of feet trampling it down.

Pathway people – what happens? Other people, other things, other priorities come trampling in and stop the good soil germinating the seed, or if it does – quickly crushing it. What tramples over our lives and stops us from becoming a GOSPEL People? In many cases it might be things that seem quite innocuous, even good things, but they detract or deflect us. Here are some things we might think about. Our friends and associates –

Other people. People we spend time with, people who influence our views. Our Values say: People - We will share the Good News of Jesus with anyone who does not know him.

It is very important that we have friends outside the church family, people with whom we engage so that we can be in a position to share the message of the Kingdom with them. But what can happen if, in fact, we allow the pounding of their feet to tread down the good soil of our lives? The ideas, the beliefs, the principles we nurture can become trampled on. Like the new shoots in the pathway – and get beaten down. What starts as a pressing down, soon becomes a hardened layer. Eventually the soil is impenetrable – effectively infertile. We never meant it to be that way, it just slowly happens.

If it's not people, what about the barrage of competing activities that fill our lives? Music, magazines, books, newspapers, websites, pod-casts, having fun.

There is nothing wrong with having fun – in fact it might be argued that Christians should have a bit more fun! Let me introduce you to Funky. Sandra and I bought him on one of my business trips away from home. We spend a lot of time away from home, often staying in hotels and it's work, work and preparing for the next bit of work. So we bought this little toy Donkey and re-named him Funky – to remind us to have some fun in life as well as work.

He now sits on our shelf when we go away to make sure we don't get too boring!

But when fun turns into the meaning for our lives – our purpose we allow the pursuit of pleasures to trample down and harden the good soil.

Books, magazines, music, websites ... nothing wrong with any of them. But are they feeding our lives, or are they trampling and pounding on the good soil to harden it? What underlying messages are they telling?

One of the privileges of seeing your children grow up is realising that they get to a point where they are probably more knowledgeable and wiser than you are! So it was when I was reading books on theology that my youngest daughter Hannah who was studying at London School of Theology told me: "Dad you should read as many books you don't agree with as you do books you do agree with". She is absolutely right. Good stuff, to challenge the mind. Nothing wrong with that. But what happens when the book, magazines, websites, music – just keep pounding away and trampling on the good soil? Other people, music, literature – things outside our lives can harden us.

What about things from inside us? Our personal thoughts, our ambitions. Philip Keller quotes 'I am what I think about when I am alone, not what I pretend to be in public'. I can fool you some of the time, maybe all of the time. But God sees me just as I really am. Do my thoughts nurture growth of the message of the Kingdom in my life? Or do they pound down back and forth and trample on the good soil to make it impenetrable?

What are your ambitions? We live in world where career and advancement is seen as a measure of our success and effectiveness. Whatever walk of life we are in, this is probably the predominant driver. What does it do to nurture the seeds of the message of the Kingdom from the one who, although he was God, made himself nothing and took on the very nature of a servant? We should strive to be the best we can in all we

do, but when does that turn into the pounding of feet over the good soil to make a pathway?

Rocky People.

If we are not Pathway people, perhaps we become Rocky People. Have you ever noticed that plants don't grow very well on rocks? Well you may have heard of Air Plants, or more accurately Tillandsias, that do grow on rocks. Here is a piece of almost useless information:

Tillandsias take all their water and nutrients through the leaf system, none or very minimal amounts are absorbed by the root system. This root system is used as wire like anchors to hold onto trees, rocks etc.

Apparently there are over 550 species of Tillandsia that grow in Mexico, South and Central Americas. The problem with any good metaphor – there are always exceptions! Anyway, I don't think Jesus was thinking of Tillandsias when he told this parable. Basic point is this: rocks don't make for good soil. The people listening to Jesus telling this parable would know this only too well. They spent backbreaking hours removing the rocks from the fields and building them into walls.

There are two things we might notice about rocky soil. Firstly there are rocks there, secondly there is soil – but it is shallow. It doesn't have the depth to keep in the moisture, it doesn't have enough substance to provide the nutrition for the plants. They start off well, when the demand on water and food is small, but they soon shrivel and die when the supply runs out.

Rocks are hard. Rocks are lifeless. Rocks are difficult to work with. The second half of the book of Ezekiel contains prophecies to Israel of their future restoration in the millennial Kingdom. As part of that God said to

them: Ezekiel 36 v 26: 'I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.' Their hearts had grown cold, hard, like stones. They were there but they didn't function in a lively way. They needed a fresh touch of God to transform them. This is the grace of God. Our values say we will be people of Grace: We will be motivated by God's free gift of love in all that we do. This is the first of our values – partly because it's the first letter of the acronym GOSPEL. But surely also because it is the starting point for all we do. It is grace that first melts our hearts and turns them towards God. And it work in reverse: if we allow hardness to creep into our hearts we are in danger of becoming rocky people - unresponsive to God's love.

But amongst the rocks was also some soil – except it is shallow. No depth to hold the water, not able to sustain the plants on it's own. Shallow soil needs the rocks clearing away to make it richer, deeper.

Our values say we will support one another. We will be real as we care for one another and work together. As we care for one another we provide an extra depth and resource to those who need support. In any family, from time to time, there are those who need support and those who give it. The Kingdom family is no different.

Thorny People.

Then there are Thorny People. Jesus says two things about them: They are choked by the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth.

Ouch!

Worries of life. We live in an age of modern agriculture, machinery, weed killers and chemical treatments. For us today, a thorn and thistle free field

is not only possible, but most likely for farmers. Not so for the people Jesus was talking to. Thistles were everywhere and the seeds would blow about. Thorns would multiply rapidly. The only solution would be continuous attention to the soil. It would be about thorn control not thorn eradication. Cares and worries are part of life. It's how we deal with them that makes the difference. David, the psalmist, wrote: 'many are the afflictions of the righteous'. Jesus said: 'in this world you will have tribulations – be of good cheer, I have overcome the world' (John 16:33). If we are to live balanced, fulfilled lives we need to work, provide for our families, deal with illness. This will bring worries, problems to deal with. As Ian has quoted M Scott Peck a number of times 'Life is difficult'.

The problem with this third type of soil wasn't that there were some thorns about. It was that the thorns were thick and covered the whole area, leaving no space for the good plants to grow, and choking those that tried. We will have worries and cares – but we mustn't become preoccupied with them. When I was stewing this week about a financial worry, Sandra had to remind me that our Heavenly Father owns the cattle on a thousand hills, so he can certainly spare a few beefburgers! Jesus told the hearers of his sermon on the mount, that his father knew what they needed and would provide. Sometimes we need people with servant hearts who will come alongside us and help us to dig out the thorns we allow to grow in our soil.

What are our values? Servant Hearts - we will serve those in the local community and beyond with integrity and love. As we serve each other in our church family, in the communities in which we live, we are helping to weed out the thorns. Have you noticed that when you serve others your own cares and worries seem to reduce – or at least you become less

preoccupied by them? Being choked by the thorns is a choice we make, it not an inevitable.

The other thing Jesus said caused the choking grip of the thorns was the deceitfulness of wealth. We should note: wealth is not the issue, deceitfulness is! Deceitfulness – subtle lies, cunning schemes to delude someone. Deceit – telling half-truths, obscuring the real meaning, intentionally misguiding someone. Paul never wrote that money was evil but he told Timothy that ‘the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil’. Attitude! Preoccupation. If I have any wealth, how did I come about it, what do I use it for? Who owns my house? Is it me, is it partly my Building Society or is it God? Do I hold on to it lightly or do I cling on to it as the source of security of my life?

Lifestyle□- we will be good stewards of our time, talents and possessions. If we have the values of servant hearts and lifestyle it will be very difficult for the thorns and weeds to overgrow and choke out the growth on our soil. So what of the fourth type of soil?

GOSPEL People

Well Jesus called it the good soil, the productive soil, the soil that sustained growth.

Let’s call it the soil of GOSPEL People!

Jesus said that this soil would promote a good harvest for the Kingdom. In some cases thirty fold, sixty fold or a hundred fold – always abundantly. Surprising, amazing multiplication of the seed that was sown. So how, given all the problem of soil maintenance, trampling, combating the weeds and thorns, is this good soil possible. Maybe it goes something like this.

The rocks and hard stones have been removed as God's grace motivates a people who know God's free gift of love in all that they do.

As they care for one another and work together, the shallow soil is deepened and enriched to make it more fertile and able to hold moisture.

Those with servant hearts help to gradually remove the thorns as they ponder less on their worries and rely more of God's wonderful provision.

As people have the good news of Jesus shared with them, they don't trample and pound down the soil into hard pathways where the crops are growing, but keep to the edges of the field, avoiding damage. The people who help reclaim the good soil are equipped and they develop and use their God given gifts leading to a lifestyle as good stewards of their time, talents and possessions.

Preached at Crawley Baptist Church by Colin Guest on 5th July 2009