

MARK – LOVE WINS

What's in a Parable?

We continue in our journey through Mark's Gospel, and today we find ourselves confronted with parables. What we will read today will, I'm sure, be very familiar to you. Part of what's going on here for Mark is that he is demonstrating that this Jesus (a common name) from Nazareth (a common town) is more than a simple teacher. Mark wants us to see that this carpenter from Nazareth, with no formal education, speaks and teaches with supernatural power. And Jesus chooses, most often in Mark, to teach through parables.

Scholars say that the idea of parables is that they have one simple, single truth. They also say that that simple, single truth might have many and varied applications. So, I'm going to read a very familiar parable and ask you this question: What is the simple, single truth of the parable?

The Parable of the Sower

4 Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge. **2** He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: **3** "Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. **4** As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. **5** Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. **6** But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. **7** Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. **8** Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times."

9 Then Jesus said, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear." (Mark 4 v 1-9)

With the people around you, take a moment to answer the question: What is the simple, single truth of the parable?

What do you think?

Most scholars and commentators would agree that the simple, single truth of this parable is about the quality of the soil. There is something here about the truth of the kingdom of the heavens – we might go as far as to say, it’s really about the truth about Jesus himself and who he is. There is something about growth – we might say growth in faith or belief and the outworking of that. But it does all seem to hinge on the kind of soil this truth lands on. So, the simple, single truth this parable seeks to teach seems to be about the quality of the soil.

If you, like me, struggle to grasp the meanings of parables, it turns out you are in good company. Because, it appears, the disciples did too. In fact, according to Mark, Jesus asks them directly if they understand the parable. And before they can answer, he goes on to explain it!

¹³ Then Jesus said to them, “Don’t you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? ¹⁴ The farmer sows the word. ¹⁵ Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. ¹⁶ Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. ¹⁷ But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. ¹⁸ Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; ¹⁹ but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. ²⁰ Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown. (Mark 4 v 13-20)

And it does seem that Jesus puts the emphasis on the soil – it is the soil that determines what happens to the seed. And we’ll get to that. But I want to pause and ask a question. When a farmer, any farmer, sows seed, any seed, what is he or she hoping for? What is their greatest desire? My answer to that questions is this: Any farmer wants to see the seed grow and reach its full potential. I’m guessing that no farmer would ever sow seed hoping it wouldn’t grow at all!

Next question: What might this parable teach us, or say, about God?

Well, it may be this parable teaches us that God longs to see his people reach their full potential. When a farmer sows seed, they will be desperate to see

that seed grow and produce a bountiful crop. We might not want to use the word desperate about God, but maybe it's true. Maybe God, in his love, grace and wisdom, is desperately hoping that what he sows into the lives of people like you and me, grows. Maybe it's true that God is desperately hoping that people like you and me reach our full potential.

So, how are you doing friends?

If the simple, single truth in this parable is about the quality of the soil, maybe we would do well to think about that. And maybe this is where it gets a bit personal and challenging. And maybe this is where a bit of honesty about ourselves is required. But, as we go into it, we would do well to remember the context: the farmer longs to see what he sows reach its full potential. God longs for you to reach your full potential – he does!

There are four types of soil in this parable. The first soil is the pathway. This is soil that has been trodden many times by those travelling and walking – both people and animals – and it has become very hard. With all the people, animals and goods that have trampled this soil, it has become like cement! And nothing grows here. Any seed that fell here, would be snatched away quickly by the birds and wasted.

The hard question is: have you hard soil in your life, beaten and trodden down so that nothing grows there?

It is probably true that there are many things that can cause the soil of our hearts to become hard:

- Family we find difficult or who abuse us
- Friends who let us down or who hurt us
- When God does not seem to come through for us
- The experiences of life that mould us
- The things we expose ourselves to that feed us.

I'm wondering too, if we can also harden our hearts with our theology. It seems to me it might have been true about the Pharisees – the people who knew they were right! But when Jesus began talking about what the kingdom of the heavens was like, it turned out they were wrong a lot of the time.

Psalm 95 has these verses: “Do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah, as you did that day at Massah in the wilderness, when your ancestors tested me; they tried me, though they had seen what I did. (V 8-9)

When I hear those words, I think: 'I'm capable of that!' I once heard a speaker make this challenge from these verses: keep your heart soft!

How's the soil of your heart friends?

God is always sowing, hoping...

The second soil is rocky soil. This soil that takes enormous hard work to get anything to grow. This kind of soil is not good soil for the gardener or sower because it cannot be relied on to yield good fruit or a good crop. Perhaps we might call it barren soil. Elsewhere Jesus says, 'You will recognise them by their fruit.' (Mathew 7 v 16)

I wonder if others were asked to look for evidence of our faith, or our growth in faith, or our life of faith, or perhaps evidence that we follow Jesus, would they find any?

Rocky soil covers the rock with a thin layer of soil, meaning there is no place for the roots to grow. If we have no roots, when life becomes challenging, it can be really hard to hold onto faith. Truth is, I've been on my own journey of growing and changing faith for a few years now. I've found myself asking questions I never thought I'd ask, and I've found myself asking what my faith is really based on. That has been challenging and led to much wrestling and I've reflected much on where the roots of my faith are.

The wrestling has made my faith deeper and stronger – even if it's not the same faith it used to be. For some people, that kind of wrestling leads them to give up on faith – and I understand that. I wonder if it has something to do with roots?

How are you doing friends?

Another kind of rocky soil is stony soil. This soil requires a massive amount of work to clear the soil of stones to get anything to grow. We have hard places in our hearts – places we simply will not allow the seed to grow. We stubbornly refuse to let God in, allow the Holy Spirit to move, or refuse to believe.

Another kind of rocky soil is gravelly soil. This soil allows nutrients and nourishment to drain away quickly. There is growth, but it is short lived. A cause of this can be an attitude of ingratitude: we constantly grumble against God for the way he apparently handles our lives and arranges our

circumstances. Maybe a sign of this is that we live 'if only' lives, and the consequence is it is hard for anything to grow.

How are you doing friends?

The third type of soil is thorny soil. In this kind of soil, it is a constant battle to grow anything. It is difficult to grow both thorns and fruit. 'Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles?' (Mathew 7 v 16). The challenge seems to be it's one or the other. Thorns have a nasty capacity to choke a crop. Perhaps the question is: What is growing in your life right now? Or maybe, another way to ask the question would be this:

- What takes up most space in your life right now?
- What occupies your time and attention?
- What has gained prime place in your priorities?
- What is the net result of your living: things of earthly value, or things of eternal value?
- On what is your heart set?
- Where is your treasure?

How are you doing?

The fourth soil is good soil. When the seed falls on good soil, there is growth. What's challenging about his parable, is that all the other soils are considered non-productive – none of them produced the growth hoped for by the farmer. But the truth about good soil, even the best soil, where growth is possible – is that this soil has to be broken first, before it can become beautiful. And maybe a question we need to wrestle with right now is: Where in our lives do we need to be broken so we can grow?

We ask that question remembering the farmer's greatest desire is for us to reach our full potential. God is always, gently, quietly, lovingly, caringly working to produce good soil in you and me. And maybe the question becomes: Where, right now, does God need to do his good work in you and me?

So, friends, how are you doing?

Well, for me, I find that quite challenging. As I've spoken these words, I think I've recognized all of those soils in my life. And I'm hoping you might at least have recognised that, for all my faults, of which there are many, I have some good soil – there are at least some signs of growth. But if I am honest, there's

a part of me that's left slightly unnerved by what is apparently the simple, single truth of this parable.

Because it does seem that it all relies on me! If it's all about the soil, and the soil is my heart, then it's all about how I respond to God's sowing in my life. And if that's true, then in your life, it's all down to you! And then I wonder: so what chance have I got?

Maybe you don't think and wonder like me, and that's fine – don't! But for those of you who do – what do we do with that then? Well, I'm really glad Jesus didn't teach just one parable!

And for those of you who are now worried about me, I'm not thinking that it's nothing to do with me – the growth thing. But I do hope and believe that something else is going on in the kingdom of the heavens too!

The Parable of the Growing Seed

²⁶ He also said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. ²⁷ Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. ²⁸ All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. ²⁹ As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come."

The Parable of the Mustard Seed

³⁰ Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? ³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. ³² Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade."

³³ With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. ³⁴ He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.

The simple, single truth is the parable of the 'growing seed' maybe that its growth is, in truth, a mystery. Nobody does anything, but the seed grows anyway. And, according to Mark, it grows 'all by itself.'

The mustard seed is not, in fact the smallest seed, but everyone listening will know about it and how big it grows.

This simple, single truth of this parable might be exactly that, that something big can grow from something small. If the disciples have been left wondering what chance they have if everything is down to their response, maybe Jesus is showing them more truth about the kingdom of the heavens.

And maybe that truth is that they are not the only ones at work in the kingdom of the heavens. That maybe, alongside their response, something else is at work. Maybe in these parables, Jesus is letting the disciples know that they are not alone, and never will be alone in the work of the kingdom of the heavens. Maybe he's teaching them not to judge only what they can see, what's on the surface, what is observable. Perhaps we would do well to learn that too.

Maybe what Jesus wants them to know goes something like this:

'Guys, you are absolutely responsible for how you respond to what you know about me. You are. But know this, I am absolutely responsible for helping you in ways you might never see, know, or understand. You are not on your own and never will be on your own. Let's do this thing together because I have your best interest at heart.'

And maybe, just maybe, that's what God would say to you right now, in these moments, however your life of faith is: 'Let's do this thing together. I have your best interest at heart.'

So, how about it, friends?

Preached and Live Streamed from Crawley Baptist Church, on Sunday 18th February 2024, by Rev. Ian Phillips.

