

Parable of the Sower - Matthew 13:1-23

We are going to continue our look at Jesus' parables on the Kingdom of God. As I started in the middle of this set and have come to the end we will go back to the beginning and look at the parable of the sower. This parable works on 2 levels really, it is the introduction to Jesus' teachings from then on, especially his use of parables, but it also teaches us about the Kingdom, and more specifically how it is received.

There is therefore a lot in this parable and it's introduction to the rest of Jesus' teaching.

Mt 13:1-23

Jesus has begun his ministry and he has begun to receive some real opposition in the last chapter. He now starts teaching in parables. Jesus' parables are not simple, they are not just stories, they are really deep. They have a lot of levels. Equally they are not necessarily easy to hear, they challenge, us. Eugene Boring sums it up

'In the preaching of Jesus, parables were not vivid decorations of a moralistic point but were disturbing stories that threaten the hearer's secure mythological world - the world of assumptions by which we habitually live, the unnoticed framework of our thinking within which we interpret all other data'

Jesus' parables came not to smooth over a bit of misunderstanding. Rather to knock the foundations from under all of our understanding and start again. The understanding wasn't wrong but the whole framework within which his listeners understood. And perhaps ours too. For example, I have been in churches for a while now, I know how God moves, and I sure know how he should move, I expect God to act in this way and I am going to work along side that. And I won't stop until I have done my bit to established the Kingdom of Chris, er.. of God.

I have been building the Church in my image for most of my life. Jesus says when challenged about his disciples

Neither do men pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do the skins will burst, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved. (Mt 9:17)

He wants new vessels. His parables need to shock us into receiving the teaching without our old way of thinking or we just wont get it, or worse still, we will twist it to reinforce our understanding of how God should work. We risk losing God's word and confusing our understanding unless we start afresh with new wineskins, with a new framework.

We need to look at the parables afresh. I have been trying to and I am sure that some of my old understanding has crept in. I would advise that the hardest interpretation, the

most difficult reading of the parables is often the best place to start.

If it doesn't have something that offends you go back and read it again. I started looking at each of these parables with the bias of my kingdom. It takes a while for me to see Jesus' words in there. But it will hit you with a Eureka moment if you will dwell on it. Jesus' introduction to these parables encourages us to look afresh, with new eyes.

We read the parables, the passage between this parable and the interpretation 'Though seeing they do not see, though hearing they do not hear or understand' and think that Jesus is only talking about people hearing at the time. Of course, we understand, we think, we have had years of interpretation, of exegeses. But I worry that the Church can take it's understanding for granted so much so that it uses the parables for children's stories. I am not against this as it helps develop a good frame to understand the word, but lets not forget them as adults, they still have a lot to teach us. We need to wrestle with them and find what they are challenging us about.

Jesus is speaking of the Kingdom. Again, to start to understand this parable we need to think outside of our time and culture. The Kingdom of God is an accepted term today, but remember it was explosive back then. This is evoking images of the time of the Judges, of God's deliverance and ultimate rule, of the Messiah. Jesus was rejected because he taught this subject but taught the last thing that the leaders wanted to hear. This parable is an introduction to not only how the Kingdom is received but also how it is delivered. We see both sides of the equation here again, like the treasure and the pearl. However, this, the rest of Jesus' parables, and the way in which he acted and taught were not what they expected. Why, because they had the Kingdom of the Pharisees, or the Kingdom of the Sadducees in mind, not the Kingdom of God. They wanted a saviour with a capitol S, a warrior to rescue them and crush all others.

I want to introduce a concept to you. Luther talked about left handed power. Let me explain a bit. Right handed power is cause and effect as we understand it. If I push this pen, it moves. That is right handed power, it is straight line power and it works. It is responsible for most everything we see today. However, you apply right handed power to people, to relationships, you start having problems, you risk imposing upon others, you risk breaking relationships down. Left handed power is something completely different. Left handed power is working beyond our understanding, something beyond ourselves, it is paradoxical power that to the world looks like weakness. For example. Right handed power is reacting when someone hits you by hitting them back. Straight forwards cause and effect, straight line power. Left handed power is not only not reacting but being willing to turn the other cheek, it doesn't stop the evil, it may soften a heart or 2 but then again it may not. But it will never close the door on a relationship or the potential for forgiveness. Jesus is a left handed saviour, a dying, rising saviour. Left handed power is dying on a cross for the forgiveness of sins and to conquer death, not charges in on a horse. He works in paradoxical ways. The Jews of the time did not want a left handed Messiah. (Left handed power is wonderfully explained in Robert Farrar Capon's book 'Kingdom Grace and Judgement')

To put it another way, a man who is drowning at sea's saviour is a lifeguard, someone to swim out to him and rescue him, bring him back to shore. We have a saviour who swims out and who then drowns with us. But in doing so, turns the whole order of things on it's head to redeem us. Jesus, as a saviour, when he died on the cross showed the power of God not in a way that anybody expected or fully understood.

In this parable that we are going to look at now Jesus taught of a Kingdom that was spread, he started to introduce the idea of a spiritual Kingdom that was not welcomed by the leaders of the day, a Kingdom of growth through left handed means. Not a Kingdom of the Earth imposed by force.

So we understand Jesus' introduction and we have a concept of where he is coming from. Let's look at the parable of the sower.

Before we look at the seed and the soil lets think about the sower, it is always good to start with the character that represents God. Farmers would take a sack of seed, put it over their shoulder and go out scattering it in their fields. However, Jesus' audience would consider our sower here a fool. Farmers were not rich people, they were often poor and would sow the seed very carefully. They relied on every one of the seeds to grow and be fruitful and would often rely on luck and the weather. I have this image of a group of farmers on their knees, sowing this precious seed as carefully as possible so to be fruitful and we have this idiot coming along just throwing it all over the place like it will never run out, like it could just grow anywhere.

There are a couple of things to unpick from this. Firstly, the parable does not de-value the Kingdom, the seed was precious to Jesus' listeners, they understood that, but what our farmer does with it is the shocking truth here, his casual approach is shocking, you can't just throw something as precious as the Kingdom about like this. Can you?

Importantly this is not an efficient farmer. The Pharisees were efficient sowers, they knew where to plant seeds, they hand picked disciples, they kept it within the Jewish nation. This parable dares to consider just throwing the doors open and hurling the invitation to God's kingdom to the farthest corners of the earth.

Let's consider this point though. Jesus does not present an efficient Kingdom. This is not the parable of the factory line. Thomas Merton when asked what the leading spiritual illness of the age was replied 'efficiency'. This Kingdom of Chris is efficient, everyone is where they need to be at the right time and everything works as it should. The Kingdom of God is not efficient, as we understand it. If you look at this parable it is even wasteful. How often do we pause to consider our actions and weigh them up with efficiency and effectiveness in mind? I don't think that the Church is called to be efficient I think it is called to be significant. If that means throwing the word all over the place then that's what it means. If it means apparently wasting money to share the gospel then so be it. Often the last people we expect to get it are the first ones to receive God's grace with gratitude. These days with green issues on the agenda waste is near enough a swear word. But is God inviting us to risk waste? I understand the concept of good

stewardship but this parable shows us an example of being willing to be wasteful. Sharing the gospel is the important thing, not how cost effectively we are doing it.

A quick aside, I have always been a real swine about time keeping, I don't like lateness, it's just one of my rough edges. However, if I read of Jesus raising Lazarus I see that Jesus is not only a bit late, he is four days late, and a man died because of it. Jesus doesn't obey my rules of punctuality. Why, because these things do not matter. The Glory of God matters, Jesus himself comments in this incident that 'for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe'. My Kingdom is efficient and timely, God's is more than that.

Anyway, we have a head start with this parable as Jesus interprets it for us. If we keep looking at the sower, God, as the trinity, is the sower, at this time he is the sower in Jesus, it's Jesus spreading the word. What strikes me from this parable is the generosity of God, his grace. He gives to all, he will risk an incredible amount of waste, time and time again to ensure that all hear the word and have the chance to respond. He flings it far and wide. In addition his investment in us is not dependant upon our ability to receive, he invests his seed in all of us and we are going to consider this when we look at the seed. Let's lose this pursuit of efficiency. It's not God's way. Some things are worth doing inefficiently. Our sower here flings far and wide what is most precious. Jesus is casual with the most precious thing because he views us with such love.

We have thought of the sower, now lets consider the seed. What is the seed? It is the message of the Kingdom, the Word. Now consider with me John 1 - The Word was with God, the Word was God and the Word became flesh. The Word is Jesus. Therefore the seed is Jesus too. So Jesus is the sower and the seed. This shows us he gives of himself. His investment in you is his spirit and this is what we are talking about here, the truth of the gospel, our saving grace through Jesus and Jesus alone. One thing to note here though is that we are called to follow Jesus and his example, true sharing of the Word includes giving something of yourself. This is the example we have been set. It is teaching us about sacrificial evangelism.

However, it is important to note that in this parable Jesus is doing all the work. This is the truth of God's grace and our salvation. He does it all. We are just the soil. Our part is to just listen and receive. God plants his seed in us and it bears fruit in us. God can see fruit in our lives because of his seed, not our works. We are saved by the Grace of God that in us he sees Jesus. In other words God bends the rules to see us as perfect.

In these parables we have been looking at what we can learn about the Kingdom. The message of the Kingdom here is the seed. This parable talks about the sharing of the Kingdom rather than the Kingdom itself. However, there are still lessons to be learnt about the Kingdom here. What this parable tells us is that God's word is planted in us. How we respond is outlined in the different types of soil, but the Word is in us regardless. When we hear and receive the truth it should be an awakening of something within us.

Rabbinic literature has it's own folk tale to describe this idea of the angel Laila.

Apparently

The angel Laila brings the seed and soul together in the womb. While the child develops in the womb Laila places a lighted candle at the head of the unborn infant and teaches the child the entire Torah as well as the history of their soul. Then when the child is born the angel puts out the candle and brings the child forth. The angel then puts it's finger to the child's lips as if to say 'shh', and this causes the child to forget everything that was taught. The story implies that the knowledge is present, merely forgotten. This action of putting the finger on the child's lips is also meant to explain where we get the indentation on our top lips from.

I like this, it's a folktale, but the fact is that the truth is within us, we can respond to it or we can not. In my faith I believe, I have faith, but there is also something within me that just can't not believe, I am compelled to believe. It is entirely faith and belief but at the same time I know it is true. God's seed is in me and it grows as I let it, as I receive it and make good ground for it.

Sometimes though my rough edges shine through. Less so these days than when I first started to take my faith seriously but still often. It is important to remember that God's working in our lives starts as a seed and it's ongoing. Sometimes, when planting seeds, you can drop them in and it is difficult to see them, or where they went, but sure enough, given time they will grow. God is not finished with any of us yet but be encouraged that if you are ever-seeking God you will develop fruit, no matter how new the seed is.

Before we look at Jesus' interpretation of this parable it is important to go back to the passage between the parable and the explanation. It is to show that Jesus' teachings are not always received. The parable is a re-working of the prophecy in Isaiah. (v14-15) Jesus is the fulfilment of this prophecy and he is telling us so. It may seem weird in the middle of a parable and it's explanation but it is as much a part of the explanation as verse 18 onwards is.

Jesus focuses his explanation of this parable on the four different types of soil, the hard, the shallow, the pre-occupied and the good. So lets have a look at these.

Firstly, Jesus tells us of the seed that falls on the path where the birds came and ate it up (v 3,4). Jesus' explanation gives us a head start here (v 19). Now I tell myself off here as I can be stubborn headed about the concept of being 'culturally relevant' because I have a worry that there is a risk of losing the message in the pursuit of being trendy. However, if the message is not understood because it is not delivered in a relevant way then it is lost. We have to share the gospel in a way that is understood, and therefore in a way that is relevant. My hope is that we keep the focus on the message.

I think that it is no mistake that the devil is associated with those on 'the path'. Satan loves to persuade people that they are on the right path, that they understand spiritual

matters and that they are fine. Spirituality is a great example where the gospel is either not understood or taken as part of a wider belief system and therefore not really believed at all. Unlike the others the seed doesn't even take root as the evil one snatches it away. If someone believes they are on the right path the devil has an easy time fending off the gospel. But the seed is still scattered, God is still trying to get through. He still stands at the door and knocks.

I think that the Pharisees fall into this camp, they did not understand Jesus' methods and teachings, they are so obsessed with their saviour they expect, the left handed way Jesus works is passing them by, they don't understand because they are convinced they are on the path.

Interestingly these are the only ones who lose the seed in this parable, all the others do grow in one form or another. The rest that we will look at all accept the gospel at one point in time.

The next receiver is the rocky places. (v5,6) Some fell on the rocky places, where it did not have much soil, It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched and they withered because they had no root. Jesus explains this in v 20,21.

Let's break this one down, we have a bit more here. Firstly the seed is sown and it takes root, lets be glad for that. But it is in the rocky places where there is not much soil. What does this mean? What does the soil represent, well the good soil is you and me, it is where the fruit grows in abundance. What does this tell us then. There will be those who believe but due to a lack of Christian fellowship, their faith may spring up quickly, perhaps because it has to, but when tests come these people can fall away. I know that when things are hard or if we were to suffer persecution I would rely heavily on the Church. What would we do without each other? There are those without that luxury.

There is a real ministry in teaching, helping and encouraging new Christians. In helping those who are not surrounded by other believers, those out on a limb. I used to do gigs and events with a band and we would share a gospel message as part of that. We saw some people saved which was great but I am very remorseful that I never kept in touch with them. We tried to leave them attached to a Church but due lack of experience or wisdom at the time I now know that this could have been done better. Now I don't know where their walk is now but it may be that they sprang up and fell away due to a lack of support. Missions are great and I think they do a valuable work of spreading the gospel. But there has to be support afterwards.

I strongly believe that Jesus called us to make disciples of all nations, not just converts of all nations. This parable gives us an idea of what can happen if we forget to disciple.

The other side of this that I would like to encourage, in myself really, is patience. In our garden we have a patio area and in between the slabs there grow all kind of greenery and it can really annoy me. I want to dig it up and concrete the whole thing. The green

belongs in the garden not the paved area. I know that this is representative of how I can be in my impatience with others. I can be harsh on those in the rocky places and forget the vulnerability of the word in them. They need to be encouraged to soften into good soil, let's not be harsh because we know where we think growth should happen, there are those outside of the Church who have a grasp of something of God. If encouraging someone's loose grip of the gospel brings them into fullness with Christ, if surrounding them with more soil means a deeper root, then so be it.

What is interesting about this part of the parable is that we can read it and consider that the sun comes and scorches them. That trial and persecution are to blame for their falling away. Let's re-read this though. It tells us that 'since he has no root' he only lasts a short time. The sun shines on us all, we will all suffer persecution and trials, of various degrees. This is not the cause of falling away in this parable, the shallow root is. So when we pray for those in persecution or who are going through trials do we pray for the persecution to end or should we be praying for their rooting in God?

The last two groups now are a contrast of those who may be further on in their faith.

Jesus tells us of other seed that fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants (v 7). He explains this to us in v22. I think two really important questions to ask here are: What does this look like? and How can we help? God has said in some of the other parables that he will not weed the Kingdom until the harvest. He won't risk the fruitful ones to remove the weeds. The seed is planted and it grows but it is choked. But God is still protective over it. So are they still saved? We could come along to a discussion about once you are saved are you always saved? That is a huge subject that I am not going to try and begin to discuss, but, God's grace shows us that we have a God who loves to bend the rules to save his people.

This one is relatively straight forward and is part of the large part of teaching Jesus gives us about wealth and the trappings of the world. We must keep being fed, at Church, at home, in quiet times, in reading. Also we must be generous and remember that everything we have you have because God has given it to us, let it go and share it with others.

There is not much more to say to this one, but of everything, what are the two things that Jesus point to that threaten our fruitfulness, worry and money. Therefore, have faith and be generous. He talks a lot about both, and both are considered up in Matthew 6:25

*Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life,
what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what
you will wear. Is not life more important than food and
the body more important than clothing.*

And interestingly it is out of this passage that Jesus tells us to seek first his Kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to us as well. This is why it is deceptiveness of wealth. We have so much more that to pursue physical riches is a

lesson in futility.

Finally the good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it (v 23). He produces a crop. He is fruitful. What is the fruit? Fruits of the spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self control. How are we fruitful, we receive from God, we root ourselves in him, and we don't let ourselves be distracted.

The interesting thing in this parable is at the end of the day the four different receivers of the word are distinguished by their fruit. Jesus tells us that 'by their fruits you will recognise them' A good tree bears good fruit. All had the opportunity to be fruitful, each seed has the same potential, and I believe that soil can change, what was once a path can become part of a field. God's holy spirit is at work in everyone and his seed is in there somewhere. Soil can be softened by rain, even with faith the size of a mustard seed we can tell a mountain to move and be thrown into the sea, how much more a couple of rocks. We can encourage each other to follow after God. Finally, plants develop seeds of their own and they can be carried by the wind wherever. We will share the gospel and if we are willing to God can take it anywhere. But this parable shows us an example to not just share where we think there will be a harvest, or where we may be successful. God's example is to reach out to all.

Is unfruitfulness beyond God's grace? You may feel fruitless at times and I would therefore encourage you to learn from this parable, don't stress out about the fruits, work on the soil and being someone within whom God's seed can grow. The first thing a seed does when planted is to grow what's called a radicle down into the soil to get nutrition, then it works on the stalk. The fruits will take care of themselves. Prepare your heart for God, that is all he asks, he already has done the sowing and he will do the cultivating.

Finally the parable tells us that the good soil will produce a crop yielding 100, 60, 30 times what was sown. Some of this is the potential for fruit in us, there is the potential for an abundance. However, we are called to be fruitful and our fruit will produce seeds. We are to be sowers too. We are called to make disciples. Too often evangelism is like trying to win an argument. However, the seeds are born out of our fruit. We will share the Kingdom when we are loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, good, gentle, faithful and self controlled. God's holy spirit will carry and plant the seed and will nurture it. God sows seeds but we can too by our fruit.

This parable is very interesting in telling us an awful lot regarding the Kingdom. We can learn how God works and spreads, how he invests in us. We can learn how we and others receive or don't receive the word. We can see how some will fall away, but I believe how some can develop to be receptive. And we can see how we can serve God's purpose in bringing forth a harvest. We see how the Kingdom works and we get the idea for how Jesus teaches. He spreads the net far and wide and preaches to all sorts of people, not just the Jewish nation. He dares to throw the seed farther than the field and into the gentile nations too. It is often the last people we expect who respond to the word. Jesus 'wasted' his time with all sorts of people who we would not expect to respond, from

prostitutes to tax men. Therefore share with everyone, spread the gospel far and wide. But also, encourage and surround those who receive it, I would hope that the Church will prepare good soil, not only individually but also help to prepare it in each other.

In this parable we have the image of God, the sower, walking through fields of fruitful harvest in the church. It is reminiscent of God in Genesis walking through the garden in the cool of the day. In the church, in this parable, we see that we are coming back to what we were originally intended to be. God is restoring his original creation to it's full glory in Him.

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