

Theme: - The parable of the Sower

This parable is found in all three Synoptic Gospels. Mark's version in chapter 4 was the first to be written, and it is likely that both Matthew and Luke had access to Mark's version when they wrote their own versions, Luke's version is in chapter 8. A parable is usually a short story to illustrate a moral or religious principle or spiritual truth, and it's great virtue is that the parable enables and compels us to discover truth for ourselves. In this case the short story is of a farmer who is sowing seeds. One last thing before we look at any parable is what was the overall objective of Jesus telling parables; he tells parables so that we can be transformed by a deeper understanding of God and the kingdom of heaven.

This Parable of the Sower is one of Jesus' best known parables, and Jesus told this parable to warn and encourage people that not everyone who hears the good news will believe, and there will be many reasons for that, but nevertheless we are to persevere with our message of salvation.

At the end of chapter 12 we are told that he was teaching in a house when the crowd told Jesus that his mother and brothers were waiting outside to talk to him, and Jesus replied, "For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." Then at the beginning of chapter 13 we are told that on the same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by a lake. By this time Jesus had probably stopped teaching in synagogues because they were increasingly being places for Jesus to avoid, due to the jealousy of the Scribes and Pharisees, who were plotting against him and trying to trip him up on every word he spoke.

Then such a large crowd gathered around that he had to get into a boat, and he sat there while he taught the crowd who remained standing on the beach. We need to be careful when we talk about large crowds, the combined population of Judah and Israel in Jesus' day may well have been less than 1.5 million people, smaller than the population of some of our larger towns but spread over the entire country. So, a large crowd could be considerably smaller than what we would call a large crowd today. It was usual for a Rabbi to sit while teaching, but in all probability the boat wasn't in use, and could have been beached, so Jesus could still see over their heads, which meant that everyone could see him, and I find it easier to concentrate when I can see whose talking.

Verse 3 tells us that Jesus told them many things in parables, and it's not clear whether those are not listed or that they were listed elsewhere, but when Jesus came to the parable of the Sower St Matthew decided to record it for posterity. Jesus used agricultural terms and themes in many of his parables because Israel in Jesus' day was predominantly agricultural, although exceptionally because of the lake there were

fishermen in Galilee, but they were very few compared to those working on the land, but they too would have understood.

Jesus started the parable by saying, "Listen!" Saying 'listen' was a bit like telling people to be quiet, which meant that other people can hear what's being said and it also focuses people on the speaker. Jesus then said, "A Sower went out to sow," In those days a farmer would have sown his seed by Scattering or broadcasting the seed by hand, by taking a handful of grain from a sack and trying to spread it as evenly over the soil as possible. Then other people who would be close behind him would be raking it in, and that was a picture everyone in springtime would see many times, and of course some would also be involved.

Now although the farmer didn't want to lose any grain, spreading it by hand inevitably resulted in some falling on unproductive areas, and the first area mentioned was a path which with years of use would be hard and the seed would not take root. Now the birds, who are ever in search of a free meal, ate up the seed which fell on the path, Other seed fell on rocky ground where they didn't have much soil and they sprang up quickly, because there was no depth of soil. It would seem that some areas of Israel had a shallow layer of soil on a rocky base. The rocky base would absorb the heat during the day releasing it during the night when it was cooler, The added warmth aided germination and growth. But when the sun rose, the plants on the rocky ground were scorched because they had a poor root system due to the lack of soil, and little if any moisture would be captured in the thin layer of soil to replenish the moisture lost through the sun, and the plants would wither and die.

Other seed fell among thorns and the thorns grew up and choked them. That's the problem with weeds, we have to nurture and tend our cultivated plants if we want them to grow, but weeds which we spend time and money on trying to destroy will still grow stronger than the plants we nurture. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

Before we go on, farm workers would be fully aware that, depending on the type of crop, first century harvest would be doing well if it produced sevenfold to tenfold yields let alone thirty, sixty or hundredfold. And even today with modern equipment and farming methods a farmer would be happy with a yield of fifteen to twentyfold.

We now skip over verses 10 to 17 and jump to verse 18 of our reading, leaving out the mystery of why some people can understand Jesus' parables while ours can't. Verse 18 starts, "Hear then the parable of the Sower." We have heard the short story which spoke about different types of ground, and now we hear about different kinds of people who are represented by the different types of ground.

When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart. Even though the seed is sown in the heart it fails to find a foothold because the person failed to understand; this is the

seed that fell on the path. As for seed which is sown on rocky ground these are people who respond to the word initially with joy, but their early enthusiasm wains as the going gets tough. And when the full implications of what a disciple of Christ is and the unforeseen opposition they are subject too they are soon gone, they are long on excitement but short on commitment. As for unforeseen opposition, it's a little known fact that more people were murdered because of their faith in Christ in the twentieth century than in any other century before and amounts to an estimated 15 to 20 million Christians, if you are interested in statistics then look it up on the internet.

The third type of person is like seed which fell among thorns they yield nothing because the cares of the world and the lure for wealth choke the word; the desire for wealth is the devil's best friend and greatest alloy.

We now come to the seed sown on good soil, and when Jesus said that some grain fell on good soil and produced yields of thirty, sixty and a hundredfold, some people would walk away in disbelief, these would be examples of people who hear the word but do not understand and are like seed which fell on the path. While others who understood what Jesus was saying would be amazed at such yields, which would be beyond their wildest dreams, but they understood that following Jesus would also bring joy beyond their wildest dreams, and they would want to stay and hear more good news of the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus knew exactly what he was saying of course when he spoke about yields beyond their wildest dreams, he was giving them encouragement to continue following him, and for their future, when he had gone, to continue the work of evangelism even though it appeared that the message was falling on deaf ears. This parable is not only for the encouragement of new Christians, but for all of us not to give up when we see people leaving the church, especially the young.

As an example of what can happen, I was taught Christianity by my parents, and through having to go to Sunday School, and by going to a church run primary school. But at 15, when I left school, I stopped going to church regularly, and by the time I was called up into the army had stopped going altogether. It was when my eldest daughter was born in 1967, when both Jill and I decided that we were going to give our children the same opportunity that we both had, so we both started going to church again and to bring up our children as Christians. Sadly, neither of my parents saw me ordained but both knew that I had started going to church regularly; so eventually my parents saw the fruits of their work in bringing me up as a Christian.

Jesus' exaggerated words about the harvest are designed to encourage disciples who work hard with apparently few results. As Christians we may well be preaching or just talking to people who are represented by those on the pathway, or those on rocky ground, or those who are on thorny ground. and some of our efforts may never amount to anything. However, we must not be discouraged, because those who do hear the

word and understand it, that is, take it into their hearts, live by it, and stake their lives on it, will produce an abundant harvest.

The parable assures us that God is at work below the surface, as in my case, causing growth that will be evident in time. We need not be dismayed with our work of spreading the gospel even if we don't immediately see the results. The harvest extends across a large range, from thirtyfold to a hundredfold all from good seed planted in good soil. Jesus neither criticizes the thirtyfold harvest nor praises the hundredfold harvest.

The faithful disciple may be responsible for sowing the seed and watering it, but God is responsible for the growth (1 Corinthians 3:7). Jesus likens the seed to "the word of the kingdom." Jesus used words powerfully in his ministry and calls his disciples to do the same. Just as a growing seed can crack a rock, so can the word of God transform lives.

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