

Sermon 16 July 2023 Parable of the Sower

Hebrews 11:1-3,7-12 Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

One of the great thing about the parables of Jesus is that people could relate to them on two levels. Firstly, they are, on the surface, simple stories. But once you delve into them, you realise there are invariably several layers to them.

Secondly, they are rural in nature. Being a rural society, his listeners would be familiar with the imagery used. The parable of the sower fits these two criteria perfectly. What could be simpler or more rural than a man sowing seed?

The seed represents what Jesus has to teach us about the kingdom of God. The critical point of the story is what happens to that seed. Does it fall on deaf ears or is the teaching of Jesus taken on board and bears fruit? Back to that in a moment.

Who does the sower represent? In the first instance, obviously Jesus himself. But it goes further than that. On the one hand, Jesus is directing his words to his disciples. After all, they are the ones who are going to entrusted with the task of spreading his word when Jesus moves on. At the time, they weren't aware of this but Jesus certainly was.

I think Jesus is also directing his words, in terms of the sower, to us all. We are all disciples and we are all challenged to do our bit to further God's kingdom. We should all be in the business of sowing seeds. Now those seeds might take a long time to germinate and grow into something productive – it takes a long time for an acorn to grow into an oak – but as Christians, by definition, we are commissioned to spread God's gospel of love to all and sundry. As expressed through this parable, Jesus makes the point that this is not necessarily easy. So back to the seeds.

Some seeds fell on to a footpath. In Palestine the fields were in long strips and the ground between the strips was a right of way, a common path. The ground was beaten hard by the constant passing of feet and so no seed was going to penetrate the soil. This symbolises people who have a closed mind to the word of God. They have made up their minds and are simply not interested.

I do have an experience along these lines most evenings. It is time for my kids to go to bed. However, they are immersed in their devices. I would like to think they are working their way through complex educational programmes but the reality is more than likely to be something a little different. I announce in what I consider to be a reasonably commanding voice that it is time to clean teeth and hit the sack. On a scale of 0 to 10, the response hovers around 0. Their focus, their interest is certainly not on what I have to say.

Unfortunately, we know there are many people out there who have a similar attitude to the word of God. They have other priorities. How we reach out and engage them is something of a challenge. I don't intend to explore that challenge right now, suffice to say we need to make the message relevant and applicable to the lives of those who have yet to be touched by the presence of God.

Some seed fell on stony ground. Much of the good soil in Palestine was spread quite thinly on top of what was very stony ground. So where that thin layer of topsoil had been eroded, the seed would have fallen on to the stony ground. Here the seed might germinate but would then die away very quickly. This represents people who listen but in the end have other priorities and so lose interest.

Some seed fell among thorns. If the soil wasn't deep and fertile, weeds would flourish and so provide competition for the seed. Invariably, the weeds would win. This thorny ground symbolises those who become consumed by the anxieties of life, the pressures of everyday living. These can include providing for family, employment, carrying out duties, the pursuit of wealth. We lose our focus on what ironically could in the end help us with these everyday challenges.

Then some seed fell on fertile ground. An abundant harvest would result. This soil represents people like yourselves – people who not only listen but then take on board what you hear and resolve to shape your lives accordingly; people who hear the invitation to walk through the door into God's kingdom and actually take up the invitation. And when we walk through the door, things change.

However, it does take a degree of courage to walk through that door. Until we take that step, God is very much an unknown quantity, and even then, God remains something of a mystery. It will inevitably call for sacrifices to be made but the rewards are significant, to say the least. Let me finish with a story.

An Arab chief tells the story of a spy captured and sentenced to death by a General in the Persian army. This General had the strange custom of giving the condemned prisoners a choice between the firing squad and the 'big black door.'

The moment of execution drew near and the guards brought the spy to the Persian General. The General asked, 'What will it be, the firing squad or the big black door?' The spy hesitated for a long time. Finally, he chose the firing squad.

A few minutes later, hearing the shots ring out confirming the spy's execution, the General turned to his aide and said, 'They always prefer the known to the unknown. People fear what they don't know, and yet we give them a choice.'

'What lies beyond the big door?' asked the aide. The General replied, 'Freedom. I've known only a few brave enough to take that door.'

Trusting in God has similarities to making that same choice. Perhaps the result of not choosing the door are not quite so dramatic, but it does take a degree of courage to take that step. There is a degree of the unknown involved but there are also substantial rewards.