

## Sermon 12 July 2026 The Parable of the Sower

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

One of the great things 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 word to his disciples. After all, they are the ones who are going to be entrusted with the task of spreading his word when Jesus is no longer with them. 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: *'A farmer went out to plant some seeds. As he scattered them across his field, some fell on a footpath.'* Matthew 13:3-4. 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 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 on occasions in the evenings. It is time for my children 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 quite 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 1. 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 to 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 to the everyday lives of those who have yet to be touched by the presence of God.

Some seed fell on stony ground: *'Other seeds fell on shallow soil with underlying rock. The seeds sprouted quickly because the soil was shallow. But the plants soon wilted and since they didn't have deep roots, they died.'* Matthew 13:5. Much of the good soil in Palestine is spread quite thinly on top of what is very stony ground. So where that thin layer of topsoil has been eroded, the seed falls on to the stony ground. Here the seed germinates but then dies away very quickly. This represents people who listen but in the end have other priorities and so lose interest.

We have talked before about how our priorities will determine our attitude and approach to both people and what we do. By making God a priority in our lives, that will undoubtedly shape the way we interact with people, and in the end, everything comes back to people. Just last week, I was talking to someone about her work. She made the observation that she had learned that if she treated those with whom she worked and also those for whom she was responsible for in the workplace with kindness, care and respect, in other words embracing Christian values, then everything fell into place and the workplace was both productive and also a pleasant environment.

Ezra Benson, American religious leader, said, *'When we put God first, all other things fall into their proper place or drop out of our lived.'*

Some seed fell among thorns: *'Other seeds fell among thorns that grew up and choked out the tender plants.'* Matthew 13:7. 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.

And 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 entity, and even then he 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 relate to you 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. Maya Angelou, American writer, said, *'It is this belief in a power larger than myself and other than myself which allows me to venture into the unknown and even the unknowable.'*

In the end, it is about faith. Sure, we might not fully understand where it is leading but we do need to begin that journey, to take the first steps on what is undoubtedly a very exciting and rewarding journey. Martin Luther King said, *'Take the first step in faith. You don't have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step.'* Because you are gathered here this morning, you have more than taken those first steps.

And speaking of a rewarding outcome, both Noah and Abraham, who were referred to in our first reading, are examples of a rewarding outcome, albeit examples tending towards the extreme. In both cases, they were a little reluctant to follow God's word and were certainly ignorant of the eventual outcome, but they took those first steps in faith and look what happened! We probably shouldn't expect to achieve anything like what they did but we can take inspiration from them in that they trusted God and this led to fulfilment.