

10 July 2011
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Introduction

Over the next three weeks we will be exploring some of Jesus' parables, from Matthew 13. So it seemed like a good idea to talk a little bit about parables.

parabole is a Greek word meaning a comparison, to put one thing beside another to make a point. Usually the intention is to inform, as most comparisons do – thing A (which you may not be familiar with) is rather like thing B which you know about, and so you are able to get to know something more about thing A. A good parable can be a very useful, and usually quite accessible, teaching technique. It clarifies something, makes it easier to understand, and helps to make connections between the known and the unknown.

But when Jesus tells his parables it seems that there is something else going on. Some of these stories we learnt at Sunday School – who remembers colouring in pictures of the sower flinging seed, the merchant finding the pearl of great price, or the treasure (looking rather like a pirate's treasure chest in my memory) sticking up in the middle of a field. And yet, when we begin to think of the parables again post-Sunday School, we realise that they are not nearly as simple as a children's story. Do they really throw light on the nature of the kingdom of God, or do they just make the whole thing more confusing?

G K Chesterton said that if you give people an analogy that they claim they do not understand, you should graciously offer them another. If they say they don't understand that either, you should oblige them with a third. But from there on, Chesterton said, if they still insist they do not understand, the only thing left is to praise them for the one truth they do have a grip on:

“Yes,” you tell them, “that is quite correct. You do not understand.”

Jesus began where Chesterton left off. When Jesus used parables, they so often mystified rather than informed. In resorting so often to parables, his main point was that any understanding of the kingdom his hearers could come up with on their own was going to be a misunderstanding. Mention 'messiah' to them, and they would picture a king on horseback, not a carpenter on a cross; mention 'forgiveness' and they would start setting up rules about when it ran out.¹

Jesus sought to deconstruct the assumptions and expectations people had about the kingdom, so that then he could begin to construct a new understanding of what God was about.

Jesus' disciples were confused by the parables, and came to ask Jesus about them. Jesus told them that it had been given to them “to know the secrets, the mysteries of the kingdom”. But there were others who would see without perceiving and hear without listening or understanding². Is this a judgment or a description? It can sound quite judgmental, and yet it could as easily be Jesus' observation of what was happening – many people, particularly religious people, were unable to grasp what he was telling them about the kingdom of God, because it did not fit what they understood about the way God would act. So they were unable to perceive and understand, as they heard the parables.

Imagination, an open mind and an open heart, are all needed for parable hearing.

Sermon

One of the wonders of a good story is that it can be heard in many different ways. What you hear can be different at different times, in different contexts, among different people. I wonder how many ways you have heard this story of the sower who went out to sow? And I wonder what you hear today?

Jesus began “A sower went out to sow.” So one place to start is there, with the sower. He's out there doing his business, sowing his seed, casting it out far and wide – so far and wide that it falls all over the place. Some on the path, some on rocky ground, some among thorns, and some in good soil. Shouldn't the sower have been a bit more careful about what he was doing? But God the gospel farmer has no compunction about tossing seed anywhere and everywhere whether or not it will have much of a shot at succeeding.

1 Robert Farrar Capon, Kingdom, *Grace and Judgment*, p.7

2 Matthew 13:11,13

Why? Because unlike real farmers who love and lavish attention on only the good field, God as farmer loves every field, every plot of land, every heart. God cannot look at his own image-bearers and fail to spy people he loves. Their hearts may be hard as asphalt, having accumulated years and years and layers and layers of cynicism, but God loves them anyway and keeps throwing the gospel their way. Other hearts may be as shallow and ignorant as can be, having been eroded by too much television and too little reflection, but God loves them anyway and so keeps tossing the gospel their way. Other hearts may be so crowded that God can hardly see the way through the thicket of concerns about money and family and justice and politics, but God loves them anyway and so keeps dropping gospel seeds into that over-crowded environment.....

“If you have ears to hear, then listen”

What about all those different soils? The explanation that Matthew gives suggests that each soil is a different person, a different response to the word that is sown. This is the world as we know it, where different people respond in many different ways to the gospel, from complete indifference through shallow acceptance and eventual falling away to fruitful lives that produce more seed for food and for sowing. Jesus himself faced this range of responses, and at this point in Matthew's gospel he had just faced a series of challenges and a range of opposition – his early popularity with the crowds had also produced enemies, and they were powerful. The early Church, for whom Matthew was written, was itself facing trouble and persecution, and needed encouragement to know that this did not mean that they had failed, nor that the gospel had failed. Rather they could take heart that an abundant harvest was promised – to those who heard and understood.

“If you have ears to hear, then listen”

What about if we consider the soils as different conditions within an individual, and then ask the question – what is needed to cultivate good soil?

Are there areas in my life where I have become hardened and indifferent to God? Where have troubles and difficulties become so urgent that God's word cannot take root? Where have I become distracted, lured away, too busy with too many things so that what had been growing has shrivelled up, producing nothing? And how might I cultivate the soil in my life? What about the water of the Spirit, or even the benefit of a good hard frost, digging out rocks to make more space, getting rid of the weeds and going over the soil with rake and hoe? Prayer and helping other and Bible reading and showing kindness and fellowship with God's people and working for justice and peace – all these are the means of grace that could be used as spade and hoe and rake, to cultivate good soil in my life.

“If you have ears to hear, then listen”

What about that harvest? Some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Given the apparent indifference of the sower to the outcome, it could be seen as miraculous that any of the seed was able to produce a crop, and the quantity seems to indicate an unexpected abundance. So this story is then a tale of hope, that the harvest is not reliant on human effort but on God's grace poured out in superabundance.

“If you have ears to hear, then listen”

A sower went to sow – and of course he sowed seed. Seed is small, and when it's sown it disappears, to all intents and purposes. You cannot see seed growing, unless you are a child planting your first garden and wanting to dig it up every day or two to see if anything's happening yet – and then you learn very quickly that seeds won't grow unless they're left alone.

So what does this parable suggest about the way God works in the world, through what is small and hidden, growing in secret? Is that the way we expect God to act? Is it in the dark and hidden (but rich and nourishing) places that we look for signs of God in action?

And what about that other thing Jesus said – unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains a single grain, but if it dies it bears much grain³?

For that surely is what we see happening here. The seed is effective - it does what it's meant to do, taking root and springing up. Even the seed which is eaten by birds – you know that seeds are not destroyed when birds eat them – in fact, seeds are more widely distributed just because after they've been eaten by birds

they pass through the digestive systems and are deposited in some distant location where they can then germinate effectively.

And as for the rest of the seed – it germinates, it does what it was meant to do – but the fruitfulness, the productivity it is able to achieve depends on the readiness of the soil to receive it and allow it to flourish. “If you have ears to hear, then listen”

For a final take on the parable of the sower, listen to Joy Cowley's poem, called *Growth*⁴:

I thank you, bountiful Sower,
that you do not choose good soil alone.
You cast your abundant blessings
over the entire landscape of existence,
knowing that conditions may change
and barren soil may become fertile ground.

My old hard paths of judgmental thought
have become softened by a rain of tears
and are ready for new growth.

My stony places have small patches
of rich soil that are waiting
to receive the seed of truth.
And last year's crop of thistles
has mouldered down to a compost
that will grow strong plants
and a good crop of fruit.

I am so grateful, bountiful Sower,
that my growth does not depend
on my unstable earthly condition,
but on your endless abundant giving.

A sower went out to sow.
How do you hear Jesus' story today?

4 Joy Cowley, *Come and See*, p.56