

THE SEED AMONG THE SOILS

Reading Luke 8:4-15

According to the account in Mark's gospel this parable is of fundamental importance in understanding Jesus' teaching. I know this parable of Jesus is usually called the Parable of the Sower, but I think that's misleading, because this story is really all about the different soil conditions that seed can be sown into and what happens to the seed as a result. There's nothing to indicate that the sower did anything different with the different batches of seed, or that anything was wrong with any of the seed, rather it was the different conditions which that seed encountered that were the determining factor.

In those days the farmer would sow his seed by what is called the broadcast method. He would carry the seed in a pouch at his side and as he walked through the tilled field he would toss it out onto the ground, scattering it liberally. It was then usually ploughed into the ground, but the parable doesn't mention that because it's not really relevant to the meaning of the story. In Jesus' parable the seed encounters different kinds of soil conditions: a path which would have been hard soil, rocky soil, a thorn patch and good soil. What happens to the seed is different in each of those four places.

When I was re-reading this parable to prepare for this Sermon I was reminded of a story that a colleague told me about "sowing" or investing his money in four different investment funds some years ago. Last December he went to see the fund manager to get a report on what had happened to his investments. "Well" the fund manager said to him, "there's good news and bad news". You'll remember that we invested a quarter of your money into a bank based fund – well it was always a solid performer in the past, but with the financial crisis times have been very hard for banks and so that investment is entirely gone. You'll also remember that we invested another quarter of your money into an alternative energy project making bio fuels, well that initially showed very strong returns, but I'm afraid that with the collapse in oil prices and the increases in the costs of grain and

other raw materials they used the company became unprofitable and went bankrupt. Next we invested the third quarter of your money in mortgage backed securities, but people were greedy and bought houses they couldn't afford and so I'm afraid that they have become worthless. So what's the good news shouted my colleague. Well smiled the fund manager, we invested the last quarter of your money as venture capital into a start up company and they are doing incredibly well and I'm sure that with a little patience that investment will pay off fifty or even a hundred times over.

I'm sure you can see that my story loosely follows Jesus' parable, but let's go back to the original story. You might like to open your Bibles at page ***** so that you can follow it along with me.

Jesus teaches a large crowd by means of this parable – look at verse 4: “While a large crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from town after town, he told this parable:” (Luke 8:4)

The parable likens the evangelistic teaching of Jesus to a Farmer sowing seed.

In verse 11 Jesus tells us that the seed in the parable represents the word of God:

“This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is the word of God.” and in verses 12 to 15 He tells us that the different kinds of soils represent different reactions of people each hearing God's word. Apparently this explanation is given not just to the disciples, but to the whole crowd.

According to Jesus the first kind of soil was hard soil – look at verse 5:

“A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up.”

Jesus explains this in verse 12:

“Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved.”

So the parable is all about hearing – genuine hearing or superficial hearing. We’re all here in church today, so we’ve heard at least some of God’s word – I hope –, but do we really believe it. We’ve received the seed – but what’s happened to it in our lives? Has it really entered into our hearts and minds or are we hardened and closed to it, so that it never really gets a chance to germinate. This often happens if we’ve had a bad experience, an unmet expectation or a hurt, especially a really deep hurt. Those things can create a hardness in us so that we don’t let God’s word through. We all suffer pain and hurts – some of us more so than others. If you are hurting today, I’m really sorry, but don’t run from God, run to God – He’s the only one who can heal you and make you whole. Give your hurt to God and get better not bitter. A bitter life is a barren and wasted life, bitterness only prolongs and amplifies the pain.

This hardness and closedness to God can also be caused by pride when we think we can do it by ourselves, we think we don’t need any help from God. If we’re filled with pride this morning, let’s remember the old adage that pride comes before a fall and repent and turn to God before it’s too late. Hardness can also be caused by fear, perhaps a fear of what God might say to us or demand of us, but he will faithfully forgive us our sins if we turn to him in repentance and won’t demand of us more than we are able to give. If he does ask to do something in his service he’ll be with us every step of the way strengthening and supporting us.

So if your heart and mind have been closed to God, drop your defences, open your mind and let God speak to you. Don’t let the birds eat your seed. The seed of God’s word will bring you healing. As it says in verse 12, belief in this word will also bring you God’s salvation – eternal life with him.

Jesus said that the second kind of soil was rocky – look at verse 6: “Some fell on rock, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture.”

In the Middle East a lot of soil is very shallow with limestone rock only a few inches below the surface, so plants trying to grow in that

soil can't develop enough of a root system to support them, when the sun comes they wither.

Jesus explains the application of this in verse 13:

“Those on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away.”

Some of us are like that. When we first hear God's word we receive it eagerly, but we don't develop our relationship with God, we don't root ourselves deeply in his word – the Bible. So when problems come we turn away from God and our faith dies. There are many who initially receive the word, but a year later there's no perceptible change in them, or their lives, and when problems come, when the heat is on, they fall away. If you've heard God's word but haven't put it into practice then most likely your faith will not last. You need to spend time each day with your Bible, to spend time each day in prayer. You need to spend time in fellowship with other Christians, perhaps in a home group. In summary you need commitment to God, his people and his word to develop your Christian roots.

The third kind of conditions the seed found was a patch of thorns – see verse 7:

“Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants.”

This is explained in verse 14:

“The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature.”

With people like that the seed lands and starts to grow. This growth lasts longer than that on rocky soil, but it doesn't bear fruit because it gets choked by what Jesus called “thorns”. He names these in verse 14 – worries, riches and pleasures. These things distract us and preoccupy our minds. But, you know riches and pleasures don't bring any lasting satisfaction – I see more unhappy people in Monaco, where material wealth abounds, than amongst the Tonga tribe in Zimbabwe, who are starving from lack of food and suffering political

repression. Only God can fill the void within us and only in surrender to him and allowing him to show us the purpose he has for our lives will we find peace and freedom. But, we can't find God's purpose for us and our lives by watching TV or movies or playing sport. We've got to spend time with our Bible and in prayer. That doesn't mean that pleasures and the good things of this world have no place in our lives. God gave us all the good things of this world to enjoy. After all God gave us the ability to have fun and experience pleasure in the first place. But, God wants us to enjoy all these things in the way he intended – drink wine, but don't get drunk AND we must not let anyone or anything come before God in our lives. God won't accept our leftovers.

Those who are still listening carefully, may have noticed that I haven't mentioned worries yet. I believe it's no accident that Jesus put them first in his list. They can be the worst distraction. Fear can paralyse us. God doesn't want us to be afraid he wants us to trust in him to deal with our fears and worries. As John says in his first letter "perfect love casts out fear".

These thorns that choke our faith are mainly a result of neglect in our lives – neglecting to spend time with God regularly, neglecting to read our Bible regularly and neglecting fellowship with our Christian brothers. That kind of neglect will allow the thorns to grow up all around us which will initially choke the spiritual joy out of us and finally kill off our faith entirely.

The remainder of the seed fell on good soil – see verse 8:

"Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown." When he said this, he called out, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear.""

Which Jesus explained in verse 15:

"But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop."

So these people not only hear the word of God but they retain it. They think about it and study it. They put it into practice and

persevere with it. The result is a productive life and a productive life is generally happy and satisfying. What distinguishes these people from the others is not really the lack of problems, but that they yield a crop – they bear fruit.

If we want to make our lives really count, if we want our lives to be productive and fulfilled, then we must study God's word and spend time with him in prayer. As Jesus said in verse 8 of our reading - "He who has ears to hear, let him hear". We need an authentic and appropriate hearing of God's word which leads to a real and lasting faith. And we mustn't just be hearers of God's word, we must act on it, do something about it and let it make a real difference in our lives.

But don't be impatient. Remember that Jesus used an agricultural analogy, remember the kinds of words he uses 'mature' in verse 14, 'persevere' in verse 15. So we need to give our spiritual development time, it takes time for people as well as plants to grow and mature. That's a difficult concept in our society which demands instant gratification – but real satisfaction and real development take time. We demand an instant miracle – and God CAN do that, but it's not the way he usually works. He wants to test us, to develop our strengths and root out our weaknesses.

The question Jesus really wants us to ask ourselves is what kind of soil is in our lives? The determination of that is in our fruit. Are we growing in our faith, is God changing us slowly from the inside, are we beginning to experience the lasting peace and joy that only he brings? If not we need to change our spiritual soil. The parable never blames the sower or the seed, it's the soil – our attitudes – which causes the difficulties.

We need to change our mental attitudes, the priorities in our lives and turn to Jesus, the only one who can heal us and make us whole and mature us to bear much fruit. That fruit can of course be many or all of the fruits of the spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control (Galatians 5:22), but at this point in our Christian lives we need to put ourselves in the

place of the sower and start to cast the seeds of God's word into the fields of untouched souls all around us. Remember that verse 4 says that the sower sowed *his* seed, not someone else's. God will give each one of us our seed to sow. We shouldn't necessarily try and copy what others are doing, we just need to follow God's leading. Maybe we'll sow seeds into the lives of others which will grow and blossom and be multiplied a 100 times or even more.

Let's just close with a few words of prayer. Heavenly Father help us to change our mental attitudes and to overcome the distractions of this world so that we may be good spiritual soil in which your word grows and bears fruit so that in due course we may go out and scatter the good seed of your word freely into the lives of others. Help us in these things in the power of Your Spirit we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.