

# Soils aint Soils

Matthew 13:1-23

Our passage for this week is called by Jesus himself "The Parable of the Sower". As it is recorded in Mark and Luke as well as Matthew we can say that it has been well known and well loved since the times of the early church.

However it can be quite difficult to preach on well known passages for it is easy for both preacher and listener to think "Oh yeah I know this one". So the preacher may not listen as well to the text as he should in preparing the sermon and the listeners may not listen to the preacher as well as they should. This is particularly ironic as the whole point of parable is to encourage us to be good and productive listeners.

Jesus says "He who has ears, let him hear!", which is quite odd if you think about, because the percentage of people without ears I would imagine is fairly small. For some of us our ears may not work as well as we would like and may even need a little help but still we have ears. But Jesus understood that just because people have ears doesn't mean that they are listening. Every parent has said "Are you listening to me?"

Jesus, however, wants everyone to listen to what he is saying. Just in case we miss the point words related to hearing are used 14 times in the next 14 verses.

It is as if the text is asking us directly are we really listening?

## JESUS THE TEACHER: PROBLEMATIC PARABLES

### Jesus Teaching

What we are called to listen to is Jesus teaching about the Kingdom of God, or the Kingdom of Heaven as Matthew prefers to call it. This passage concerns those who hear the message of the Kingdom (v19) and being given the knowledge of the secrets of the Kingdom (v11)

This is the great and wonderful message of God's coming reign which the prophets and saints of the Old Testament looked forward to. The disciples had realised that in the ministry of Jesus this hope had come to fulfilment. The Kingdom of God is being revealed in what Jesus says, what he does and indeed who he is. The promises of God are coming true the time for repentance and healing has come.

Yet Jesus does not say this to the crowd, rather he teaches in parables: stories with hidden meaning that will only be discovered by careful listening and reflection. As Jesus says "He who has ears let him hear?"

### Problematic Parables

Jesus disciples wonder about this teaching technique, wouldn't it be easier just to tell the people plainly what he is doing.

Jesus answer is difficult and worthy of more careful reflection than we can give here but at its heart Jesus says the parables act as a barometer of the spiritual receptivity of the listener. The parables themselves create a division in those listening between those that respond to them and those who don't. There is quite a clear divide given in these verses between "the people" or "them" and the "disciples" or "you"

Those on the outside, "them", are compared with Israel of old that refused the word of the Lord given in Isaiah. They are spiritually deaf, blind and hard hearted. They will not listen. They will not turn and be healed.

But the disciples are different. Jesus says that they have been given the "the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven". Because of this Jesus can say that their eyes and ears are blessed.

So there are the two groups. From one perspective the difference is that God has revealed these things to one group but not the other. At the human level however the difference between the 2 groups is listening, one group is, the other isn't.

The disciples need to understand that the Kingdom is one that grows by its message of healing taking root in the hearts of the people who listen. It is not a kingdom that grows by force and violence but one that comes through listening, really listening. Those who do will grow in the way of the kingdom, those who don't even what they have heard will be of no use to them.

The call again is: are you listening?

### **SOWING THE KINGDOM: SOILS AIN'T SOILS ...**

The Parable of the Sower itself illustrates this idea and reinforces it with a scene that those listening to him on the shore of Lake Galilee would have known very well, a man sowing seed in his field. It says a lot about the kingdom that Jesus has come to proclaim that it is described with a peaceful agricultural image rather than one of violence and domination. Those who wanted stories of politics and power would have found this difficult to listen to.

#### **Differing Responses**

As anyone who has tried to sow a lawn will know the differing fates befall the seed. It is the same with Jesus teaching of the Kingdom. The same word is said to those who have shown some determination to hear him, but how will it be received?

There are the four differing types of soil for which we are given an explanation.

- The path which has been hardened by the ways of the world for which the message of Jesus is just a passing fancy, there is no understanding and the message of the kingdom disappears from view.
- There is rocky soil with little depth, the classic just going through a religious phase without lasting impact.
- The soil with weeds and thorns where the preoccupations of life, stunt growth and lead to no harvest.
- Finally the good soil that not only hears but understands

#### **What kind of soil are we?**

At one level by using the imagery of the sowing of the seed Jesus is teaching that the message which he is preaching may take some time to come to fruition, it may take some time to take effect. It will not be immediately obvious how people are responding. The point then is not to try and classify people, that person looks a bit rocky, that one rather weedy, is there even such a word as pathy? Rather the question should be directed at ourselves: what kind of soil am I?

The parable sets up a natural desire to be the good soil. We will want to be those who have heard and understood the message. Have we really listened to the message of the God's kingdom.

### **FRUITFULNESS**

For those of us have listened the passage leaves us with a question, the question of fruitfulness. The passage says that those that are like the good soil will be fruitful. The idea of fruitfulness arises from the imagery that Jesus is using, the sower plants the seed to produce a crop not just a plant. To rather mix my metaphors, this may cause us to wonder whether we are on the path to fruitfulness?

Do we long for this Cathedral community to be fruitful for God, do we desire to see God's kingdom come in Hobart, do we want to see fruitfulness in our own life? That may be a challenging question for us, but if the answer is yes, there is much here for us if we will but listen.

#### **"Listeningism"**

Firstly note that it is the seed which is fruitful, it is the message of the Kingdom which bears fruit, not the soil. The role of the soil is to accept the seed. This means the path to being fruitful is not something which is separate from hearing and understanding the message of the Kingdom. It is not that we hear, understand and then try to be fruitful that would be the parable of the triffids, rather fruitfulness is a natural consequence of hearing and understanding. The path is not through *activism* but *listeningism* (which is probably not a word but one that Christians should embrace regardless). That is part of the secret of the kingdom.

To illustrate, a favourite passage of mine is Paul's call to clothe ourselves as children of the kingdom with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience, all bound together with forgiving love. It is all very well for me to say this but if I try to put it into practice it is likely to fall apart fairly quickly as I find myself clothed in other things. But as I listen to the story of God's love for me, as I grasp and understand the compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience and above all the forgiving love he has shown in Jesus then I will be transformed in my mind, then the seed of the kingdom will bear fruit.

### **Working the Ground**

Secondly, given the importance of listening what can we learn from the reverse lessons of the other soils? The call of the Parable of the Sower, as on scholar has put it, is "... to see to it that the soil of our own hearts is soft, and deep and clean." (Plummer, 191)

#### Soft

The message of the Kingdom is one that can only be accepted humbly. The very means of Jesus test can be a problem for our pride. The Kingdom is entered and grows by listening. Not by discovering, not by good works but by that most humble often hardest of acts, listening.

Furthermore it will mean listening to a message which humbles as it reminds that we are not the king in this kingdom, but Jesus is and we owe him our allegiance. It is easy for pride to make us hard to such a message, but that is the call of the Kingdom.

Consider your own heart How does such a call make you feel? Is your heart hard or soft? Remember that when we accept this message we have mercy, joy, purpose and hope that nothing can snatch away.

#### Deep

We need to let this message take root deep in our heart. This will mean thinking about it, meditating upon it, pondering further what it means for us. I need to ask myself how much time do I spend doing this? This can be through Bible reading and study; prayerful meditation; praying for ways and opportunities to live it out; coming back to the promises of God in the challenges of life and faith.

I also should compare this to how much time do I spend listening to other things. It's the problem of ears, you can't turn them off.

#### Clean

This relates to the third area. We may need to weed our own mental garden, to clear out the ground. Unhelpful patterns of thinking, behaving, mixed up priorities and so on so that there is room for the word of God to grow.

Being in church this morning is a great start, and I pray that we will find that the more we listen to God's word that the worries of the world are put in perspective and we can see through the deceitfulness of wealth, the two concerns to against which our passage warns us.

#### Conclusion

As we do this, as we listen to the word and have soft, deep and clean hearts we will to use Paul's language be transformed by the renewing of our mind. This is the way that God's word bears fruit in the way that we live, love and laugh, in our work, worship and witness. This is the way of fruitfulness, if we will listen.

Dear Lord, as we listen to your Word give us hearts that are soft, deep and clean, so that the seed of your kingdom may take root in our lives and produce an abundant harvest of good words and deeds. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.