

**16 July 2017**

**Fertile soil?**

**Matthew 13.1-9, 18-23**

**Isaiah 55.10-13**

Did you realise that the parables have been given different titles in different countries?

The traditional title given to the parable we have read today in this country is *The parable of the sower*. The bibles we use in church even include this title before the section.

But, of course, the sower only plays something of a bit part in the parable. He is certainly not the centre of attention.

In Germany, the parable is entitled *The parable of the four soils*. The logical minds of the Germans have recognised that the focus of the parable is on the different sorts of ground that the seed is sown into – the hardened path, the rocky soil, the weed-infested soil and the good soil.

Yet, you could argue that for Matthew this is actually *The parable of the seeds*. In Jesus' interpretation of the parable what is actually highlighted is the different stories of growth of these seeds that are sown. This is a story of a range of seeds – some of which don't even take root, some of which shoot up, but because they have no roots quickly wither, some of which thrive, but are overcome by the competition of weeds, and some of which produce a good crop.

But anyone who has heard this parable on a number of occasions, will find it difficult to get out of their minds the sentence that we find only in Luke's version of the parable in Luke 8.11: 'The seed is the word of God.' In which case this cannot be a parable about four different seeds, because in all cases the seed that is sown is the word of God.

But perhaps the desire for a consistent, meaningful title for this parable is part and parcel of a Western desire for neatness and logic that Jesus does not share. The reason Jesus taught in parables rather than in logical propositions is perhaps because the life of the kingdom of God cannot easily be summed up in

logical statements and propositions – it has to be encountered in stories with multiple layers of meaning, stories that invite you to dwell on them and think about them and muse over them.

This is one of the very few parables that Jesus ‘explains’ or interprets to his disciples.

In his interpretation Jesus makes it clear that this is a parable about how people respond to the message of the kingdom – how people respond to the good news that he brings.

It is even possible that Jesus is responding to the dismay or bewilderment that some people were expressing about the different ways in which people were responding to his ministry. Some were probably extremely puzzled and couldn’t quite work out why it was how some people were extremely enthusiastic about all that Jesus stood for ... and others simply did not seem to get him at all. If he is God’s person in the world, why doesn’t everyone get it?

Now there are some assumptions that Jesus makes in telling this parable.

The first is that Jesus expects the message of the kingdom of God to be fruitful.

That’s the whole point of the parable. That when the message of the kingdom of God is proclaimed, it will bear fruit. It will make a difference in people’s lives and in the world.

This is the conviction of the prophet Isaiah of Babylon, who likens the word of God to rain falling, causing seeds to sprout and grow:

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven,  
and do not return to it without watering the earth  
and making it bud and flourish ...  
so is my word that goes out from my mouth:  
It will not return to me empty.

The word of God’s love and salvation, when released into the world, will always be fruitful.

And Jesus lived with this conviction ... which is why so many of his parables and images are about growth and harvest and fruitfulness, or its failure.

There is a purposefulness in all that Jesus is and does – he wants to produce people who grow and bear fruit in their lives, who themselves live purposeful

lives that are growing – people who are benefiting the lives of others and making a difference in the world.

The message of the kingdom has the potential to bring growth and flourishing to our lives ... and this parable explores why that doesn't always happen.

The second assumption that Jesus makes in telling this parable is that the sower scatters the seed into every nook and cranny of his field. The seed is scattered far and wide and doesn't only fall on the fertile soil. It falls everywhere.

Now, to our modern ears this sounds somewhat extravagant, even wasteful.

In our modern era of highly technological farming methods, the seed will be drilled only into the soil that has already been prepared – computer technology will try to ensure that few seeds are wasted and that the field is drilled as efficiently as possible.

But back in Jesus' day things were rather different. In order to get the seed into as much of the field as possible the farmer would scatter his seed extravagantly everywhere. And Jesus may even have had in mind farming practices whereby farmers would sow the seed, and then plough the seed in afterwards. So the seed would be sown onto the paths that had formed during the fallow period, and onto the rocky soil, but which would eventually be ploughed up.

The message of the kingdom is not shared sparingly, nor efficiently ... but is to be broadcast to all and sundry, because this is good news for all.

But, with these assumptions, this parable asks us to explore what happens when the seed hits different types of soil. The message of the kingdom is the same for all, but it doesn't have the same impact in people's lives. So what makes the difference?

The first lot of seed falls on the path. The soil has been trodden down and so the seed cannot sink into the soil. It stays on the surface and the birds get a free meal.

Jesus talks about people hearing the message of the kingdom and not understanding it.

I wonder if Jesus might be speaking here of the difference between hearing and listening.

Look at this picture of a rabbit with one ear up and one ear down.

I wonder if he might be saying: "I can hear, I just choose not to listen."

We all know in relationships that there is a very big difference between hearing and listening. Listening demands a conscious giving of attention to someone.

This is the Chinese character for the word meaning 'listen' – 'ting'.

This character is made up of a number of different symbols. (I want to add a note of caution to say that I have come across a few different versions of this, so the one I have chosen may or may not be fully accurate!)

The first is the symbol for the ear – listening is clearly all about using our ears to hear what someone is saying.

The second symbol is the symbol for 'king'. Listening means hearing with added significance. Paying attention as if we are in conversation with a king.

The third symbol is the symbol for the eye. Truly listening demands attention that is more than simply hearing – we will use all of our senses to take in what is being said to us – seeing as well as hearing.

The fourth symbol is the symbol for 'one' – this is to emphasise that listening is about giving our undivided attention to the person who is speaking.

The final symbol is the symbol for 'open heart'. Listening is about opening our heart to another person – being affected by what they are saying. Listening calls for empathy.

And this is what Jesus asks of us – not just that we hear, but that we listen ... really listen.

Not only with our ears, but with everything that we are so that what Jesus says is allowed to take root in us.

And then Jesus warns that the word of God needs to be deeply rooted in us. We need to allow all that God says to us through Jesus to sink deeply into our lives and touch us at the deepest level.

The second lot of seed falls on soil that is shallow ... where the bedrock is near the surface and so the seed just cannot penetrate.

It germinates and shoots, but it cannot develop a strong enough root system to sustain the plant under the prolonged heat of the sun. It withers and dies ...

Like all of my sunflower plants in pots while we were away on holiday ... they simply dried up for want of water.

We all know that life can be tough. It throws challenges at us all of the time. And sometimes life is tougher than others.

Earlier this year the story emerged of a man in Cumbria who was taken ill while he was in town. He had to be taken to the hospital. He was helped out by the police, and one of the helpful policemen who attended him offered to drive his car back to the local police station so that it would be safe while he was in hospital.

Unfortunately this policeman didn't tell any of his colleagues what he had done, and when the next shift came on the alarm was raised about a suspect car parked next to the police station.

The man's day went from bad to worse when they eventually decided that their only option was to carry out a controlled explosion on the suspect car.

Life sometimes hits us like that ... and as Christians that can even take the form of persecution and hardship because of our Christian convictions. Being a Christian is not a 'Get out of jail free' card from life's challenges.

We are called to be resilient in our faith ...

This last week, scientists in Oxford have identified what they believe to be the most resilient form of life on planet earth. It is this handsome looking microscopic creature – the Tardigrade.

The tardigrade can live up to 30 years without food or water, can endure temperatures from close to absolute zero to 150C, and even survive in space. Research suggests tardigrades will outlive humans and are likely to be around for quite a while - another 10 billion years, or until the death of the sun.

It is thought that they will survive all astrophysical calamities, including asteroids, exploding stars in the form of supernovae or gamma ray bursts.

If we allow God's word of love to penetrate and take root deeply within us, then we will discover an inner resilience that allows us to withstand all that the world is able to throw at us. As the apostle Paul says:

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

If we go back to our Chinese character for listening, this is all about how deeply we allow Jesus' word of life and hope to speak to our hearts.

Because this kind of resilience is not about developing a thicker and thicker skin, it is about forming a deeper and deeper faith and trust in God. This is about becoming dependent upon God and his love. Any resilience that we have is through God's strength and not our own.

Notice that in Jesus' story each set of seed exhibits better and better growth. The seed that falls on the pathway doesn't even germinate. The seed on the rocky soil grows, but doesn't build up a very strong root system, so quickly shrivels.

The third set grows strongly. The soil is good and fertile. The only trouble is – now there is competition. The wheat is not the only plant growing in the soil. There are thorns as well. And the thorns outgrow the wheat, and choke its growth.

It grows ... but it never reaches the point of producing any sort of crop for the farmer because of the competition from the thorns. It remains unfruitful.

When Jesus speaks about the competition for the life of faith he identifies the competition as 'the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth.'

If we return again to the Chinese character for listening, we might want to highlight the need to listen with undivided attention ... and always to listen to the message of God's kingdom with undivided attention.

We may allow the word of the gospel to take root in our hearts, but if we do not root out the competitive voices that also speak powerfully to who we are ... and indeed if we continue to feed and nurture those voices, then the gospel will not bear fruit in our lives.

We need to ask ourselves the question about how serious the competition is in our lives.

And that is partly about who we listen to most attentively.

Is our view of the world shaped more by our reading of the Daily Mail or Guardian than it is by our reading of the gospel?

Are our attitudes shaped more by our following the story of Eastenders, Coronation Street or the Archers, or by our following the story of Jesus.

Is our self-image shaped more by what we think others around us think about us and say about us, or by God's word speaking to our hearts, saying 'Fear not, I have redeemed you I have called you by name?'

Who or what has most influence on the major decisions we make in life – the expectations of culture around us or the expectations and promises of God on our lives?

We can never cut ourselves off from these influences and these voices – but we can make them subservient to the word of the gospel.

We can become intentional in listening to these other voices through the filter of the message of God's kingdom made known in Jesus.

It begins in awareness of the kind of influence these other voices can have in speaking to our lives, and then testing the kind of influence they have against all that we know of God in Jesus.

The art of gardening is knowing which are the weeds, and uprooting them before they have had the chance to take root.