

Sunday 9th July 2023

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God is love, let us adore God by sharing God's love.

God is ever present, around us and within us, we worship together in God.

Reading Matthew 13:1-9 & 18-23 ([JB Philips](#))

Reflection

Jesus taught the people using parables, and afterwards explained the parables, sort of, to the disciples but he never explained it to the crowd. Parables come in many guises some more perplexing than others but the main point of their use was to startle, surprise and make the listeners think. Sometimes a parable begins in such a way that those listening would make assumptions, think they know what is going to happen and where the story is going but suddenly they are faced with a twist in the tale and that is the invitation to rethink. Today we are often so familiar with the parable that we have stopped letting it open up our minds.

The parable we heard also features in Mark and Luke, with subtle variations, and it is a very familiar parable. It is one of the parables where we read of Jesus taking the disciples aside and explaining the rationale of the story, but in the midst of the text which we have not heard today we find the disciples asking why Jesus tells parables. His answer is thought provoking – he does not expect the people to understand his teaching and he quotes from Isaiah demonstrating the people have never understood God's message. It says -

"These people will listen
and listen,
but never understand.
They will look and look,
but never see.
¹⁵ All of them have
stubborn minds!
They refuse to listen;
they cover their eyes.
They cannot see or hear
or understand.
If they could,
they would turn to me,
and I would heal them."

Jesus message is all about healing the rift in our relationship with God but many choose not to hear, to ignore the message of love. It takes time to get to the nub of a parable so this morning I invite you to spend a little time with this parable imagining the scene and making connections. Read the version below taking time to reflect on the bits in italics.

One day Jesus was on the beach talking to a crowd of people. The sun was high in the sky and beams of sunlight reflected off the ripples of the water.

Imagine being on a beach. Imagine the water and the waves. Think about sitting on a beach and squidding the sand between your toes.

Soon there were so many people that Jesus and the disciples had to get into a boat so they could see everybody on the beach.

*I wonder what it felt like to be in the crowd.
I wonder what it felt like in the boat on the water.*

Jesus stood up in the boat and began to tell a story.

"There was once a farmer who went out to sow seed in his fields.

Have you ever sown seeds? The farmer had so many seeds that he took handfuls and threw them left and right as he walked. Imagine taking a handful of seed and throwing it onto the ground. Perhaps the wind made it go further!

As the farmer walked the land casting seed left and right, some of the seed was carried onto the path that ran along beside the field.

Have you ever walked on a path beside a field? What was it like? How did you know where the path went? In the land where Jesus lived there was not a lot of water and the land could become very dry and hard.

The seed lay on the hard-trodden land until the birds came and ate it.

Perhaps you feed birds in your garden, *imagine the birds pecking at the seed and eating it!*

Other seed was carried to the rocky land next to the path, here there was soil lying on top of rocks and between rocks and the seed grew but it could not put down deep roots and when the sun rose high in the sky the plant shrivelled in the heat because it had no way of getting water.

Have you ever been thirsty, think what it is like to be thirsty and not able to have a drink. Have you seen a plant that needs water? Imagine the leaves of the plant becoming droopy and sad.

Some seed fell amongst the weeds growing at the edge of the field and began to grow but the weeds grew stronger entangling the plants and taking all the food from the soil and the plants slowly died.

Have you ever been somewhere where someone took all the food and left you with none? Imagine being hungry and not able to get food. Imagine being somewhere where everyone else seems stronger than you.

However, other seed fell on the good soil in the field and grew strong and in time the farmer harvest many times the weight of seed he had sown."

Have you ever seen a field full of strong healthy plants. Imagine the farmer gathering his crop. What do you think the farmer felt? How did the farmer feel about the seed that didn't land on the good soil.

When Jesus has finished the story he asked the crowd to think about the story and then he sat down in the boat.

Take a moment to consider which part of the story has stuck in your mind?

Maybe you will come back to that later and ponder some more. For the moment though lets unpack a few of the mysteries in the story and the connections between the parable and the people who could not, would not hear or see.

The parable appears to give three negative instances and one positive but look more closely and there is actually more of a balance, for the seed that falls on the good soil we are told might bear fruit 30 fold, 60 fold or 100 fold, three possibilities. Anyone who has sown seeds knows that even with all the care and right conditions not all seed germinate. So just for a minute lets consider how we might pair these three positives and three negatives.

The seed that falls on the path stands little chance of growth, it is a path, hard and probably dry, open and exposed and the birds quickly see the seed, Matthew invites us to see the birds as negative, that in life which encourages a selfish attitude and thoughtless actions, the opposite of love, compare this with the 100 fold yield from the good soil, two extremes, all or nothing, both of which unlikely outcomes as the farmer does not deliberately throw seed onto the path nor will he really expect 100% yield.

The seed that falls on the stony ground at the edge of the field fares little better really, there are cracks and gaps between the stones in which the seeds can bed down but there is probably still not much water and few nutrients available, there is no place to grow roots. Jesus suggests this is like those who hear the message and are so taken with it they put their all into following but then trouble comes or enthusiasm wains and they forget. Life is unpredictable and some churches do not prepare new Christians for keeping faith in adversity suggesting that if your follow the rules life will always be good. Growing roots takes commitment and perseverance. The opposite of this may be the 60 fold yield, not perfect but good, not all bad but difficult.

Now we move to the seed which falls in the weeds or shrubs at the edge of the field. They are on land which is growing something but that something already has a firm hold. The new shoots have to compete and not all survive, overwhelmed by the established plants and unable to compete for nutrients. Interestingly, Jesus invites us to think of this as those who hear the message but do not prioritise the message and so the existing demand of life eventually overwhelm and choke the message. An all too familiar scenario where we are sidetracked away from attending to the growth of our faith. Perhaps the most common scenario and therefore linked to the 30 fold yield, a little growth or a little failure.

It takes time for seeds to grow. To grow faith requires time, time to question, time to nurture, time to think deeply, time to hear and understand, to see and perceive. Do we give our faith enough time? Jesus says only those who want to hear will bear fruit, do we want to bear fruit and if so how much time do we give to hearing.

Parables are stories with a purpose, they are not meant to be taken literally but rather something to dwell upon and ponder. The command to love your neighbour is simply a set of words, only when it is incarnated by someone living it does it become the word of God, become love. The Word is discovered not in speech but in action, it is formed by being performed. Parables invite us to hear and see but only when we are transformed by what we hear and act upon it have we perceived the word of God. If we do not take time to ponder the parables against our modern world we will never hear the message of Jesus so take time and let the seed be sown and nurtured so that we become seed sown in the lives of others.