

**Trinity Bexleyheath**  
**Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> February 2021**  
**Andy Banks**

**Mark 4:1-20 Jesus' Parables: The Sower, The Seed and The Soils**

We read today from the start of Mark 4. Godzone children have their own video of this passage on our YouTube channel. We're moving now from the controversy around Jesus' miracles to a focus on Jesus' teachings and what they reveal about who he is and how we should respond to him. So, let's pray and then read first from 4:1-9.

**[Pray]**

**[Read Mark 4:1-9]**

*4Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered round him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge. 2He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: 3"Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. 4As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. 5Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. 6But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. 7Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. 8Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times." 9Then Jesus said, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."*

I'm going to stop there for now, because for many in the vast crowd, this was all they heard. So, for a moment, just try to imagine what it would be like hearing this story for the first time. Was Jesus commenting on the precarious hand-to-mouth existence of many poor farmers who were pushed off the best land by wealthy landowners and were left with the erratic ground at the edge of the field? If so, what was his point? Or could it have a spiritual meaning, like Isaiah's warnings that pictured Israel as an unfruitful vineyard in imminent danger of destruction? What did Jesus mean by his ominous conclusion, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear?"

Whatever the crowd concluded about the meaning of this story, or if they were simply confused by it, one thing is certain: only a few thought understanding it sufficiently important that they bothered to ask *Jesus* what he meant. How many had ears to hear, but *didn't really* hear? How many of *us* are equally happy with a superficial understanding of God's Word? Yet a few did inquire about it at some undisclosed later time, and Mark interrupts the flow of his account to share how Jesus answered their question. From v.10.

**[Read Mark 4:10-20]**

*10When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. 11He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables 12so that,*

*"they may be ever seeing but never perceiving,  
and ever hearing but never understanding;  
otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!"*

*13Then Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? 14The farmer sows the word. 15Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown.*

*As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. 16Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. 17But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. 18Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; 19but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. 20Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop – some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown.”*

The first thing Jesus cleared up was *why* he taught in parables at all. At first glance the “so that” of v.12 is troubling, as it seems to suggest that his purpose was to deliberately obscure the truth from all but his chosen few, so as to prevent repentance. But that is not the case. “So that” in Greek, as in English, can indicate either cause or result, and here it is better to read it as result. Jesus’ parables revealed the state of people’s hearts towards him. Were they satisfied with a nice story or did they yearn to learn more of God and his purposes in Jesus? Sadly, many would be ever hearing, but never taking it in. But the alternative (“Otherwise”) is that people might turn (or repent) and be saved. Exactly as the parable described.

For the seed in this parable represents the Word of God, the good news of Jesus Christ. The farmer is therefore Jesus, who speaks God’s true Word into the world. But the farmer, by extension, is also *anyone* who shares the Word of God. Yet, although this parable is often called “The Parable of the Sower,” actually the sower is largely an incidental detail. The focus is on the *seed* – God’s word – and on how it germinates in different types of *soil*, which represent different people’s *reactions* to God’s Word. So, what can we learn from these different types of soil that the Word falls upon?

#### 1) The hardened soil

Firstly, there is the *hardened* soil – the path, trodden down and compacted, year after year. The seed cannot penetrate such land, so the birds enjoy a feast from that which drops there. Jesus says that echoes what happens when some people hear God’s Word. Their heart is so hardened against God that, though they may *hear* the word, Satan snatches it away as quick as it goes in and they ignore Jesus or rail against him. Indeed, the sowing of the Word to such people may even harden their hearts still further against Jesus.

When I worked in Meopham School, the R.E. teacher often found this dynamic at work in his lessons. Pupils would listen ok when learning about *other* religions, but when *Christianity* was on the curriculum, the shutters would come down, the opposition would increase, and the class would generally become far more disruptive. They thought they knew all about *this* religion and they shut their ears to hearing more. This is the hardened soil.

#### 2) The shallow soil

Secondly there is the *shallow* soil – the thin layer of soil with hard rock not far under the surface. This soil initially looks very promising. There is an enthusiastic response to God’s Word, and an immediate burst of growth. They may be people who are desperate to share their testimony publicly at every opportunity, and may for a time be going on so strong for God.

But they lack depth to their faith. A plant must grow down if it is to grow up and produce a fruitful harvest. And the same is true in the Christian life. Sustainable Christian growth requires *depth* of faith. We have to keep delving deeper and deeper into God’s Word, the Bible, to bring us closer and closer to God. We have to learn better and better how to pray in faith and in line with God’s will. We have to pay attention to the *words* we sing in worship as well as enjoy the melodies. We need to journey with others to learn from each other’s

different perspectives and different cultural frameworks. And one of the best ways to put down deep roots is to *serve* in ways that stretch us – ways that stretch our *faith* like the prayer ministry team, or ways that stretch our *understanding* like teaching children or helping non-Christians explore faith through something like an Alpha Course.

A shallow faith will often fall by the wayside, especially when life gets tough. In the West, our faith is not forced to strengthen or break by persecution, so more often than not it is tested by personal suffering. When suffering comes, we will either drive deeper into God's Word for real answers, or we will settle for superficiality or gradually drift away from faith altogether. This is the shallow soil.

### 3) The busy soil

Thirdly, we have the busy soil – the soil in which the grain is crowded out by the weeds that compete for the same space. These are the Christians who begin to grow, they may even put down strong roots, but somewhere along the way they get distracted and their growth gets swamped by other things. Jesus mentions three possibilities: “the *worries* of this life, the deceitfulness of *wealth* and the desires for *other things*.” They may often be linked, but they can also stand alone in choking the fruitfulness of God's Word in people's hearts.

There was an ill-judged sign outside one church that read, “Don't let worries kill you! Let the church help!” But there is many a Christian who does the exact opposite of what that sign was trying to say – they let their worries become all-consuming, as they seek to solve all their problems themselves, instead of trustingly turning to God in prayer. I used to think that Jesus' words “Ask and it shall be given to you” were just nice-sounding exaggeration. As I've grown over my years as a Christian, I've begun to discover that Jesus really meant them – and the many other verses like them. He really doesn't want us to be crippled by worry, but to bring our requests to him and to know his peace as we see him work all things for our good.

Then, there are other Christians who invest far less in the growth of their faith than they do in the growth of their finances. It's a simple matter of priorities. And, by the way, the deceitfulness of wealth can affect the poor as well as the rich. Wealth creation is not wrong, but it becomes wrong if it takes all our energy away from seeking to know God better, because it will choke our fruitfulness as Christ's followers.

And then, there are the distractions that Jesus simply describes as “desires for other things.” Anything that draws our gaze from Christ or to which we afford a greater importance than Christ. That might be success, recognition, the pursuit of hedonism, intellectual prowess, sexual gratification, physical perfection or all manner of other things. Remember, Jesus began his ministry by announcing to those who were *already* God's people, “The Kingdom of God has come near,” and then he called these believers to, “Repent and believe the good news.” I think the busy soil is the most common pitfall for most Christians, and it stunts our fruitfulness.

### 4) The fertile soil

Lastly, there is the fertile soil. The soil that hears and accepts (or welcomes) God's Word, lets it take root and keeps the weeds that grow up around it in check. And so, it produces an abundant harvest! Thirty, sixty, even the incredible one hundred times what was shown! Jesus doesn't spell out exactly what he means by a harvest. But judging by other Bible passages: he could mean a “harvest of righteousness” (2 Corinthians 9:10; Hebrews 12:11; James 3:18), a good Christlike character; or he could mean “doing good” to others (Galatians 6:9), so as to bring God's blessing to the world around us; or he could mean harvesting people into his Kingdom (Matthew 9:37-38; John 4:35-36), a life that influences many people towards faith in Jesus and towards growth in faith. Or all of the above. And that is by far the most exciting, fulfilling form of Christianity!

So, the question is, what sort of soil best represents you at present? Hardened soil? Shallow soil? Busy soil? Or fertile soil? I say “at present,” because Jesus told this parable to prick people’s consciences such that they might become more receptive, fertile soil. No type of soil is unchangeable if we repent (or turn). Neither does Jesus say anything about our eternal destiny in the description of these types of soil – except perhaps in the hardened soil. The focus is not on eternity, but rather on earthly fruitfulness for God’s Kingdom. How fruitful do you want to be as a Christian? Is there ground you need to plough up to enable your roots to go deeper? Are there weeds you need to cut back so they stop choking you?

Alternatively, we could apply this evangelistically. Obviously, there is a time to sow the Word of God. And we all long for those times when the Word finds rest in the ready fertile soil in someone’s heart. But, whether we find that soil or not straight away, we might still be doing more good than we realise – we might be ploughing up the ground or clearing away the weeds in someone else’s life by our attitude, lifestyle and words, making the ground more ready to receive God’s Word in the future – whether from us or someone else. So, let’s look to our own soil first, and then let’s be available to be used by God to change the condition of someone else’s soil, too. Amen?

**[Pray]**