

**Therfield Chapel**  
**Mark 4: 1-20**  
**15<sup>th</sup> March 2009**  
**The Parable of the Sower**

We're in Mark's Gospel again and are thinking about the ministry of the Lord Jesus as he walked the earth

And tonight we come to the first parable of Jesus recorded by Mark

It's interesting to note that in verse 4 of Chapter 4 Mark specifically records that Jesus taught many things in parables

Then we read again in v33:

<sup>33</sup>With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. <sup>34</sup>He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything

In the four gospels parables make up around 35 per cent of Jesus' recorded teaching which means that it's quite impossible to appreciate his ministry without understanding what's known as the parabolic method

So let me begin by making three comments about parables:

(1) It goes without saying that Jesus didn't have all the usual things we associate with teaching today

He didn't have a blackboard or clipboard or an overhead projector or a video projector or a photocopier to make his handouts

But in spite of the lack of all these things he managed to hold the attention of the crowds

Perhaps it was his authority that caused people to listen but I reckon it was at least partly his use of stories

Jesus really was the master story-teller and we know that all the world loves a good story

So much so that of his stories have gained legendary status

Think of the stories of the Good Samaritan; the prodigal son or this one we'll be considering tonight the parable of the sower

All have to some extent passed into general culture – there is a magic about these stories as well as something very profound about them

(2) It's also interesting to note that although Jesus did teach people important theological truths, he did it without using complicated theological language

Instead he chose stories about simple things that were very much part of their everyday experience and used them to carry theological cargo of great significance

(3) The nation of Israel at the time of Christ was highly religion

They were saturated with teaching from the numerous religious leaders that led their community

And I suspect that many people were virtually immune from taking much notice of anything new

And so one of the motivations I suspect for Jesus' use of parables was part of a strategy that deliberately departed from the norms of religious instruction in order to grab people's attention

Our English word parable comes from two Greek words – *para* (alongside) and *ballo* (to throw)<sup>1</sup>

So parable really means to throw alongside

It's if Jesus was using stories to throw truth alongside people in an attempt to get a reaction

It's as if he is seeking to paint a picture in the mind of his hearers that is designed to make them go away and think

In his parables rather than trying to entertain them, Jesus wants to sow seeds of interest in their imagination to provoke them to work out the meaning and the significance for them

Or to put it another way, the idea is to draw the listener increasingly into the story in order to get him or her to think about how it affects them personally

In keeping with this, some commentators suggest parables are designed to act as a mirror that we hold in front of ourselves

If we hold the mirror at 45 degrees we will see God better or at 90 degrees we see ourselves better in the light of God's truth, forcing us to adjust our lives according to what we see<sup>2</sup>

So let's look at what is called the parable of the sower or probably more accurately the parable of the soils

Jesus seems to have begun speaking in parables in response to the large numbers of people who were following him to hear him preach

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<sup>1</sup> Warren W Wiersbe, *Be Diligent* p38.

<sup>2</sup> David Pawson. Sermon on Mark 4.

Before this he'd spoken much more plainly – as we see for example in the Sermon on the Mount

But it seems that he switched to use parables deliberately in response to events on the ground

Look at the context in verse one

<sup>1</sup>Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around 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.

Have you ever wondered why Jesus had to teach from a boat rather than from the shore of the lake?

The obvious answer – the one I learned in Sunday School - was that Jesus was being crowded by so many people that he was virtually pushed into the water

And getting onto a boat was an obvious solution to avoid being almost drown

That may well be true

But there may be another reason

Up until now in Mark we've studied numerous occasions when Jesus performed a whole array of miracles

Word had spread throughout the whole land and people had come from north, south, east, and west, and gathered in Galilee to hear this amazing prophet<sup>3</sup>

Look in verse 7ff of the previous chapter (3)

<sup>7</sup>Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the lake, and a large crowd from Galilee followed. <sup>8</sup>When they heard all he was doing, many people came to him from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, and the regions across the Jordan and around Tyre and Sidon. <sup>9</sup>Because of the crowd he told his disciples to have a small boat ready for him, to keep the people from crowding him. <sup>10</sup>For he had healed many, so that those with diseases were pushing forward to touch him.

So here Mark specially records that many people wanted to touch Jesus – almost certainly for healing

You've got to remember that before universal free health care most people had to cope with on-going ailment affecting their bodies

Tooth aces, sores, hernias, sight problems were the lot of humanity – just like they are today in the Third World

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<sup>3</sup> Ray Steadman.

And so it was natural that people wanted to touch Jesus – he was a proven healer and many had needed to do no more than that to be miraculously healed as they no doubt reported afterwards

Now Jesus willingly healed people but he also wanted to teach people

And so unless he got a little distance from them, it was quite impossible for him to do so

For the multitudes pushed and besieged him all trying to get to the front to grab him

Now perhaps some had come not for healing but out of plain curiosity - they wanted to see something spectacular – in the same way that we might go to see a magician at work

And they pressed in on him too

And so the best way of trying to teach them was to get onto a boat

And that's what we find him doing here – teaching from a fishing boat to those on the shore

Then – perhaps to get them to be quiet - he calls them to attention with the word listen v3

And he begins to tell them the story of farmer who sows seed in a field

Farmers in those days didn't have machines to drill the seeds into the soil in a line as they do today

What they did was to take fistfuls out seed out of of a bag and scattered in onto the soil

It would have been a picture familiar to all of them

And in Jesus' parable four things happen to that seed

(1) Some of it fell on the path and being exposed on the surface, the birds came and ate it up

(2) Some seed fell on the rocky places where there was little soil depth and the seedlings came up but because the soil was so shallow they were soon scorched by the sun and withered and died

(3) Some seed fell among the thorns and when the seed sprouted and a little shoot appeared it didn't last long because it was soon choked by the stronger thorns and weeds

(4) Finally seed some fell into good ploughed soil - plants came up, grew and produced a crop – multiplying thirty, sixty or even a hundred times

And Jesus finishes his parable by saying, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” v9

As so as he often did, Jesus places a great deal of emphasis on listening to what he has to say

Just in the first 34 verses of this chapter in one form or another the word hear is used no less than 13 times<sup>4</sup>

Now what’s particularly helpful but also unusual about this parable is that Jesus interprets it for his disciples and thanks to Mark we’re allowed to eavesdrop

But before we look at its interpretation we have to cope with the verses sandwiched in between the parable and its interpretation

Let’s read them

<sup>10</sup>When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. <sup>11</sup>He 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 <sup>12</sup>so that,

" 'they may be ever seeing but never perceiving,  
and ever hearing but never understanding;  
otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!'"<sup>[a]</sup>"

Now about the only thing that is clear from these verses is Jesus’ remark that the secret – lit. the mystery - of the kingdom of God had been revealed to the disciples

They were allowed and enabled to understand the secrets of God’s kingdom

But what about the rest of the verses?

At first reading it seems that Jesus is saying that he is speaking in parables in order that the people he was speaking to may not perceive, understand or be forgiven

Almost as if Jesus, by using parables, instead of seeking to make the truth plain is deliberately trying to obscure it<sup>5</sup>

Rather than seeking to increase their light, he is actually trying to increase their darkness<sup>6</sup>

We seem to have a riddle

So what are we to make of these words?

There are lots of theories about these verses and how we are to understand them – mostly centred around the idea that there is a mistake in the Greek

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<sup>4</sup> Warren W Wiersbe, Be Diligent p38-39

<sup>5</sup> David Pawson, *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> David Pawson, *ibid.*

But I personally (and many other commentators) tentatively think that we can only understand these verses with reference to the context in Isaiah where Jesus draws them from

For in Isaiah 6 we see these verses in their original context and they concern Israel

As a nation Israel had hardened her heart, she had closed her eyes and blocked her ears - to the extent that when the word of God came she could not see it or hear it

And Jesus in this case seems to be comparing the crowds to Israel at the time of Isaiah

Jesus, aware of their self-induced stubbornness seems to be making the point that their failure to understand his teaching was inevitable<sup>7</sup>

In the Scriptures there is a recurring theme that God has determined that those who deliberately refuse to understand will remain blind<sup>8</sup>

As Jesus teaches he encounters two types of people

First there are those who want to understand the truth and to them the parables become apparent and they learn and have their understanding deepened

But second, there are those who are simply not interested and he appears to decree that they will see (because they have eyes) but not perceive, hear (because they have ears) but not understand

These are the kind of people who would go away and say, "What's this man on about telling all these funny stories"<sup>9</sup>

Now in my experience the same thing happens today as the gospel is preached – there are still two types of hearers

The first category of people sit under ministry of the word and have an appetite for God and for learning Christian truth

They are those with a sincere heart; those willing to make changes in their lives as they hear the word of God – these people grow and learn more

God seems to reveal his mysteries to those who care

But on the other hand you get other people who sit under the same ministry week after week and when you enquire as to what they've learned you find that they learned nothing

In fact often you find them complaining that the preacher made no sense

And so often the simple reason is that they are simply not interested in Christian truth

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<sup>7</sup> R. Alan Cole, Mark, p149.

<sup>8</sup> R. Alan Cole, Mark, p149.

<sup>9</sup> David Pawson. Ibid.

And so the ones who have no interest – those who refuse to be changed by the word of God, instead of being enlightened ironically they actually become increasing blind as they sit under the preaching of the word

As I said before it seems that those who deliberately refuse to understand, God has determined that they will remain blind

So Jesus – if this interpretation is correct – uses parables to sort out those who want to hear him and have their lives changed by him from those who only want healing or who only came to have their curiosity satisfied by his clever miracles or those who came simply because a crowd draws a crowd

All the latter would eventually be put off as they find his parables incomprehensible

But those who came with a real desire to learn would understand

Now before we look at Jesus' interpretation of this parable he says something else that is also a little hard to understand – but this time it refers to his disciples

<sup>13</sup>Then Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?"

I think that probably what Jesus means here is that they – the disciples - need to listen carefully because this parable contains the key to understanding all the other parables

In other words – as we shall see – the right soil is required for receiving and understanding any of the other parables

So in verse 14 Jesus begins his explanation of the mystery of the parable – translated as secret in verse 11

Remember that a mystery in the New Testament is not something that is incomprehensible

No, it is something that is hidden from outsiders but disclosed to insiders

Remember also as we look at his interpretation, Jesus told this parable as a response to the crowds who had come to hear him – perhaps thousands of people

It's almost as if he was using it to explain to his disciples the reason why his teaching would have little impact on the majority of his hearers

They may have been impressed by the crowds, but Jesus seemed not to be – as if he knew that the lives of most would not be changed by his ministry

Now although Mark doesn't record it here, Luke tells us that the seed is the word of God<sup>10</sup> and Matthew tells us that the one sowing the good seed is the Son of Man<sup>11</sup> – so

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<sup>10</sup> Luke 8:11

the farmer is Jesus himself in this instance – or I suspect any servant of God sowing the seed in the future

Jesus identifies four types of soil or four types of people as they receive his word – remember that in each case the seed is the same – it is the difference in the soil that determines whether or not the seed produces a harvest

Four types of soil:

**(1) The soil of the path – the unresponsive or hardened heart<sup>12</sup>**

In Israel large fields were divided up into sections with pathways that divided them

These paths were trodden on all the time and the sun would bake the soil making it very hard

I guess that it was on these paths where the seed fell that Jesus was referring to

The hard soil

These are people on whom the word of God lands but it barely penetrates

This is unresponsive soil – the heart that treats the word of God lightly and fails to pay in much attention

These are hearers of the message but people who fail to do anything about it or use it to good advantage

The reasons for this hardness of heart may be pride or bitterness or unforgiveness of others or that hardness that results from years of cynicism and scorn

Such things prevent the word getting in

And so Satan – as we saw likened to the birds of the air – comes and snatches away the word as it rests on the surface and it's gone

Hardness and indifference to the word of God is all around us today I would suggest

Speaking personally and honestly, I've been preaching for around twenty years in one context or another

It's always a joy when you preach to men and women who have a really hunger for the word of God – it makes it all worthwhile

But the thing that strikes me so often is the sheer lack of interest of many people to the preaching of the word of God - the boredom; the apathy; the glazed look that appears

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<sup>11</sup> Matthew 13: 37. Although this statement occurs in the context of another parable (of the weeds) the principle still applies.

People with a thousand agendas more important than what God is saying

There are some you can preach to week after week and nothing ever seems to get in

This is hard soil – the unresponsive heart

## **(2) The shallow soil – the shallow heart**

I used to think this is seed sown in rocky places

But that's not the case

It is seed sown into shallow soil because there are rocks immediately beneath

This seed germinates and results in quick growth – but there's not enough depth to give it moisture and nutrients sustain and the plant dies

Jesus likens this soil to people who receive the word with joy but their root is shallow and when trouble or persecution comes they give up

There is a response to the word but it's a brief one and it's soon over

This perhaps is people who fail to accept the price that has to be paid to be a Christian – people who don't want to be outside the mainstream of society – people don't want to thought of as a religious nut or something like that

These are real concerns for many people

When I think about shallow hearts I always remember a girl I met at university called Louise

She was studying economics like I was

I remember getting into a conversation with her in the library and telling her I was a Christian

To my delight as we talked about Christianity she became really interested and one thing led to another soon she was coming to the Christian Union and to my church

Not long afterwards she found an application for a Christian conference and enthusiastically signed up for it

I also happened to be attending the same conference that year and so of and on we bumped into each other during the week

I still remember her beaming face – she had become a Christian she told me and was full excitement and enthusiasm

As you can imagine I was thrilled for her – she seemed determined to follow Christ all the way

The next time I saw her however was about three months later

Before she said anything I could tell immediately that all her joy and enthusiasm had drained away

I was soon subjected to a barrage of critical comments about Christians, the bible and the church

Apparently her Dad had had a little talk with her and ‘explained’ that all religions had good in them but that she shouldn’t be allow herself to be brainwashed

And as she spoke to me she really kicked over the traces of all her recent decisions and experiences

What’s more it soon became apparent that I was the one to blame!

The last thing I heard about Louise was that she had got into an immoral relationship - she had had a child with a man that she said she could never marry

It was all very sad

She received the word with joy – remember there was nothing wrong with the seed - but when difficulties came from her friends and family she packed it all in – just dropped it and the joy withered and cynicism replaced it

The soil of her heart was simply too shallow for the word to really get in<sup>13</sup>

She was butterfly heart – never stuck at anything for long – always moving on to the next thing

Shallow thin soil, rocky ground

No root

### **(3) The Thorns and Weeds: The crowded heart<sup>14</sup>**

This is the seed sown amongst the thrones which come up and choke the plants so that they did not bear grain

Jesus identifies the thorns as three things

First, the worries of this life; second the deceitfulness of wealth and third the desire for other things

This is the person in whom the word of God is sown but they fail to remove the weeds that are planted in the soil along side it

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<sup>13</sup> David Pawson

<sup>14</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe

And these weeds or thorns crowd out the seed sown by God

Now weeding out the thorns or weeds from soil is hard work – and this section of the parable is a reminder that we have to work hard to weed our hearts of those things that will choke out the word of God

There are so many places we can put our affections; so many temptations that it is relatively easy for our faith to be choked

They can be things that are obviously sinful – we all know what they are

But the weeds can be things that are not necessarily wrong in themselves but can still be a serious threat to our faith

I personally know of people who seemingly were strong Christians at the age of 20 but who have stumbled along the way

What were their thorns that crowded out the word – well a variety of things

The pursuit of a career that crowded out the church; falling in love and marrying someone who didn't share their Christian faith; getting caught up in the desire to build the middle class paradise – what Rico Tice often calls the goal of lawns, Labradors and Land Rovers

These are common weeds that can so easily crowd out the word of God and make it unfruitful

It's my experience that the longer we live the more attractive these weeds become

Things that we once would have ripped out immediately, we begin to water and feed

So that's the three things that rob the heart of the word of God – the hard soil, the shallow soil and the thorny soil

One commentator suggest that they seem to correspond neatly with the Christians three enemies: the Devil, the flesh and the world<sup>15</sup>

#### **(4) The Good Soil – The Fruitful Heart**

This is when the hearer hears the word and accepts it and it produces a crop

This is the great motivation for the preacher and the one who witnesses to those around him

There are those who are neither hard nor shallow nor preoccupied

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<sup>15</sup> Warren W Wiersbe, p42

People who have a desire for the truth of God and are willing to prepare the ground of their own heart to receive it even if it is costly to do so

Farmers know that if you keep sowing the seed, you will get a harvest

And it's the same with scattering the word of God – it will produce fruit

I remember a lady coming to see me and saying, “I heard the Bible being preached week after week for years and it meant nothing to me. But now suddenly it's all clicked and makes sense and it's changed my life”

The word had born fruit as it hit the good ground

I remember hearing a man called John speak in Sheffield years ago - he worked as an evangelist for the Open Air Mission

John said that prior to going to work for the Mission he worked for years in a regular job in the centre of Nottingham

And almost every lunchtime he used to go to a place that was equivalent to Speaker's Corner in London and preach to the gathered crowds

And John said that there was one man among the crowds who he came to recognise because he was the chief heckler; almost every day he was there shouting insults and abuse

Anyway John explained how eventually he left his job in Nottingham and moved away when he went to work for the Open Air Mission

But several years later John returned to Nottingham and was walking through the town centre past where he preached all those years ago

And there on the platform was a man preaching the Christian Gospel and to his amazement he was no other then his former chief heckler and sparing partner

After the man had finished preaching John went up to him and asked, “Do you remember me from all those years ago?”

And the man took one look and said “Of course I do...you were one who faithfully preached the word of God to me all those years ago (in spite of all the abuse you got)...on the outside I was mocking but on the inside what you said got under my skin and I couldn't get rid of it...it troubled me day and night until I finally gave in and became and let God be God in my life”

The good ground makes it all worthwhile – the seed did its work when it hit the good ground

**Final thoughts (this passage raises lots of practical issues and implications)**

(1) We need to keep sowing the word of God believing that there will be some good soil that bears fruit – even if we can't see it at the time

We must never up – farmers know that a harvest comes in the end

(2) But we also need to remember that just as in Jesus' day many folks will never accept the word of God – and this parable goes a long way to explaining why

In other words this parable reveals why so much preaching and witnessing is unproductive – people don't want the gospel enough

(3) Speaking now of us as Christians in the church

It is probably the case that all of us, at differing times, have a heart that resembles the characteristics of each type of soil

We are not uniformly one throughout our Christian lives

For example we many go through a time of being very fruitful followed by a time of being hard and unresponsive

This has two practical implications for each one of us:

First, great responsibility comes with hearing the word of God – he who has an ear let him hear – we must be diligent about how we hear and what we do with the word of God – the word of God is a serious business and we dare not treat it lightly

Second, there are times when each one of us needs to have our hearts ploughed up again to receive the word of God afresh

To break up the hard soil; to deepen it and kill the weeds

And I think that that explains why some things happen to us that we don't like – in the economy of God

Often it takes suffering or hardship to break us out of our cosy self-protective worlds for God to get through to us

For it is when life is hard that the little meanings that we create become irrelevant and we become aware of bigger meanings

And the seed is able to penetrate that we may once again be fruitful

As if God has to get the soil to the right consistency again

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