

Sermon – Sunday 16 July 2017.

In Psalm 78, the psalmist declares: *“I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter hidden things – things from of old – what we have heard and known, what our fathers taught us.”* (Psalm 78: 2-3).

In our Gospel reading this morning, we have one of Jesus’ best known parables, the parable of the sower. This is just one of a series of parables in this part of Matthew’s gospel where Jesus is telling his listeners what the kingdom of heaven is like, using everyday examples to create an image of God, and his promised kingdom. So the kingdom of heaven likened to a mustard seed, to yeast, to hidden treasure, and a pearl of great price.

Each parable, by itself, does not paint a full picture, but gives his listeners us a vision of a particular aspect of the kingdom, in a way that they will find easy to understand, and also to remember. This is important, because in a society which had no mass media, information was generally passed on by word of mouth – so the message had to be clear, simple and memorable. Complex theological debates just wouldn’t have worked. For many of us, they still don’t!

We can see for ourselves just how effective these stories are. Even those people who don’t regularly go to church, and maybe haven’t seen the inside of a bible since their childhood, will usually be able to recall at least one of Jesus’ parables from what they were taught in their RE lessons at school, many years before.

In the parable of the sower, Jesus is not so much talking about the kingdom itself, but about how the Word of God is to be received and nourished, and how his message is to be spread. It’s quite possible that, in using the image of the sower, Jesus had in mind the words from Isaiah that we heard in this morning’s Old Testament reading:

“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, but will accomplish what I desire, and will achieve the purpose for which I sent it”.

Powerful words in themselves – but when we look at the passage through the lens of the New Testament, we might interpret it differently. We might see that it is not just the literal ‘words of God’ that Isaiah is referring to, but a foretelling of the Word of God – Jesus himself – coming from God, and not returning until he had fulfilled God’s purposes.

And in the same way, when Jesus refers to ‘the seed’ in the parable of the sower, he is not just talking about the words of scripture, or the words as we have them in the bible today, but about the very essence of God, embodied in Jesus himself.

In some of Jesus' parables, the full meaning may not be immediately apparent. But in this case, we don't have to search particularly hard for the hidden message, because Jesus himself provides it, in the second part of the passage.

The sower is Jesus himself. The seed is the word of God's kingdom. And the seed is sown in four different types of soil – on the path, on rocky ground, amongst the thorns, and in good soil – representing different types of people who receive the word.

The emphasis, then, is not so much on the sower or the seed, but the soil into which it is sown – leaving us to consider the question 'what sort of soil am I?'

Are we like the path, being impervious to the word, and letting it be snatched away before it can even begin to grow in our hearts? Or are we like the stony ground, enthusiastic in accepting the gospel at first, but falling away as soon as this starts to make demands on our lives, because our roots do not go down far enough?

Or do we let other priorities take root in our hearts, overwhelming and choking the tender shoots of the gospel message like the brambles at the bottom of our garden? Or do we provide the right conditions – the good soil – enabling God's word to flourish within us, and bear fruit that yields as much as thirty, or sixty, or a hundred fold?

One of the things I love about Jesus' parables is the detail they contain, and the way in which the meaning transcends the two thousand years that have passed since Jesus told them. But we must also remember that these stories were being told to people with a completely different life experience to our own – so we also need to look at them in context.

As we were driving back from Bude on Friday, I noticed that some of the fields of wheat were almost ready for harvest. And it got me thinking – what sort of yield might a farmer expect to get today? So I 'gleaned' these stalks of wheat, and a rough count shows that there are typically between thirty and forty grains in each ear – each from a single seed.

But back in first-century Palestine, with its poor soil and unreliable rainfall, and without the benefits of modern plant science, fertilisers and pesticides, a typical yield would have been more like ten- or fifteen-fold. So when Jesus talks about a crop yielding one hundred times what was sown, his listeners would have appreciated that he was talking about something pretty phenomenal, even miraculous.

It is sometimes said that the sower in this parable is being rather wasteful. After all, how many farmers do you know who would scatter their valuable seed over their land, regardless of how well prepared the soil was. No, they would first cultivate the soil, improve its condition with fertilisers, remove any rocks and weeds, and then make sure that the seed was scattered only onto the good soil.

So why does God behave so differently? Well, I guess that's just the way God does things. As Paul said in his letter to the Corinthians,

"the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight".

We always think that we know best. We would not be the sower who flings their seed about, without looking where it is going to land. We would make sure that the seed only got to the 'right people' – people like us, people who can be trusted with it. Our careful, defensive, well-planned strategies are so different from the seemingly random, generous, even foolish provision of God.

If we are to join the ranks of God's sowers, we must prepare the ground as thoroughly as we can. But then we must trust in the generous mercy of God, throw caution to the wind, and watch with delight as God's word accomplishes more than we could ever have dreamed of.

So how fruitful will you be – thirty fold, sixty fold, or even a hundred fold?

One final thought. As you probably know, the method of sowing that Jesus described is called broad-casting, and was used around the world before the invention of mechanical seed drills. Interestingly, broadcasting is also the term adopted for the transmission of radio and television signals, which like the sower's seeds, are sent out in all directions, quite indiscriminately.

To listen to a particular programme, you need to have your radio switched on, and tuned in to the correct frequency. And so it is with God's messages – if we are going to hear and understand his word, it is not enough just to be switched on – we also need to be tuned in to his wavelength.