

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 Jesus' parable of the sower

That same day Jesus left the house and went out beside Lake Galilee, where he sat down to teach. Such large crowds gathered around him he had to sit in a boat, while the people stood on the shore. Then he taught them many things by using stories. He said:

A farmer went out to scatter seed in a field. While the farmer was scattering the seed, some of it fell along the road and was eaten by birds. Other seeds fell on thin, rocky ground and quickly started growing because the soil wasn't very deep. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched and dried up, because they didn't have enough roots. Some other seeds fell where thornbushes grew up and choked the plants. But a few seeds did fall on good ground where the plants produced a hundred or sixty or thirty times as much as was scattered. If you have ears, pay attention!

Now listen to the meaning of the story about the farmer: The seeds that fell along the road are people who hear the message about the kingdom, but don't understand it. Then the evil one comes and snatches the message from their hearts. The seeds that fell on rocky ground are people who gladly hear the message and accept it right away. But they don't have deep roots, and they don't last very long. As soon as life gets hard or the message gets them in trouble, they give up.

The seeds that fell among the thornbushes are also people who hear the message. But they start worrying about the needs of this life and are fooled by the desire to get rich. So the message gets choked out, and they never produce anything. The seeds that fell on good ground are people who hear and understand the message. They produce as much as a hundred or sixty or thirty times what was planted.

Dear friend, I've often heard people say Jesus was a great teacher and a master of using ordinary everyday examples and stories to illustrate his message. He was so down to earth. Most wouldn't argue with that. But spoiler alert, we need to be aware of the danger of not recognising the extraordinary power of the punch hidden in those stories and examples. They are everyday stories but with a power-packed message.

Jesus' stories were mysterious, disruptive and unsettling but we have a tendency of taming them. It could be because we live in a completely different context, also because we ask the wrong questions, or we just want them to make us feel comfortable.

In a resource I received this week from Sermons.com, I read about Connie, an anthropologist living and working in an aboriginal community in our land. The community has a rich tradition of storytelling. They have regular gatherings at night to tell story upon story. Connie felt very privileged to be invited to one of those storytelling nights.

She listened carefully to the imagery, the detail, and the action of a story about the beginning of time. At the end of the story she asked, "What does it mean?"

All eyes were on Connie as an elder looked intently at her and said, "That's the one question you cannot ask."

What does it mean? Can we ask this question of Jesus' parables? What questions can we ask to help us understand Jesus' stories, his parables? Can we ask, "What does this mean for us?" "What do we learn?" "What should we do?"

This parable, like many others, is about the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God. If we want to avoid a tamed, moralistic interpretation of the story maybe we need to ask not "What should **we** do?" but, "What is **God** doing?" "What does this tell us about God, the King and his kingdom?"

Last week we remembered how Jesus confused the people by the way he acted. Eating, drinking and mixing with people on the margins, the outsiders. This week they're confused by his story. Or are they? By the end of this chapter and a few more stories we're told the people of his hometown are very unhappy with him. Maybe his stories are all too clear to them and also too confronting.

The people wanted a Messiah and King who would be their own and rid them of the Roman enemy. They wanted a real king who'd establish a visible kingdom, using military might if required. I think, if we're honest, we might still want something like that. Jesus stories disrupt their dream. Jesus tells stories about a kingdom which includes all people, is mysterious or hidden and is actually already present. Do we see that in the parable of the sower / farmer? Yes, we do!

In this story the seed is sown everywhere. Do you want a kingdom of just good people like you? Then turn this parable upside down and make it about 'soil types' and thank God that although you're not perfect you're certainly in the good soil category. Tame it!

This parable, when it's not tamed, is about a sower who sows everywhere, in and on every soil type, expecting the good seed, which Jesus says is the Word of the kingdom, to grow and bear fruit. It's a story of God's universal kingdom. Hidden in the ground the seed grows. Hidden in the world the Word of the kingdom grows, the kingdom grows. Not visible but hidden. Not open, clear to see, but mysterious. Not coming at some time in the future but already present.

Here's some homework: Read John 1:1-18 and think about how it relates to the parable of the sower / farmer.

What about the soils? So much is said about the soils. The soils represent all the conditions of human beings, of human hearts. Some hearts are more open to the word and produce lots of fruit. Others aren't open at all or open for a while but not for long. But the seed is sown in all. This wasteful, extravagant sower, sows the seed everywhere and gives us a glimpse into the heart of Jesus, into the heart of God.

Jesus explanation of the soils also reveal anti-kingdom, anti-God forces. They are the evil one, the devil. Troubles, persecution, worry and desire for wealth. All of these can either rob us of the words of the kingdom, or hinder the work of those words in our lives. Either stop or hinder the fruitfulness of our lives.

The message of the kingdom is, "Turn back to God and believe the good news." God has been sowing this message all over the world. God sowed it in my heart. God has sown it in your heart. Turn back and believe the good news. The good news of the King. The good news of the kingdom.

As you and I allow the good news of the kingdom to take root in our lives it produces fruit.

We believe the good news of who God is, a loving Father, his Son Jesus, our Saviour, and the Holy Spirit who, like the sun, the wind and the rain to crops, warms our hearts, blows God's goodness into us, and waters the good seed of the word so it produces fruit.

We believe the good news of who we are. We are dearly loved children of God.

We believe we have amazing potential because our amazing God is at work in and through us.

We believe that as the seed was sown in our lives we're sent to be sowers of the seed in the lives of others. All others. We might be tempted to do a soil test before deciding whether to sow or not. Don't give in to the temptation. Just sow the seed. Show the love. Spread the love of God.

The good seed of God's kingdom is being sown in the world. God is growing his kingdom, hidden in our lives and mysteriously growing and bearing fruit in us and in the world.

Jesus tells a story about a sower generously sowing seed. He says the seed is the word of the kingdom, the message of the kingdom. The sower makes no distinctions but continues to sow the good seed everywhere. Praise God for his love that never lets us go. Amen.