

BIBLE MONTH SERMON NOTES



Bible reading: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

It's been a long day for Jesus, if Matthew's account is anything to go by, with highs and lows along the way (Matthew chapter 12).

- An argument with the Pharisees over a Sabbath breakfast (12:1-8)
- On to the synagogue and another confrontation with the Pharisees over healing on the Sabbath, this time with an ominous conclusion (12:9-14)
- Crowds coming to be healed, and being healed! (15-21)
- Another confrontation, this time over a deliverance (22-37)
- A challenge to Jesus' legitimacy from the Pharisees and the teachers of the law (38-45)
- A slightly awkward moment with Jesus' family! (46-50)

Perhaps for Jesus, this is a typical Sabbath day in his work of sowing the seeds of the kingdom.

And the day is still not finished. A large crowd gathers, wanting more of Jesus. Jesus decides on a teaching session, using his preferred method of teaching in parables. But where to start?

Perhaps the parable Jesus chooses is as much a reflection on the mixed success of the day, and on the sea of faces before him - the faithful, the curious, the sceptical and the downright hostile - as it is setting the scene for the parables to come.

THE SOWER

"A sower went out to sow" (v3)

So far so good. Nothing unusual about that - the listeners would instantly recognise the scene.

THE PATH

"As he sowed, some seeds fell on the path and the birds came and ate them up" (v4)

Wait - back up! Seed being wasted? Seed grain was also food grain, so sowing would be done with minimum waste. Seed on the path is a sign that Jesus is 'straying from the script'.

Jesus' sowing of the seeds of the Kingdom is an act of rampant generosity. His is not a regime, like that of the Pharisees, that denies hungry people their breakfast, sick people their healing or possessed people their deliverance.

"When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart" (v19)

Jesus later explains to his disciples that he's talking here about those on whom the message of the kingdom has no effect. It's more than the listener not being able to understand; it's almost a conscious decision not to allow the gospel to make sense. In the Bible it's called 'hard heartedness'.

Bible Society's 2017 research found that 22% of Kiwis aged 13 or over claimed to be sure there is no God. It's fairly likely that a good proportion of those have at some stage heard some, or all, of the gospel. But they've resolved not to believe it, whether for reasons of world view or personal experience. People sometimes say of Christians that they 'believe what they want to believe'. If that's true then it's also true of those who reject the Christian message. Jesus knew that would happen, in his day as in ours.

Our responsibility then, as those who proclaim the Good News about Jesus, is to make sure that the Gospel we offer is an invitation to belief, not a barrier to it, so that we do not by our words or actions become complicit in its rejection.

Suggest or discuss some ways in which your church can make sure that the Gospel is a generous invitation to belief, and not a barrier to it.

THE ROCKY GROUND

“Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprung up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root they withered away” (v5,6)

Again we see how recklessly generous the sower is with the seed. The ground is marginal, but there is soil there and the possibility of some of the seed taking root. And the seed does find enough moisture to germinate and enough nutrients to being to grow, but not enough to nourish it to maturity.

“As for what is sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away” (v20-21)

By the time Matthew's Gospel is written and circulating the church is experiencing the persecution Jesus foretells, and no doubt they're also seeing many 'fall away' because of it.

Persecution takes on different and more subtle forms in 21st century Aotearoa New Zealand. It is social rather than physical, but it just as effectively snuffs out budding spiritual life particularly among the young. Bible Society's 2017 New Zealand research found that 34% of 15-18 year olds identified as Christian, but just 15% of 19-24 year olds did. The trend was repeated for measures of church attendance, Bible reading, discussing the Bible with others, and allowing the Bible to influence your life. On the other side of the coin, 31% of 19 to 24 year olds were sure there is no God, compared to 14% of 15 to 18 year olds.

It's exciting to see how college age teenagers are interested in the Gospel, catching something of what God has done and is doing in the world, responding to it and actively engaging with the Bible and Christian life. And all credit to our youth leaders, youth pastors and youth workers! They do an amazing job and we must pray for them.

But when our young people leave college and enter tertiary or other training, or the workforce, things happen that too often extinguish that nascent faith. It may be social pressure, exposure to different worldviews, or just a failure to make their parent's faith their own. And it is sad to see.

What does seem apparent is that churches and youth ministries have a window of opportunity during teenage years to build a sense-making, sustainable faith and Christian worldview in the teenagers whom God brings their way and entrusts to their care.

Suggest or discuss some ways in which your church, church denomination or the wider church can help build an enduring faith in Jesus Christ into people who are part of church and youth ministries during their teenage years.

THE THORNS

“Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them” (v7).

Again we see the reckless extravagance of the sower! It seems the thorns were already there in the ground, yet the seed was allowed to fall there also. The next parable in Matthew suggests that this was not inevitably futile – in that parable the seeds and weeds both grew to maturity. In this parable, though, the thorns overwhelm the seeds, starving them of moisture and nutrient and strangling the life from them.

“As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing” (v22).

Jesus’ explanation of this part of the parable takes an interesting turn. In the first two soils the seed either doesn’t get started or starts but dies. Not so here. The plants appear to survive, albeit stunted and underdeveloped, but they ‘yield nothing’.

We’re used to thinking that this part of the parable, like the first two parts, describes people who have ‘fallen away’ from things Christian. But it could also describe people who are church going Christians, but whose lives are so entangled with the material, social or philosophical trappings of this age that they do not contribute to the growth of the kingdom.

Bible Society’s 2017 research also found that 29% of all Kiwis aged 13 or over used to attend church but no longer do so. One in five of those people still identified as Christian, even if they no longer attended church.

There are many reasons why people might stop going to church, such as age or ill health, work commitments, spouse, partner or family pressure or a bad experience. It’s likely that some of those non-church Christians live fruitful lives for the King and kingdom!

But there are also, undoubtedly, a good number of former church goers who found the cost of discipleship too high, and found other ways of living more attractive, or perhaps just easier, or more convenient.

Suggest or discuss some ways that your church people can empower themselves and each other not to be drawn away by the material, social or philosophical trappings of wider society, but to be and remain contributors to the growth of God’s kingdom on earth.

THE GOOD SOIL

“Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty” (v8).

Here we see the other side of, or perhaps the reason for, the sower’s extravagance. Even with modern agricultural methods in good growing conditions, one wheat seed produces an average yield of 20 to 30 grains. A yield of 100 to one is pretty impressive by any standard! Listeners would know that the sowing has been fruitful, in spite of the apparent failures.

“But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty” (v23)

None of the Gospel writers who recount this parable tell us what type of seed the sower was sowing. We can be sure, though, that the sower was not sowing ornamentals! The test of success for these plants is not how good the mature plants look. Success is not even the plants reaching maturity, although that is desirable. Success for the sowing is hearing and understanding that leads to fruitfulness. Plants that reproduce plants that reproduce plants.

CONCLUSION

When we look at the big picture, the sowing of the seeds of the Kingdom of heaven has been remarkably productive! From a small group of faithful followers, serving in submission to Jesus Christ and in the power of God's Spirit, has come a global Christian population of 2.2 billion, or 31% of the world's people. In some countries, such as Cuba, the growth of the church runs far ahead of the capacity of Bible mission agencies like Bible Societies to keep up with the demand for Bibles.

In Aotearoa New Zealand we're not currently seeing that sort of growth. But we can be encouraged nonetheless. Seventeen percent of kiwis aged 13 or over and 30% of all 15 to 18 year olds attend church monthly or more often. Fourteen percent of all kiwis aged 13 or over read the Bible at least monthly, most of those weekly or daily. It's easy to focus on decline and miss that the church is still a significant, life-giving, society-transforming presence in Aotearoa New Zealand.

But the work of bringing the Kingdom of Heaven to 21st Century Aotearoa is in a tough phase. What lessons does the parable of the sower have for us?

Working backwards through the parable then - we can love and nurture those who are 'fruit bearers' among us. They may make it look easy, but they need our prayers and encouragement to keep going.

We can examine ourselves and ask, "Are **thorns** of entanglement with 'the cares of the world and the lure of wealth' preventing us from being fruit bearers for the Kingdom?" How can we disentangle ourselves, and help each other to do likewise – those alongside us in the church and those we know who, for whatever reason, have left the church?

We can build up the soil on the **rocks** of hardship and resistance, by providing a nurturing and discipling environment where people, particularly young people, can develop 'faith resilience'. Then when they strike the rocks of hardship and resistance they have a faith and a maturity that will enable them to survive and be fruitful.

And what about the hard path? That is a challenge for the church and our place in society. As Christians we need to be 'wise as serpents and innocent as doves' (Matthew 10:16), showing by wise and gracious discourse and effective Christian community action that the Kingdom of Heaven has indeed come to earth in the person of Jesus Christ, as modelled by his followers, and is bearing fruit!

You may wish to make concluding comments, or simply end with a prayer.

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