

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

13:1 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. 2 Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. 3 And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. 5 Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. 6 But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. 7 Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. 8 Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. 9 Let anyone with ears listen!"

18 "Hear then the parable of the sower. 19 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; this is what was sown on the path. 20 As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; 21 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. 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. 23 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."

The Parable of the Sower

A common prayer I've heard recently is the prayer for revival. There is a longing that God would do what He has done before in bringing many people to faith in a short time. However I'm not sure how much those who pray that know what happened alongside God's actions in each of the historical revivals. After all when Jesus asked his disciples to pray to the Lord of the Harvest to send out workers he immediately sent out his disciples to preach the word of the Kingdom. We would like God to act powerfully and with great miracles, signs and wonders. But what does waiting on God for this involve? How passive or active do we have to be?

The question here involves considering how much God is sovereign and how much we are responsible for? For example: Is this a balance, like a see saw, with God responsible for what we aren't and vice versa. Or is God totally sovereign all the time? Will the Holy Spirit act in power and we just pray and wait, or can we get on and do something and God will act around that? I think we need to understand God's sovereignty, God's absolute power to act, a bit better than this.

An example – was God involved, did God act in you coming to church this morning? Do we trust God absolutely to be behind us getting here? But did you drive here with your eyes shut? Of course not! We almost always expect God to be acting and us to be responsible at the same time. Except when it suits us not to be - for example, when we just pray for God

to act to transform something without us! Paul has something to say about this. In Colossians 1:28-9 says:

²⁸ It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. ²⁹ For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me.

Here Paul takes responsibility for the results of his preaching as well as the effort to do it while acknowledging that it is God who powerfully enables him to proclaim Jesus to everyone. And we know while Paul takes responsibility for everyone being mature in Christ the Holy Spirit is also working maturing those people as well. And he also says in Philippians 2:12-13

work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³ **for** it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

We work hard because God is at work in us, enabling us to do so. God is sovereign in everything but we are also always responsible for working hard and getting results that please God.

So today I want to look at the Parable of the Sower and apply something of this theological insight to it. This parable is so familiar to us but I hope to bring out something new for you.

Up until this time Jesus has been teaching, healing, proclaiming the Kingdom in word and action and there had been different responses from people. The Pharisees and other religious leaders had, by and large, rejected what he was about. Large crowds were attracted to his healing and engaging teaching but some didn't want to really commit and they turn against Jesus at the end and demand his crucifixion (27:15-23), leaving us to wonder whether they ever truly understood. His disciples got the picture some of the time but not always and a few, like the Centurian, appeared to really get what Jesus was about.

So Jesus tells them a parable illustrating all these responses and saying a bit more too. This picture Jesus paints is of someone broadcasting seed, sowing seed on their land in the normal way any farmer would in those days. The farmer would know his land, and would cultivate and fertilise the areas of good soil. In order to sow seed like this he would need to sow right to the edges of his field so that all the cultivated soil would be well sown. (Has anyone here sown a grass area by hand?) So naturally the seed would spread past the edges as he threw it. It would also be carried even further by any breeze. Thus the seed would land not only in the soil he had prepared but also on the path, and the areas with rock just below the surface. And in those days he didn't have access to weed killers so inevitably some weeds would have seeded in various areas. This would all have been quite familiar to Jesus' hearers and it is only the rather high yields Jesus describes that would have alerted his hearers to there being something of greater significance to his story to be heard if they had ears to hear. He was wanting people to be listening with ears to hear –

that is with an attitude of expecting to act on what they understood him to be saying. It is an invitation to change – and to persist in that change.

Jesus goes on to explain to his disciples this background meaning his hearers should be listening for. The explanation not only helps them to realize what was happening in the different responses to his proclamation of the Kingdom but also what would be the response to them sowing the word because they, and we, as disciples of Jesus, are also called to sow the Word of the Kingdom.

What is the 'word of the Kingdom' – it is the word of God that produces fruit of the Kingdom. Sowing it is proclaiming the good news that God's Kingdom has come in Jesus, that God is at work putting things right in the lives of those who respond in their hearts, in their core being, to follow Jesus, and therefore will join in proclaiming this gospel to others, producing ever more fruit of the Kingdom, the 100, 60, 30 fold.

So what does Jesus explain?

When the seed is sown – the word of the Kingdom is proclaimed - there is a need for a response, a decision. Note that there is a progression in the responses to his proclamation of the word of the Kingdom, from no response, through short-term responses, to a full, enduring and fruitful response. Soils don't choose what they are – which shows where the allegory in this parable breaks down. People can change their response. But there is a need for perseverance and for the encouragement of perseverance. These days it seems only sports people are commended for perseverance. But this is essential in the Kingdom of God.

The first scenario of the path shows that there will be spiritual opposition to this which we will see in those who do not respond positively at all. The evil one is at work and snatches it away like the birds as soon as it falls on the hard path. Those with hearts hardened by the prince of this world do not discern in Jesus' words and actions the presence of God's kingdom, or saving presence. The heart loves, desires, is the center of a person's willing, thinking, knowing, deciding and doing, the center of their commitments and way of life. These hearts are unaffected by the words of life offered to them.

The second scenario of the thin soil on rocky ground describes the presence of "trouble and persecution" that causes the person to stumble. This trouble comes "because of the word." The person does not understand that God's kingdom threatens and conflicts with dominant cultural values and structures. Nor can they resist. It is inevitable that the world "strikes back." This is the person who seems eager to hear and receive what we bring, receives it with joy even, but is challenged by anything that Jesus calls them to be or do that clashes with being an ordinary 'kiwi'.

The seed that is choked by thorns represents the person who hears Jesus' proclamation but "the cares of the world and lure of wealth choke the word" and bring it to nothing (13:23). The "cares of the world" are anxiety and worries over daily life. This anxiety is expressed in

attempts to secure life without reference to God, being worried over all sorts of things around us rather than trusting in God's love. "The lure of wealth" exercises a similar hold over the human heart when material gain is the goal and definition of human success. Acquisitive greed is not compatible with trusting God's loving provision. With these commitments, the word about God's rule is not able to break through and nourish new life. The plant may endure but not enough to produce any fruit.

After these three scenarios addressing negative or inadequate responses to Jesus' proclamation, the fourth scenario concerns the seed sown on good soil (13:23). This seed and soil represent those who hear and understand the word. Their hearts, the center of their very being, embrace the good news. They fight off the devil. They endure difficulties and persecutions. They are not defined by worldly cares and wealth. They join the community formed by and committed to God's kingdom and marked by doing God's will (12:46). They too sow the seed, proclaim the word of the Kingdom. So they live fruitful lives, signified by the abundant crop.

What else can we understand from this parable and its explanation? It speaks of the abundant grace of God.

The sower scatters his seed carelessly, recklessly, seemingly wasting much of the seed on ground that holds little promise for a fruitful harvest. Jesus invests in disciples who look similarly unpromising. He squanders his time with tax collectors and sinners, with lepers, the demon-possessed, and all manner of outcasts as well as talking with the crowds and trying to address the religious authorities and leaders whose hearts are invested in different things. Yet he promises that his extravagant sowing of the word will produce an abundant harvest.

If there is any hope for the unproductive soil, it is that the sower keeps sowing generously, extravagantly, even in the least promising places. Jesus' investment in his disciples shows that he simply will not give up on them, in spite of their many failings.

Too often we play it safe, sowing the word only where we are confident it will be well received, and only where those who receive it are likely to become contributing members of our group. In the name of stewardship, we hold tightly to our resources, wanting to make sure that nothing is wasted. We are reluctant to speak out in our daily lives or be bold or creative in our personal evangelistic efforts, resisting new ideas for fear they might not work — as though mistakes or failure were to be avoided at all costs.

Jesus' approach to speaking of the Kingdom is quite at odds with our play-it-safe instincts. He gives us freedom to take risks for the sake of the gospel. He endorses extravagant generosity in sowing the word, even in perilous places. Though we may wonder about the wisdom or efficiency of his methods, Jesus promises that the end result will be a bumper crop. Despite some indifferent, shallow and fruitless responses in the end there will be a harvest — that should give us a firm hope.

So back to the beginning – that God is sovereign and we are also responsible. When we pray for God to do something here, to make a difference in St Matthew's or even bring revival in Dunedin or this country, we are praying for his power to be at work in us to enable us to proclaim the word of the Kingdom even more generously, without any regard for efficiency, knowing that it will be rejected, ineffective, not endure in many and yet there will be a harvest among those who hear. God's spirit will be at work and we too are responsible for toiling and struggling like Paul in proclaiming the Kingdom and reaching the hearts of everyone we can speak to.

²⁸ It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. ²⁹ For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me.

Colossians 1:28-9

Personally I find this all very challenging as it requires me to be thinking of Jesus often so that what is on my mind can be spoken of at any time – and it requires me to practice speaking about Jesus often – what our fellowship meals aim to give us the opportunity to do in a natural, non- Bible study or prayer setting. If we can't speak of Jesus in daily life with Christians we are unlikely to be able to do so freely with those we meet day by day.