"THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER"

Matthew 13:1-23

As it's Harvest Festival and we are in a bucolic sort of mood, it's probably appropriate to look at a story which takes us into the countryside and into the world of the farmer. Fortunately, Jesus told many stories which connected with his hearers' daily experience and drew on the scenes which his audience might have seen actually happening around them while Jesus was speaking – and, as they lived in a very agrarian culture a lot of that was to do with agriculture . One of the best-known of those is the story – the parable – which we've just heard read: The Parable of the Sower. We've looked at this before, but it's always worth reminding ourselves of the message of Jesus – and this is quite fundamental to how we approach all his teaching.

I'd like to suggest to you this morning that this parable is about a response; but, more than that, it is about **responsibility**. The focus of attention in this story is not really the Sower, whoever he or she might be. I don't even think, as many people would say, that the focus is the seed, which Jesus seems to equate with *"the message"* (*v19*). It seems to me that this is all about the soils, the various types of reception that the seed gets. And that points us towards the need not only to respond, but to take some kind of responsibility for our ongoing response. Anyway, let's have a look at this "Story of the Soils".

Once again Matthew introduces the section with a comment about the crowds. This time they're heaving about on the sea shore and Jesus hops into a nearby boat which he uses as a pulpit. Matthew tells us that Jesus used a lot of parables when he taught (*v3*) and, helpfully, this is one of the very few parables that Jesus actually explains.

So what's the point of this parable then? There's no sub-plot here, no secondary thread which runs through it – just the one point. We don't know who the Sower is, but, as we've said already, the seed is *"the message"* or *"the word"* and the various types of ground onto which it falls represent various types of people – or rather the **responses** of various types of people. We may think it rather daft that the farmer scatters the seed apparently indiscriminately all over the place. But to the people who were listening to Jesus down by the lake it would have seemed quite natural. In the Middle East they would have ploughed the ground *after* sowing the seed, thus ploughing it into the ground. So what are the responses that are illustrated here, then? The four types are very probably all represented in this congregation this morning.

1. THE PATH

Some people, says Jesus, hear the word – the message that Jesus brought with him as he proclaimed the good news about the coming Kingdom of God – but they're actually so hardened against what God has to say that they won't give it a second thought. Their response is one of rejection. They hear it, all right –

each of the types of people talked about here actually *"hear the word"* – but it's what they do with it that matters.

Maybe you're like that: you don't really care what God might have to say. For one reason or another you're convinced that it will make no difference to you. OK, so you're here this morning, but that might be simply to satisfy a friend or relative, or to conform to some long-running tradition of churchgoing, but as far as letting it make any difference to your life is concerned, you're not about to let God interfere with that, thank you very much! Well, if that's the case, don't worry. If that's your attitude, he won't interfere. You won't believe it and that's an end to it. You can go back to sleep, if you want to.

2. THE ROCK

As the seed was scattered on the ground, some would no doubt have fallen on the thin layer of soil that had built up over the rocks, a kind of thin silt that had been spread over the rocky surface by the wind and the rain. But there was no room for the roots to spread, no opportunity for growth. As soon as the roots tried to push down they hit against the rock and could make no further progress. What little growth there had been would quickly die off.

It's interesting to note that Jesus refers to those who *"hear the word and at once receive it with joy"*, because this describes those whose response is very experiential – everything is great, real peace, real experiences of happiness but (to change the image) it's all frothy, there's no desire to grow, to find out more about God. There's no stability when the troubles start arising – *"when trouble or persecution come"* (*v21*). I've come across many people like that – and there are probably some here this morning. You need to make sure that you put down some roots by reading and studying the Bible, getting involved in the life of the fellowship, asking about things you don't understand, recognising your response needs to turn into responsibility.

3. THE THORNS

Then there's the seed that falls into the ground and takes root, but as it grows, all the other stuff in the ground – the weeds and thistles and thorns – take the nutrients out of the soil, shade out the light and basically cause the seed to wither and die. They choke off the life before it can fully develop. So the third group of people are those whose Christian life is wrecked by other preoccupations. Unnecessary worries, personal gain, shallow experiences of pleasure all begin to crowd out God's word. Ambition about your job, a bigger mortgage, too many other commitments, too much television – all kinds of things conspire to deprive you of your zeal for God. It's interesting that Jesus talks here about *"the deceitfulness of wealth"* – a message that was tailor-made for us in this part of the world. Of course, it's not your fault necessarily; things just pile up and there doesn't seem to be any way out.

For some people it is perhaps a lackadaisical approach to the Christian life, to walking in the way of the Holy Spirit. But you'd never dream of behaving in that way at work or college because there are other things at stake, there's money or qualifications involved, because they're somehow more immediate, more tangible than eternal life. Those who look upon the sermon as an opportunity to catch up with their reading or sorting out the details of the coming week or allowing their resentments and complaints to simmer and fester; those who cannot afford any time to read a part of the Bible each day – these are the people who don't set any store by God's word or recognise its infinite importance. God gets elbowed out and spiritual growth stops pretty abruptly – although it seems to us to fade out rather gradually.

4. <u>THE GOOD SOIL</u>

Finally, there are those who do accept God's word and grow in it because they are eager to learn and not only to **hear** the word (as we've said, they all hear it), but also retain it and persevere in it. In their lives you can see the fruit starting to develop and through their lives others are brought closer to understanding what Jesus is all about. Get to grips with what God is saying to you and stick with it.

Jesus finished the parable (before he went on to explain it) with the little expression, *"He who has ears, let him hear"* – words that are only spoken by him in the New Testament, and perhaps most memorably at the end of each of the letters to the seven churches in the early chapters of *Revelation*. In his paraphrase, *The Message*, Eugene Peterson translates the words as, *"Are you listening to this? Really listening?"* And Charles Moule, in one of his commentaries has it as, *"Now think that one out for yourself, if you can."* As I said earlier, this is not just about response, but about responsibility.

The sower is the one who scatters the seed, the one who *"sows the word"*. Jesus doesn't say whom exactly he has in mind but, mindful of what we said about not reading too much into the story, it seems legitimate to assume that this is the evangelist or the preacher – the one who communicates what he or she thinks is God's message. So long as he or she does that, his or her responsibility is fulfilled. OK, let's personalise it: I preach what I believe God has told me to say on a particular occasion – this morning, for example. You hear it. I say the words, but you all hear them in different ways (I don't want to go into all the stuff about communication theory or "audience criticism" this morning – I get enough criticism from some bits of the audience anyway!). You hear God's word. And you respond to it.

Each response is different, too, because you each have different personalities, because the Holy Spirit applies it in different ways, because you have different attitudes to God and his word. One response is to ignore it – and no doubt some of you do. But if you don't ignore it, you have a responsibility to do something about it. I cannot make you grow as a Christian – that's up to you and the way you act on

what you've heard. I suspect that many of you have forgotten most of it by the time you get to coffee after the service. Let me quote again from Charles Moule:

> *"Words may be sound and lively enough, but it is up to each hearer to let them sink in and become fruitful. If he only hears without responding – without doing something about it and committing himself to their meaning – then the words are in danger of getting lost, or of never coming to anything. The whole story thus becomes a parable about the learner's responsibility, and about the importance of learning with one's whole will and obedience, and not merely with one's head."*

Above my desk in the study at home I have a little poster which I made to try and help me focus on ensuring that what's said here week by week has some kind of relevance. All it has on in it large letters are the two words, *"So what?"* We all ought to ask that question when we have heard God's word, either read or preached – *"So what?"* What am I going to do about this? How am I going to respond? What is my responsibility now in the light of these words? You see, no-one else can make you grow as a Christian: no-one else can really ensure that you develop into the person God wants you to be: no-one else can respond on your behalf.

Are you simply going to ignore it, reject it? Are you going to say "Mmm, that's good, I'll do something about that", and then go no further because it's too much hassle even to think about the consequences and by the time you've had coffee after the service and filled your head with chit-chat you've pretty well forgotten what it was you were going to do? Are you going to commit yourself to do something about it until you get to work tomorrow and find that it doesn't quite fit in with your programme this week and it might lead to a bit of inconvenience for you? Are you going to let God's word to you sink into your mind and meditate on it, considering what you need to **do** to act on it – and then get on and do it?

I've sown the word this morning – or maybe the seed has dropped into your consciousness from the words of a song or directly through the reading of God's word. It's up to you to respond, to take responsibility for your own personal spiritual growth. I ought to just walk off here now and go, leave you to it. (I'm not going to do that for a number of reasons, some of which may even be valid!) If we hope to grow as a congregation – grow in the sense of becoming more mature and closer to God, rather than just growing numerically – then we all need to take God's word seriously. Don't just hear it and then forget it. Think about it. Talk about it over coffee. Discuss it with your friends. Go to a home group and explore it further. **Do** something about it! *"Hear the Word, embrace it, and produce a harvest beyond your wildest dreams."*

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For many people, the parables of Jesus are the best-known bits of his teaching, and words and phrases from them have passed into our language and culture in all kinds of areas. There are examples in the Old Testament and in other ancient literature (Aesop's Fables, for example), but in terms of the recorded teaching of Jesus, parables make up about a third of what he has to say, so they are obviously very important to him.

Parables are not **allegories** (in which every detail of the story needs to be interpreted because it represents something important). And Jesus doesn't use these stories to illustrate another point he's making. A parable is a self-contained section of teaching: it stands on its own and normally Jesus wouldn't even explain it. Jesus' reason – a reason that the whole of this parable is teaching – is that parables are usually only for those who are really serious about learning from Jesus.

So what's the point of this parable then? There's no sub-plot here, no secondary thread which runs through it – just the one point. We don't know who the Sower is, but, as we've said already, the seed is *"the message"* or *"the word"* and the various types of ground onto which it falls represent various types of people – or rather the responses of various types of people.

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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What's your favourite parable? Why?

2. How do you understand *v14*?

3. How does *"the evil one come and snatch away what was sown"* (*v15*)?

4. Why do you think Jesus speaks of *"the **deceitfulness** of wealth"* (*v22*)?

5. Describe some of the things you find are apt to *"choke"* your Christian growth.

6. What does Jesus mean when he talks about *"producing a crop – thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown"* (*v23*)?

7. How can we effectively take responsibility for our own Christian growth?

8. What have you learned from this passage?