

Jesus' Parables, 8th July 2018 – The Parable of the Sower BCP

Read Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

So we come today to one of most famous of all Jesus' parables. Like all of Jesus' best parables, it's so simple yet so profound, there's one central point but so many layers of meaning, so much to reflect on.

In a week of news about possible hosepipe bans it's good to be reflecting on a story about the soil – we can see all around us what happens to the earth in particular conditions – only in this story **Jesus is talking about the soil of our hearts. And the simple question is: what sort of soil is your heart?**

And so the farmer scatters his seed into four types of soil. The seed, as Jesus says, is his message, the message of his kingdom – and like all seed, if it lands in good soil, it is inherently fruitful. If you happen to live near a wheat field it's amazing to watch over the spring and summer just how one grain grows to become a whole ear of wheat. God's message is like that too, it has a power of its own – but there are other factors too, and it is these Jesus gets us to reflect on.

So we have the 4 soils, don't we – which I've loosely titled: Close Up, Give Up, Dry Up, Grow Up! And they reflect 4 stages, don't they – both on terms of warmth of response but perhaps also roughly in time: from the point where we first hear about Jesus and think 'well that's not for me' to a place where some of us get to – a mature, deep faith which lasts for our whole lives.

'Close Up' is the soil on the path – people who hear the message and it simply doesn't sink into the ground. They either reject it or ignore it or park it for later. It's worth mentioning that whenever Jesus uses words like understand he doesn't just mean 'head' knowledge, he means *heart knowledge, people who understand the consequences of what they've heard*. The message is quite simple, the consequences are challenging!

So that's the first soil and note that it's the only one that rejects the message – all the others respond positively. And that's broadly true in what I find today – people might have issues with the church or with Christian lifestyle, but very few don't like Jesus himself. The message of his kingdom, of God's love available to all, is pretty appealing even in 21st century Britain.

But there are still challenges in store:

Give Up refers to the 2nd soil, the shallow soil. People who decide to follow Jesus and make a good start, but they don't put down roots. When they realise that a life of faith is challenging – and here Jesus refers to both internal and external challenges: the very obvious challenge of facing persecution for what you believe (or perhaps in UK ridicule or opposition), but also other troubles – when prayers aren't answered as you hope, or you find it hard to kick a habit, or you fall out with another Christian and realise that any form of community is tricky – the seed withers and dies. In short there's no root.

70% of Christian teens aren't active in faith by the age of 30. There are 3 huge life hurdles to overcome early in life – being a teenager, then the transition to student life and greater freedom, then the transition to work and keeping faith alive when much of your time is required for something else. If you don't have roots, the seed withers.

Then we get to the 3rd seed – **Dry Up**. This is where most of us face the biggest challenge of all – a busy life! I guess we all have our weeds and thorns, the things which consume our time and choke our faith. We have to learn how to cultivate thriving faith which brings our faith into all these areas.

Often the issue here for most of us is that we only relate faith to bits of our life – to the hour we spend in church on Sunday, to this part or to that part. God gets Sunday but he doesn't get Monday to Saturday. We don't let God take charge of our money, or our work, or our family or whatever it is.

But when the seed covers every part of the soil, the weeds can't grow. Weeds grow in the gaps, and as you all know, weeds self-seed very easily.

We need regular pruning in our spiritual lives and maybe occasional bouts of weedkiller – determined action to make sure a particular weed doesn't get a grip on our lives.

If any of you have been following our work in the churchyard, you'll know we're finally clearing areas at the back which have been derelict for years. Think of the brambles at the very back – people have kindly chopped them down on and off for years, and they always grow back. This winter a few people decided not only to chop them back but dig out the roots and rotate the soil, planting new seed. It took 5 times as long as just chopping, but most of the weeds have gone.

That kind of work might describe the concentrated attempt we occasionally need in our spiritual lives, where we invest a lot of time and energy finally to clear ground in the soil of our hearts for God. Might that be **true for some of us today?**

Life has faith killers – we've talked about troubles and about faith-choking thorns as the key ones which Jesus describes. But there are also **faith fillers**:

Roots which go deep – a life soaked in Scripture and prayer, in meaningful connection with a Christian community – so we never face trouble alone. God and other Christians are right there with us.

There's the weeding and weedkilling I've just described. This year we've run a Week of Guided Prayer, there are the compass courses, we have prayer after the 9.30 service, we have midweek groups, there are all kinds of books and exercises designed to help us get on top of our weeds.

And finally we come to the good soil – soil which doesn't close up, give up or dry up – but where **we grow up**. We grow into the mature followers of Jesus God longs for us to be.

As I said at the start, good soil is inherently fruitful. As Jesus says, good soil produces 30, 60 or 100 times what's planted. And we all know people like that, whose lives just make the world a better place.

But like any good soil, our hearts need that cultivation. Soil which enables roots to grow, weeds to be cut down, soil which is constantly fertilised by God's love.

The farmer sows the word. How's our soil today?