

Sunday 2nd August – Matthew 13:1-9,18-23: The Parable of the Sower ‘Looking after our hearts’

One of our regular walks over the last few months takes us down through the fields south of Wavendon, over the railway line and then through a large wheat field. Over the course of the spring and summer we’ve seen the whole cycle of the wheat growing: from bare earth in early March, to shoots in April, stalks in May, green ears in June and now at the beginning of August, golden brown ears all but ready to be harvested. This week as we walked round it, we debated among ourselves how many thousands of loaves of bread could be made from this one field.

We may grow our wheat in very different ways to ancient societies, farming huge areas with all kinds of exotic pesticides. The farmer in our story today would likely have owned a small plot of just an acre or two and would have scattered the seed by hand.

Nevertheless, it’s also true that the basic ingredients we need for wheat to grow haven’t changed in thousands of years. All we really need are: seeds, soil, sun and water. Now, in our story Jesus doesn’t mention the sun and the rain, instead he simplifies things to the main two ingredients. The story is all about the interaction between **the seed of God’s word, and the soil of our hearts**.

And the point behind this story is that the seed is innately fruitful. Just as today, a well-grown seed will produce an ear of about 30 grains, so Jesus indicates that seeds in his time were similarly rich in potential. *All the seed – all the word – needs is good soil to grow in.*

And that’s a wonderful encouragement to start with. As the old proverb says, ‘Guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.’ As long as we keep our hearts in good condition, the seed of God’s word has everything it needs within itself to grow and be fruitful in our lives. We don’t need techniques or qualifications, we just need to look after our hearts.

But, as this famous story reminds us, that isn’t always as straightforward as it appears. Jesus warns us of three dangers, three things that block the power of God’s word in our lives. The first is **hard soil**. We’ve all seen what a period of prolonged dry weather does to the ground this spring. It gets hard and cracked, anything that falls on it just sits on the surface for birds or rodents to eat.

Our hearts can be hard, too. Sometimes we don’t want to hear what God thinks about something, so we harden our hearts – note that we still use the phrase ‘hard-hearted’ in our contemporary culture. The life-giving word of God’s love doesn’t sink into our hearts and gets lost. To grow as followers of Jesus, we need to keep our hearts soft to his word – even the challenging words we don’t want to hear.

Then there’s the problem of **shallow soil**. Shallow soil means that roots can’t grow properly. Did you notice in our video just now how the seed sprouted roots *first*, before the shoot started growing upwards? Without roots, plants don’t last long, they just flourish for a time and then wither. Jesus says that’s true of the spiritual life too. We need to put down roots in God, and to make that our first priority, as it’s the roots which will sustain our spiritual lives in the long-term.

There's an interesting side-note here in that the implication is that it's not the visible stuff that determines how likely to you are to grow as a Christian – the true test of the spiritual life is not what others can see. It's your inner life, your daily roots in prayer, worship and study, the stuff below the surface that others don't see which matters most. Don't get me wrong, we need to be connected to a Christian community, we need the support of others around us to keep us going. We need purposeful ways to serve, too. And that is all good. But enthusiasm is no substitute for depth. The plant's health is determined by what's below the surface.

The final challenge is **the other stuff that grows in our soil.** Nowadays we sort that out with pesticides and weed-killer, but back then the quality of the final crop relied on the hard labour of pulling the weeds out. And the two weeds Jesus talks about in our hearts are worries and wealth. These are universal concerns. We all face worries, just as we all need to put food on the table. But they both act like weeds in our hearts, choking our spiritual lives. If we let worries take root deep in our hearts, it can take our eyes off God, we're always looking down and not up.

Likewise, money lies to us, because it promises things it can't deliver. It whispers that we'll be secure, but it's only temporary. It tells us we'll be happy, but you only have to see the broken lives of the wealthy splashed across the pages of our newspapers to know that isn't true either.

The only solution to weeds is to pull them up. Gives them back to God. Let God the farmer uproot them from your lives, and your soil will recover. Because that's the beauty of soil. One way or another, it usually recovers. And when the seed is given time to grow in good soil – look at the result!

The parable of the sower is one of those lovely stories we keep coming back to, because its timeless truths never fail to speak to us. **God's word longs to go deep in the soil of our hearts.** Let's resolve again today to keep looking after that soil: that our lives may flourish, filled with the love and power of God. 'Above all guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.' Amen.

As we respond to God's word to our hearts today, Philip will play 'Father hear the prayer we offer' – let's sing or pray as the Lord speaks to us.