

# The Parable of the Sower

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> July 2020 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Reading: **Matthew 13:1-23** (set for Lectionary Year A Proper 10)

## Introduction

Can you think of a person you have known well who you could always rely on to listen to you and remember what you had said – and maybe even act on it? A member of your family, a friend, a colleague at work?

Now think about someone else you have known well who would be likely to forget what you said, or never even paid attention, and certainly not act on it.

Or let's put it the other way round. Who do you pay attention to? Whose opinion or advice do you value and follow?



Some of you may know my dog Toby. He's a loveable character, very affectionate, and quite inclined to follow you around, especially if you are about to eat. A young man called Ivan, whom we knew in Uganda was in the UK and came to visit us. He was amazed to discover that our dogs knew some of his language, Luganda. Every time we said the word *emere*, the dogs' ears would prick up and they would pay attention. Perhaps you've

guessed that *emere* is the Luganda word for food.

Dogs are supposed to have good hearing. Yet it's amazing how when you are out on a walk and you whistle for Toby, he sometimes doesn't come. Sometimes sniffing another dog, or where another dog has been, seems to affect his hearing.

## Why Jesus taught in parables

Today's Gospel reading begins a chapter full of parables told by Jesus, short stories or illustrations about the Kingdom of God. The lectionary misses out a piece of text that comes between the parable of the Sower and its interpretation. In this middle section, the disciples ask Jesus why he speaks to the crowds in parables, and Jesus gives an answer that has puzzled people down the centuries. It's one of the tricky bits in the gospels, and that's probably why it's been missed out of the lectionary, apart from the desire to keep the reading reasonably short.

It's puzzling because Jesus appears to be saying that he uses parables to make his message harder to understand. And yet if that was the case, why does Jesus bother to teach them at all? Is it just to get a break from the demands of people for healing? Or out of some mischievous desire to seem cleverer than everyone else?

Matthew's version of this conversation is much longer than the equivalent passages in Mark and Luke's gospels, and he quotes a passage from Isaiah which comes just after Isaiah is called by God to be a prophet.

“You will indeed listen, but never understand,  
and you will indeed look, but never perceive.  
For this people's heart has grown dull,  
and their ears are hard of hearing,  
and they have shut their eyes;  
so that they might not look with their eyes,  
and listen with their ears,  
and understand with their heart and turn—  
and I would heal them.”

Isaiah gets a glimpse of how his people seem to God – unwilling to listen, hard of hearing, rather like my dog Toby when he's got something more interesting to pay attention to. And the irony of it is that if only the people would listen to God's voice and turn back to him, he would heal them – he would be able to help them sort out their problems and make a success of their nation.

Elsewhere Jesus tells his disciples not to “cast their pearls before swine<sup>1</sup>”. There's no point in putting making every effort to explain your message clearly if people aren't ready to hear it. It reminds me of the sort of comment that politicians make after an election defeat. They blame themselves for “not getting our message across clearly enough”. What is more likely to be the case is that their message did not appeal to the electorate.

Yet, in spite of the fact that God knows his people are more interested in their own agenda than listening to him, he still calls Isaiah to be his prophet. God doesn't give up on us. He is still in the business of trying to get through to us. In fact, he's so serious about this that he even sent his only Son to become human, Jesus the Word of God, who not only told us what God is like but showed us in practice. God wants to communicate with us. But do we want to listen?

There's a lot more that could be said about Jesus' use of parables, but the one thing I've learned about it is that Jesus, like any good teacher, wants his listeners to do some work themselves. We had one old Geography teacher at school whose main teaching method was to dictate notes for us to write in our notebooks. It was a pretty undemanding exercise, but we never had the excitement of finding anything out for ourselves. Jesus tells a story and then leaves his hearers to think about it, discuss it over a cup of tea or a pint, and ask themselves what it might mean for their lives. And that is why, at the end of telling the parable of the sower, he says “If you've got ears, listen!<sup>2</sup>” Those who are really interested in what he's got to say will pay attention, wrestle with it and come back for more. The rest will be entertained, and then get on with their daily lives. I wonder which category you fall into?

### **The Parable of the Sower**

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 7:6

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 13:9

So let's look at the parable of the sower, and as we do, you will immediately understand the significance of what I've been talking about up to now. Because the parable itself is all about listening – and about what happens if we do, and if we don't.

Unlike many of Jesus' parables, we have here not only the parable but Jesus' explanation to his disciples. The seed, which represents the word of God, falls on 4 types of soil, and in each there is a different result. Jesus is saying that when it comes to listening to God's word you can divide people into 4 types. Now we all know that people are all different, and the way each of us responds to God is unique. But this is a parable, a kind of model that can help us to see issues more clearly. Jesus uses an analogy, an illustration. We mustn't try to push the analogy too far, or like all analogies it will fall down. Perhaps it would be better to talk about 4 types of response to God. Be that as it may, Jesus' point is to invite his listeners, and that means each of us, to see where we are in this story.

### **Four responses to the word of God**

J.C Ryle, the 19<sup>th</sup> Century commentator and the first Bishop of Liverpool, has this to say of the parable:

*The language of the parable requires no explanation. To use the words of an ancient writer, "it needs application, not exposition".<sup>3</sup>*

The first image is the path. These are people who hear the word of God, but it has no impact at all. The seed drops on the path and bounces off. It just lies there, ready for the birds to eat. The path represents the people whose hearts are closed. Ryle thinks of some of those who attended church in his day. "They hear sermons but pay no attention to them... It seems to them a mere matter of words, names and unintelligible talk. It is neither money nor meat nor drink nor clothes nor company... And at the end they go away knowing no more than when they came in."

Have you ever had a conversation with somebody and realised after a while that they had absorbed nothing at all that you had said, because they simply weren't interested?

These are people whose mind is closed as far as God is concerned. What he says really doesn't make any difference to them one way or the other.

Then there is the rocky soil. The young plants look as if they are doing well, but their roots don't go down far enough to reach the moisture they need, and they shrivel up in the hot sun. Jesus is talking about those who are enthusiastic at the start, but their faith is shallow, not properly rooted and grounded, and far too flimsy to cope with things going wrong in their lives, or with being made fun of for being a Christian. There are lots of shallow Christians around today. When trouble strikes – maybe serious illness, or the sudden death of a loved one – they have no spiritual resources to cope. And so all they can do is blame God for allowing them to suffer, and promise never to go to church again. Do we want to be in that position – faced

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<sup>3</sup> From his commentary on Mark chapter 4, where the same parable appears (*Mark: Expository thoughts on the Gospels*, Crossway Books, Wheaton, Illinois, 1993)

with big challenges in life but having so little knowledge of God that we have no way of relating our situation to our faith – up the creek without a paddle? We can take steps to prevent being in that situation – put down spiritual roots through regular prayer, through worship, fellowship with other Christians, bible study and active Christian service.

Perhaps the soil that is most relevant for us today is the third type – the soil full of weeds and thorn bushes that take up all the nutrients that the young plants need to grow and flourish. As Jesus explains, “the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing<sup>4</sup>.”

These are the people who are too pre-occupied with other things, too busy for God. Yes, they have faith, they have good intentions, but somehow spending time in prayer, bible study or worship is just too far down the agenda, and it hardly ever happens. There are so many people with great potential who could grow spiritually and do great things for God, but all their energy is diverted into worrying about their problems, or making money and enhancing their lifestyle. Jesus challenged these attitudes.

Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?<sup>5</sup>

For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?<sup>6</sup>

Our culture tells us that it is good to be busy. In fact, the more value you can squeeze out of each minute, the more successful you will be. We want the best for our children, so we cram their evenings with dance classes, sports practices or music lessons, as well as fitting in homework, and teach them that being busy is more important than sharing a family meal or just having some down time.

And I have to admit that I fall prey to this way of thinking too. Others put demands on us, and we set high expectations for ourselves. But being busy can be another idol that takes the place of God.

When we finally stand before the judgement seat of God, will he want to know how much we achieved in the time available, or will he be more interested in the quality time we spent with him and with those who are precious to us?

### **The better way**

Fortunately, the parable doesn't end there. Some seed falls into good soil, and yields a harvest.

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.<sup>7</sup>

There is a better way. I said earlier that we shouldn't push an analogy too far, or it will fall down. You might think from the parable that the outcome in each case is fixed. You're either one type of soil or another. But that would make nonsense of

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 13:22

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 6:27

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 16:26

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 13:23

one of the main beliefs of Christianity: that we can change. Jesus invites us to examine ourselves to see which of the scenarios in the parable fits us best. But what he wants us to do is to recognise where we might be going wrong and do something about it.

Like all parables, Jesus tells the parable of the sower to stimulate our thinking, and to help us to see clearer what is actually going on in our lives, or in the world. Then, if we are open to him, if we put down some spiritual roots, if we're willing to make time and space for him in our busy lives, we can grow into maturity and bear fruit in lives that display his character and bring blessing to others.

### **Prayer**

Dear Lord, we have ears; help us to listen to you. May we be open to being challenged and changed by your word. May your Holy Spirit open our eyes to see ourselves as you see us, and to believe in our potential to grow and be fruitful in your service. Forgive us for often failing to give you the place you deserve in our lives. Renew our vision, deepen our love and strengthen our faith. In Jesus' name, Amen.