

I acknowledge that it may be dangerous to preach on a parable which is so well-known. But let's try to hear something in this well-known, well-worn story that we haven't heard before.

## CONTEXT

The parable of the sower and the seed is the first of seven parables in Matthew 13 concerning the kingdom of God. Matthew uses and expands on Mark's parable chapter (to compare the two versions of this parable read Mark 4:3-8). The parables in the two gospels are written for very different audiences and provide totally different emphases. Mark's version, written in a time of persecution, focuses on comforting a vulnerable young community. The emphasis is on the miraculous harvest of the seed despite adverse circumstances. Seeds are a good metaphor for encouraging a vulnerable community. They speak of a mysterious reality whose growth occurs without our input or knowledge. Matthew's gospel, written several decades later to an established but divided community, highlights the need for the individual to bear a harvest from the seed that falls on its soil.

## THE PARABLE

This parable is a clear reflection of the context in which Jesus told his parables. He is talking to Galilean farmers who knew the practices and experiences of farming in Galilee. The parable builds on their experiences of regularly sowing a lot of seed and not getting much yield from it. Everyone who has ever worked in the garden knows this experience. It is extremely discouraging to see things come up, only to have them die before maturity. Australian wheat farmers especially know this experience.

Rev Andrew Prior ministers to a small congregation in country South Australia. His congregation are farmers and he describes a heart-felt simile of the parable.

*Like a farmer at the end of a ten-year drought, one could wonder if there is any point in wasting more seed. Think of the farmer who borrows money for the crop, and then the harvest fails. It's a big farm, so the bank will simply apply interest, and lend more for the next season. There is a series of poor years; perhaps a middling year and then another failure. The farmer now owns little of his own farm. If he sells at the bottom of the market he may still have enough to buy a part of a city house in an outer suburb. If he risks another year, and it all fails again, he will be bankrupt. What is the wise thing to do?*

*In hope he sows the crop. He may as well have thrown out the seed by hand, and ploughed with a pointy stick, because mid-winter, the rain stops. In September the paddocks are the heartbreaking grey green of dying wheat. As they leave their whole life behind, heading for an alien town and a rented house which will eat most of the “New Start” allowance, was it worth it? Has twenty-five years running the farm been worth anything, or is it all waste?*

The people of Jesus’ day were no different to us today. Jesus addresses the experience of discouragement in relation to the experience of farmers. Jesus is telling them what they already know and have experienced.

*You know what it’s like sowing seed. A sower went out to sow and some fell on the path and the birds came and ate it....*

Jesus is inviting them (and us) to remember their experience.

And so, the parable relates the story of the sower who went out to sow (it reminds me a bit of the childhood song “One man went to mow...”).

1. some seeds fell on the path – and the birds came and ate them up
2. some seeds fell on rocky ground – and withered away
3. some seeds fell among thorns – and the thorns grew up and choked them
4. other seeds fell on good soil – and brought forth grain.

The contrast is between the three lots of seeds that yield nothing and the harvest of the seeds that do bear fruit. In the Galilean context, the description of the harvest as thirty to a hundredfold would have been an incredible harvest. Most historians believe that a good harvest in first century Galilee would have been of the order of ten, maybe fifteenfold.

That is, for every bushel planted the farmer would reap 10 bushels.

A hundredfold was a harvest beyond all conceivable expectations. This exaggeration is a sign that Jesus is not talking about grain harvests. His parable is a metaphor for the kingdom of God and of the fruit of the kingdom of God.

As with all teaching stories, the options are exclusive. In real life, all of us – at one time or another are all four soils: worn down and down trodden; hard hearted and shallow; thorny and stunted by bad luck and bad influences; but also fertile ground, bringing forth a huge harvest.

David Ewart asks

*have we not all had good news snatched away; had an initial burst of enthusiasm fade at the first sign of trouble; had good news get worn down by unrelenting cares and troubles?*

This parable is first and foremost about how we hear. Jesus says

*...let anyone with ears listen...hear then the parable...*

*...when anyone hears the word of the kingdom of God...*

Matthew McCraw says

*...the condition of the heart also matters as to whether someone will receive the message of the kingdom of God.*

Let's look at it this way

the path	the hardened heart
rocky ground	the distracted heart
thorns	the defeated heart
good soil	the hopeful (and joyful) heart

So, we have

- ears to hear the message
- hearts to respond
- and then we have...the sower

The main character in the parable is, of course, the sower. The sower scatters his seed carelessly, recklessly, seemingly wasting much of the seed on ground that holds little promise for a fruitful harvest. Whereas we try to sow our seeds where we think they have the best chance of survival. Should we be examining where we share the Good News about Jesus. Jesus you will remember spent his time with tax collectors and sinners, with lepers, and all manner of outcasts.

Jennifer Kaalund has this to say,

*...I understand the importance of good seed and good soil. However, what can often be overlooked is the sower. My grandmother had what some call "a green thumb". She knew how to nurture the soil and seed and could in many cases grow plants where they seemed unlikely to thrive. So, an equally important part of the equation is the sower.*

The sower – Jesus, the extravagant sower. Yet he promises that his profligate sowing of the word will produce an abundant harvest. Elisabeth Johnson notes,

*...Jesus' approach to mission 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.*

## THE SECTION WE DID NOT READ

The parable of the sower, in both Matthew and Mark, is followed by a passage (Mt 13:10; Mk 4:10) in which Jesus turns from addressing the crowds to speak to his small group of disciples. He explains to them why he speaks to the crowd in parables.

*The reason I speak to them in parables is that 'seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.' With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says: 'You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive.*

The quotation is from Isaiah 6:9-10, the story of Isaiah's call to ministry. Just after he accepted God's call, Isaiah is told that his ministry will not be well received. Jesus is saying that some will see and hear, but will not, at a deeper level, understand and take his words to heart.

## THE INTERPRETATION

Jesus then offers an allegorical interpretation of the parable which was read to us earlier by Bill.

First of all, let's note the difference between a parable and an allegory  
 parable – a simple story illustrating spiritual or moral teaching; the meaning is not hidden  
 allegory – a story in which events and characters have symbolic meanings (a metaphor)

The story of the sower is a parable. It is the same form as the other parables following in Matthew 13. That means the (uncommon) explanation given for this parable is a later interpretation. The interpretation in verses 18-23 is an allegory. Each aspect of the story is given a corresponding meaning.

- when anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, what is sown in the heart gradually disappears; this is what was sown on the path

- anyone who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, but then loses faith when trouble arises has no depth; this is what was sown on rocky ground.
- anyone who hears the word but allows the cares of the world and the lure of wealth to choke the word; this is what was sown among thorns
- but as for the one who hears the word and understands; this is the who indeed bears fruit.

Andrew Prior suggests

*What the explanation of the parable does in vv 18-23 is make things all too easy, even if it describes what often happens. No doubt there are people who simply do not understand. There are those who seem to rejoice in good news but have no "root," just as there are those who seem to be choked in their faith, by the distractions of life. But this is a clinical description, almost written from a position of comfort, to explain why the message of the kingdom was not heard.*

In the parable, the main character is the sower scattering his seed far and wide .

The interpretation (or the allegory) refers to the seed and soil, and not to the sower.

David Ewart says this about the sower.

*...if we do think about the Sower for a second, we hear a story about extravagant generosity. Extravagant even to the point of being wasteful. Or perhaps, extravagant even to the point of giving seed to all regardless of pre-conditions. You and I might not waste our efforts on the down trodden, the thorny, and the hardened, but God does.*

## SUMMING UP

The story Jesus told appears to be asserting that despite appearances – read, setbacks - God's kingdom will come and surprise us with its overwhelmingly rich harvest. This is all the more dramatic if the practice of the day was to sow on the unkempt fields of dried out weeds and worn paths and then to plough. To the uninformed it must have appeared stupid.

Bill Loader describes two elements associated with this story.

*The first is faith in God, in the promise that the blessing for the poor and broken people will be realised; there will be such a harvest and it will be beyond our expectations.*

*The second is: we hold onto this despite the apparent absurdity of the task and despite the setbacks; this also implies setbacks are normal, as they are in sowing and harvesting. The*

*prospect of suffering is real; the prospect of failure is real. The parable asserts ultimate trust despite the misadventures of so many seeds.*

Remember, the parable says,

*Let anyone with ears listen! ...Hear then the parable of the sower.*

Do we really hear the Word? Do we really look for its meaning for us? Do we allow it to take root in the good soil in our lives - or do we push it all to the edges - or allow it to get choked out by our day-to-day concerns? Parables are more than nice stories, they are told to teach us something.

What sort of hearers are we? What do we hear and understand?

Let me end with these words from Jeff Shrowder (© 2014) which bring us back to the Australian farmer and his necessary, eternal optimism.

Night sky gently raining;  
frail headlights on the tractor  
peering through the dark,  
finding the way for the farmer  
faithfully sowing his crop in the scrawny soil,  
his head and shoulders  
barely protected from the weather  
by a wheat bag cut in the manner  
learned from his father years before.  
Hopeful of eking out another harvest  
every drop of rain and every grain of wheat  
mattered.

Broad bright-sun sky;  
bag of grain hanging from his shoulder  
the farmer dipped his hand deep  
and cast the seed wildly  
even on the most unlikely soil.

Perhaps this year ...

Every drop of love and every grain of grace  
mattered.

AMEN