

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

It had been a long day for Jesus, if Matthew 12 is anything to go by

- An argument with the Pharisees over food
- Confrontation with the Pharisees over healing on the Sabbath
- Crowds coming to be healed and being healed
- Another confrontation over deliverance
- A challenge to Jesus' legitimacy from the Pharisees and the teachers of the law
- A slightly awkward moment with Jesus' family!

Perhaps for Jesus, this was a typical Sabbath day. And the day was wasn't finished. A large crowd gathered, wanting more. Jesus decided to tell a story and we're going to read this as a colourful story

Matthew 13:1-9

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Such large crowds gathered round him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. Then he told them many things in parables, saying: 'A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root.. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop – a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. Whoever has ears, let them hear.'

Matthew 13:18-23

'Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: when anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.'

THE SOWER: So far so good. Nothing unusual about that – the listeners would instantly recognise the scene.

THE PATH: Wait – back up the truck! Seed wasted? Seed was also food, so sowing would normally be done with minimum waste. Seed on the path is a sign that Jesus is 'straying from the script'. Jesus' sowing of the seeds of the Kingdom is an act of rampant generosity. He's not like the Pharisees, who deny hungry people breakfast, sick people healing and possessed people deliverance.

'When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. Jesus later explained to his disciples about those on whom the Kingdom message has no effect. It's more than the listener not being able to understand; it's almost a conscious decision not to allow the gospel to make sense. In the Bible it's called 'hard heartedness'.

Bible Society's 2017 research found that 22% of Kiwis aged 13 or over claimed to be sure there is no God. It's fairly likely that a good proportion of those have at some stage heard some, or all, of the gospel.

But they've resolved not to respond. Jesus knew that would happen, in his day as in ours. Our responsibility as those who proclaim the Good News, is to make sure that the Gospel we speak and live is an invitation to belief, not a barrier to it.

THE ROCKY GROUND: 'Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root.' Again we see how recklessly generous the sower is with the seed. The ground is marginal, but soil is there and the possibility is that some of the seed will take root. The seed finds enough moisture to germinate and enough nutrients to begin to grow, but not enough to nourish it to maturity.

The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. By the time Matthew's Gospel is written and circulating, the church is experiencing the persecution Jesus foretells, and no doubt they're also seeing many 'fall away' because of it. Persecution takes on different and more subtle forms in 21st century Aotearoa New Zealand. It's social rather than physical, but it just as effectively snuffs out budding spiritual life particularly among the young.

Bible Society's 2017 New Zealand research found that 34% of 15-18 year olds identified as Christian, but just 15% of 19-24 year olds did. On the other side of the coin, 31% of 19 to 24 year olds were sure there is no God, compared to 14% of 15 to 18 year olds.

It's exciting to see how secondary school age teenagers are interested in the Gospel, catching something of what God has done and is doing in the world, responding to it and actively engaging with the Bible and Christian life. And all credit to our youth leaders, youth pastors and youth workers! They do an amazing job and we must pray for them.

But when young people leave secondary education and enter tertiary or other training, or the workforce, things happen that too often extinguish their faith. It may be social pressure, exposure to other ways of seeing things, or just a failure to make their faith their own. And it's sad to see. Churches and youth ministries have a window of opportunity during teenage years to build a sense-making, sustainable faith and Christian worldview in the teenagers whom God brings their way and entrusts to their care.

THE THORNS: 'Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants.' Again we see the reckless extravagance of the sower! It seems the thorns were already there in the ground, yet the seed was allowed to fall there also. The thorns overwhelm the seeds, starving them of moisture and nutrient and strangling the life from them.

The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. Jesus' explanation of this part of the parable takes an interesting turn. In the first two soils the seed either doesn't get started or starts but dies. Not so here. The plants appear to survive, albeit stunted and underdeveloped, but they 'yield nothing'. We're used to thinking that this part of the parable, like the first two parts, describes people who have 'fallen away' from things Christian. It could also describe worshipping Christians whose lives are so entangled with the material, social or philosophical trappings of this age that they don't contribute to the growth of the kingdom.

Bible Society's 2017 research also found that 29% of all Kiwis aged 13 or over used to attend church but no longer do so. One in five still identified as Christian, even if they no longer attended church. There are many reasons why people might stop going to church, such as age, ill health, work commitments, spouse, partner, family pressure or a bad experience. There are also, undoubtedly, a good number of former church goers who found the cost of discipleship too high, and found other ways of living more attractive, or perhaps just easier, or more convenient.

THE GOOD SOIL: Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop – a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. Whoever has ears, let them hear.’ Here we see the other side of, or perhaps the reason for, the sower’s extravagance. Even with modern agricultural methods in good growing conditions, one wheat seed produces an average yield of 20 to 30 grains. A yield of 100 is pretty impressive by any standard! Listeners would know that the sowing has been fruitful, in spite of the apparent failures.

But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.’ None of the Gospel writers tell us what type of seed was sown. Success for the sowing is hearing and understanding that leads to fruitfulness; plants that reproduce plants that reproduce plants.

CONCLUSION When we look at the big picture, the sowing of the seeds of the Kingdom of heaven has been remarkably productive! From a small group of faithful followers, serving in submission to Jesus Christ and in the power of God’s Spirit, has come a global Christian population of 2.2 billion, or 31% of the world’s people. In some countries, such as Cuba, the growth of the church runs far ahead of the capacity of Bible mission agencies like Bible Societies to keep up with the demand for Bibles.

In Aotearoa New Zealand we’re not currently seeing that sort of growth. But we can be encouraged nonetheless.

Seventeen percent of kiwis aged 13 or over and 30% of all 15 to 18 year olds attend church monthly or more often. Fourteen percent of all kiwis aged 13 or over read the Bible at least monthly, most of those weekly or daily. It’s easy to focus on decline and miss that the church is still a significant, life-giving, society-transforming presence in Aotearoa New Zealand. But the work of bringing the Kingdom of Heaven to 21st Century Aotearoa New Zealand is in a tough phase.

What lessons does the parable of the sower have for us?

- We must love and nurture those who are ‘fruit bearers’ among us. They may make it look easy, but they need our prayers and encouragement to keep going.
- We can examine ourselves and ask, ‘Are thorns of entanglement with ‘the cares of the world and the lure of wealth’ preventing me from being a fruit bearer for the Kingdom?’ How can we disentangle ourselves, and help each other to do likewise – those alongside us in the church and those we know who, for whatever reason, have left the church?
- We can build up the soil on the rocks of hardship and resistance, by providing a nurturing and discipling environment where people, particularly young people, can develop ‘faith resilience’. Then when they strike the rocks of hardship and resistance they have a faith and a maturity that will enable them to survive and be fruitful.

CHALLENGE – READ THE NEW TESTAMENT. The congregation was handed the Bible Society reading guide with a plan to read the New Testament in 6 months.