

Series: Following Jesus: Studies in Mark's Gospel
Location: St George's Battery Point
Date: 23 January, 2022
Bible readings: Psalm 67, Isaiah 6:1-10, Mark 4:1-34
Preacher: Jeanne Wherrett

Parable of the Soils, or the Parable of the Sower (Mark 4:1-20)

We have one of our grandson's beehives in our backyard. A while ago, I noticed a large thistle growing just in front of it, a very large thistle. It was about as tall as me. It was early in the morning, so there weren't many bees about yet, so I gingerly reached around to pull it out. Of course, being that big, it also had deep roots, so it broke off at about knee height. As soon as I had it in my hand, I thought, "Oh no! A photo of that weed would have made a beautiful sermon illustration." So, I'm sorry, you'll just have to imagine it.

We will be thinking a lot this morning about weeds and what to do with them. Also, rocks, birds and hard ground.

Many of the thoughts that I will share this morning have come from the book, *Parable Church: How the Teachings of Jesus Shape the Culture of Our Faith*, by Mike Burnette. A third of the book is applying the Parable of the Soils to how they "do church", or more accurately how they "be church", and its part in building a "culture of the Kingdom of God" there. I highly recommend it if you would like to explore this topic further. It will be in the church library.

This is the fourth in our series on Mark's gospel with its three main themes of "Who is Jesus?" "What is the Kingdom of God?" and "What does it mean to follow Jesus?" Hopefully, we'll continue to build on our understanding of each of these questions this morning.

So today let's look at

1. Why did Jesus like stories so much?
2. Why parables and what are they?
3. What about our stories; we all have a story?
4. Do we have a story as a church here at St George's?

Who is Jesus? Well, among other things, Jesus was a brilliant storyteller. A large proportion of his teaching was done through stories.

1. Why did Jesus like stories so much? – "Who is Jesus?" A storyteller

Stories can draw people in to understand new concepts in a way that straight teaching cannot. And in an oral culture, his stories would have been memorable and passed down and repeated many times.

Some of Jesus' stories show us the Father Heart of God. A God who longs for us to come home, who longs to restore us, to rebuild our lives, heal our hurts and for us to walk closely with him. They are stories of a new and different kingdom, a kingdom of love, wholeness and restoration. A kingdom where all are welcome. Remember the

story of the two sons. The younger son who came home broken and repentant. The father ran to him and hugged him. But the father also loved the older son whose hard, judgmental heart kept him from responding. And the story of the wedding banquet. All were invited, but many had excuses, so the host sent invitations far and wide. All who would could come. Jesus' stories are (nearly) all about the Kingdom of God.

The Parable of (the Sower, the Seed and) the Soils is one of these kingdom stories. And, as a parable about the kingdom, do we see the Father Heart of God who longs that all people would draw close to him so that he could heal and restore them?

2. Why parables and what are they? – “What is the Kingdom of God?”

Why did Jesus say in our reading this morning, “to those on the outside everything is said in parables ¹² so that, ‘they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!’”?

Mark 4:11b, 12

I have always been puzzled by that. Jesus was quoting Isaiah 6:9-10 in the Old Testament showing that, in teaching in parables he was both fulfilling a prophecy and taking on the same role as Isaiah, who, at that time, was given the task of proclaiming God's truth to confront Israel for their refusal to respond to God's call.

But, those who were looking and longing for God's promised messiah who would come to save them, would get glimpses of a new way, a new understanding of the Kingdom of God that had come near to them in Jesus.

But sometimes even his own disciples didn't understand and they had to ask him. Jesus explained the Parable of the Soils to them, so we can benefit too.

When we read anything in the Bible, we need to understand the original context so that we don't miss things that would have been obvious to the original hearers.



How do we go from a culture where a farmer walked across his field, broadcasting the seed as he went,



to farming practices where huge tracts of land are mapped, ploughed, planted and harvested by drones and computer-controlled tractors, with not a person in sight, and weeds are killed with chemicals?



Perhaps we can relate more to the story from the perspective of the home gardener. Whatever soil we start with, we nourish and improve it over many years with compost, mulch, pulling weeds by hand, removing rocks, building raised beds, watering, and so on. We understand that the quality of our crops depends on the quality of our soil.

Also, companion planting, where different types of plants are grouped together so that they can help each other along, resist disease, and repel or shield each other from attacks by insects, seems to be a beautiful picture of how we, with our different gifts and personalities, can work together and cover for each other's weaknesses.

Now let's think about the Parable of the Soils at the beginning of Mark chapter 4. I had always thought of this as only describing people's initial reaction to hearing about Jesus and his challenge on our life. It is certainly that, but perhaps there is more.

Remember, almost all of Jesus' parables teach us about God's kingdom. So what about this parable about the soils? Is it one where all are invited, but we must choose, like the parable of the wedding banquet? If so, what affects our response?

Let's look at it in more detail. [Mark 4:3] The sower broadcast the seed as widely as possible, liberally and indiscriminately. The seed fell in four quite distinct places.

1. **The path** that was hard, bare, dry, exposed, dented and the birds swooped down to grab the unprotected seed as soon as the farmer had passed by. [Mark 4:4]
2. **Rocky ground** that didn't have much soil between the rocks, where the seed quickly sprouted, the plant grew, but then shrivelled in the hot sun because there was no room for the roots to grow. [Mark 4:5, 6]
3. Then there was the patch of **thorns, weeds and thistles**. The gardeners among us know how quickly the weeds grow up, lush and green and smothering our precious plants. The plants have to put all their strength into just surviving, there was no energy left to set seed. And for us, weeds with thorns and prickles are much harder and more uncomfortable to try to remove; think blackberries. [Mark 4:7]
4. Then there was the **good soil**, rich, fertile, damp, nourishing. The seed sank down into this, sprouted, grew and set lots of seed. Hooray! [Mark 4:8]

But the disciples were confused. They didn't understand. This was too obscure for them. So Jesus had to explain it to them. We may have the opposite problem today, we may be so familiar with the story that it has lost its impact, or we miss possibilities beyond what we have always understood.

What was the difference between the disciples and those on the “outside” (particularly the Pharisees and the other Jewish leaders)? The truth about the Kingdom of God was offered to all, but it was the disciples who kept coming back to ask Jesus more. [Mark 4:10-12] People’s responses to the parables exposed the motives of their hearts.

Jesus explained that the seed that the farmer sowed is the word of God. People are like the different types of soil when they hear the word, they respond differently.

1. The path – Satan snatches away the word that they heard, like the birds swooped down to snatch the seed. [Mark 4:15]
2. The rocky ground – These people receive the word with joy but they don’t last, they fall away when things get hard. They don’t get a chance to put down deep roots. [Mark 4:16, 17]
3. Thorns, weeds and thistles – Worries and other desires choke the word as it tries to grow in people’s lives. [Mark 4:18, 19]
4. But the good soil – People hear the word, accept it with joy, let it take root in their lives, lives that honour God and draw others to him. [Mark 4:20]

How often do we hear the word of God and need to decide how to respond? Can we, like a good gardener, work on the soil so that it will be more receptive next time? If so, how? How do we grow as part of the Kingdom of God – separately and together?

3. What about our stories; we all have a story? – “What does it mean to follow Jesus?”

Where do we see ourselves in this story? What is the condition of our heart? Hard, rocky, choked with weeds? Or is it good soil open to the word of God to grow in us and form us into the people he wants us to be? Maybe there is a bit of each type of soil in all of us. This side of heaven, we are all “works in progress”. So, how can we move from where we are now to where we want to be, good soil where God’s word can grow and we can flourish? Here are a few possibilities to start us thinking.

1. The path – Have we put up a hard barrier so that we don’t let God’s word in? The farmer has two choices in changing the hard path into good, friable soil, he can attack the hard surface of the path with a pick, or he can soak it until it is soft. The second option sounds better to me, especially since water is used in the Bible as a symbol of the Holy Spirit. We can let the blessing of the Holy Spirit soak into us and soften us. Perhaps we can remember a time when we felt especially close to God. Let him do it again.
2. The rocky ground – The roots can’t get down deep, so when things get challenging “because of the word” we give up, perhaps because someone opposes us or ridicules us for being a Christian or the values that we hold. Let’s dig out a rock or two so we can sink our roots deeper into God and his word.
3. Thorns, weeds and thistles – There are three categories of things here that come in and choke the word, so that it can’t produce God’s good fruit in our lives
 - the worries of this life – Parents with young children, those caring for sick or elderly relatives, etc. may feel overwhelmed. Remember this time will pass.

- the deceitfulness of wealth – We are particularly vulnerable to this in Australia today where most of us so wealthy and we don't even realise it. Wanting to continually become more and more wealthy is just part of our culture. And it takes so much of our time and energy. Or, perhaps sometimes it could actually be that God has blessed us with wealth so that we can be a blessing to others.
- the desires for other things – success, reputation, career ...

Is it time to reassess our priorities? Can we see a weed today that is choking us that we need to root out? Or is it a time we need the help of a friend or two?

No experience is ever lost. Weeds are pulled out and put into the compost heap. Then the goodness is fed back into the soil. When things go wrong, or we face hard times, we can grow stronger and closer to God. We can share this when we see others experiencing similar difficulties.

But sometimes experiences are so traumatic or hurtful that we need extra help or ministry to bring us through to a place of wholeness and healing. This is a bit like putting weeds with seeds, invasive roots like twitch and oxalis bulbs, and ivy, in a hot compost pile (or the green bin). Eventually we will be able to use these experiences to help others, although the process that we had to work through may have been very painful.

Also, I pull out thousands of ivy seedlings every year because someone many years ago planted ivy in the area. How we live now can influence generations to come.

Pulling out weeds is something we need to keep at constantly, a little bit every day. But, from time to time it is great to have the help of friends, especially in the spring when the growth becomes overwhelming.

And, perhaps if Jesus were telling this story in Australia today, he might have included possums and wallabies.

So, what about us? Have we confronted hard times, rocks, weeds and thorns? Where have we come from? Will our story help others? Can we see someone who is struggling with what we have struggled with? What helped us? How can we just walk with them? How can we share what we have learned in a way that affirms them and is not judgemental?

4. Do we have a story as a church here at St George's? – more about “What does it mean to follow Jesus?”, plus experiencing and growing the Kingdom of God

What is our story at St George's? How can we join in God's great rescue operation? Where do we fit in God's kingdom purposes? God wants to draw all people to himself. How can we cooperate with him in his mission?

Well, we can't change the seed (God's word). It was fresh and viable and, given half a chance, always germinated. Jesus doesn't tell us who the farmer represents, but in the original story it was most likely Jesus himself. Nowadays we could extend it to anyone who preaches God's word. So, we need to share the good news of the gospel as often

and as widely as possible. But this parable is primarily about the soils, so what else can we do? What is our role? What can we change? Well, we can all be involved in working the soil, preparing hearts to respond to God's word.

What if we see someone come into St George's whose heart is hard, who may have been hurt by the church in the past? How can we love them and help soften this hard ground? Or maybe someone is just lonely, or ill, or doesn't quite fit. An unconditional welcome for those who are different from us is at least part of the answer.

Is someone burdened by "the worries of this life"? Can we help in a practical way?

Also, if we let the Holy Spirit work in our lives and in our worship, newcomers will experience the presence of God and his kingdom and want to know more about Jesus.

At St George's we see the good soil in many ways – we are known as a welcoming church, we care for each other and we try to reach out in ways that will connect.

But how can we care for others more with the ongoing challenges thrown to us all by COVID? How do we maintain and build community in these challenging times?

And how can we acknowledge our particular weaknesses and struggles, and endeavour to root out the thorns, weeds and thistles from our own lives? Can we encourage those we love around us at St George's to do that for themselves too? Living this sort of life as family and community, the life of the Kingdom of God, takes bravery, grace, compassion, sensitivity and resolve.

So, perhaps the challenge that Jesus' Parable of the Soils leaves us with this morning is twofold:

1. "How do we each cultivate the good soil in our own lives?" or more specifically, "Is there one thing today that I feel God is asking me to do or to change?" and
2. "How do we cultivate the good soil as a church, and let God cultivate it within us?"

Now, I have a video clip for us to watch together. It is both a song and a prayer. Feel free to sing along if you know it, or just use it as a time for quiet prayer and reflection.

Lord, let my heart be good soil,
open to the seed of your word.
Lord, let my heart be good soil,
where love can grow and peace is understood.
When my heart is hard, break the stone away.
When my heart is cold, warm it with the day.
When my heart is lost, lead me on your way.
Lord, let my heart, Lord, let my heart, Lord, let my heart be good soil.

Handt Hanson 1985

Video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=47ggpDhylMg>

Picture of sower <http://www.redeemerofisrael.org/2021/02/understanding-parable-of-sower.html>

Picture broad acre farming <https://www.macquarie.com/au/en/perspectives/future-farms-sowing-the-seeds-for-sustainability.html>

Picture gardening / companion planting <https://www.pinterest.com.au/pin/150729918761546678/>

Burnette, M., 2021, *Parable Church: How the Teachings of Jesus Shape the Culture of Our Faith*, Zondervan Michigan