

**Prelude:** A setting of the tune for Psalm 1 by David Peebles of St, Andrews, commissioned in 1562 by the newly reformed Church of Scotland, played on the Laggan organ.

**Words of welcome:** Whether we are pausing to worship God on a Sunday morning or a weekday evening. Or any time in between, we do it because we know that God is great and worthy of our praise. So we sing our first hymn, the old classic,

**Hymn:** Awake, my soul, and with the sun

**Prayer:**

Lord God, we turn to you in worship and love; we turn to you in dedication; we turn to you, who are our Father and our Lord and our Saviour. As we begin each new day, we pray that you will help us make it a day of praise and prayer, of learning from and following in the footsteps of Jesus. As we think on you, your holiness and love, your strength, and your mystery, we know that we can do no better than to live our lives in your service, showing your love and speaking your praise. Give us the grace to follow through with our intention and be the children that you made and call us to be.

Forgive us when we fail in our intention. Forgive us when we let you down and hurt others and disappoint ourselves. And teach us to learn gentleness and forgiveness from you.

So hear us now as we pray as Jesus taught us, saying:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.

Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread,

and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For Thine is the kingdom the power and the glory for ever, Amen.

**Reading:** Mark 4:1-9

Perhaps with the exception of the story of the Prodigal Son, this must be about the best known of Jesus' parables. We know it well. We have thought about it in Sunday School, and maybe constructed models of the different types of soil; we have heard sermons preached on it. We have sung songs based around it and we have prayed that we might be like that good soil. Because we know what it is talking about.

But for a moment, try to think what it would be like to hear this little illustration for the first time, and without the interpretation which Jesus later gives his disciples. That was what it was like for Jesus' hearers.

There are a lot of hearers, crushing onto the beach, so that the boat which Jesus has previously had ready just in case is needed in earnest now, and he gets into his floating pulpit, aware that his voice will carry well across the water. And what is remembered of that day is this story, which has nothing to do with the location, with the water or with boats. Hearing it like that, what would you think?

We know that people found it puzzling – after all the disciples later asked Jesus to explain it to them. For those who lived from the land, not the water, it was just a description of what happened every day: the sowing, the seed falling in various places, but mainly in the prepared seed-bed, and the growth or lack of it to harvest or to waste. But Jesus obviously meant more than that, so what did he mean?

Was the seed talking about charity for the hungry and destitute? It could have been.

Was the sower the person of good intent and principle? It might be.

Were the birds on the path the Romans who took all that they could get their hands on? That would make it a political story.

Jesus told this story, as he told his other stories, and left people to think about it and draw their own conclusions, just the way that he gave his other teaching and worked his deeds of powerful love and left it to those around to work out for themselves what was going on. It's part of what made him revolutionary and exciting. Maybe it is time that we in the twenty-first century church remembered that and did the same, not over-explaining, or demanding a standardised response to Jesus. Just putting him out there and seeing what will happen.

**Hymn:** In our lives plant seeds of hope

**Reading:** Mark 4:10-20

Jesus left the crowd to puzzle over his story and draw their own conclusions. Maybe when they next went out to plant seed they would remember his words and think about them again. Maybe each sowing and harvest they would delve a little deeper into what he might have meant. When the disciples ask about the meaning he quotes a very enigmatic passage from Isaiah, about how the meaning of God's word is veiled.

A bit of mystery is good for us. If we think we understand everything, then we can also think that we have nothing left to learn and turn away in boredom: how often have we seen that happen with young people who have been exposed to Bible stories in Sunday School, but who have never been exposed to some of the mysteries of the faith. They reach their teenage years, and thinking that the stories is all there is, and perhaps associating these stories with the fairy tales that were also part of their childhood, they put such "childish" things away, never knowing that they have thrown out the baby with the bathwater. A bit of mystery, of knowing that there is more yet to discover, is part of the kingdom of God.

So the crowd were left to the mystery of discovery. The disciples, though have the benefit of having Jesus around when the crowd is not there, and, like many of us, mystery was not what they wanted, but some facts. Jesus doesn't offer to explain to them, but when they ask him, he tells them what he had in mind with the little story.

He tells them what we know about the different types of soil being like different types of listener. In doing that he admits that he knows that not everyone who crowds round to see and hear him on beaches or hillsides will understand or become true followers. But some, many, will. And of course the disciples, who now know what to be looking for in others, also know what to be looking for in themselves: they are to be like the good soil. And ever since Mark and the other Gospel writers recorded the meaning of the story we have known that too: we may expect to find different reactions to God's word in the people around us, but we are to be like good soil.

So be careful how you listen, and what you do with what you hear. There are some Christians who can never get enough of Bible teaching, and seek to learn more and more about what is meant by each page and book and passage of the Bible: but forget that the purpose of the Bible is to lead us into God's way of living; into living close to God as his children. Knowledge *about* is not what is most important. I wonder if Jesus was sorry to have to interpret this parable for the twelve. Maybe he repressed a sigh and was concerned that they were giving into the quest for knowledge for its own sake, or that they were already concerned to formulate a correct orthodoxy.

**Reading:** Psalm 119:9-18

Taking Jesus explanation of the parable (he gave it to us so we really should!), the soil is our souls and our selves and the seed is the word of God. And that seed needs to be sown; since it is a given in agriculture that seed that remains in the bag cannot produce a harvest. It can't grow if it is not sown. And the parable also reminds us that it will not grow well and to best effect if the soil is not prepared for it, if God's word is not welcomed when it is sown.

Psalm 119, the longest chapter in the Bible by quite a way, is all about the value and wonder of God's word. It is the outpouring of someone who loves God's word, who reads it and memorises it and thinks about it and puts it into practice, does what it says. Just the short section we read today talks about treasuring God's word and delighting in it, meditating on it and declaring it aloud. And the Psalmist asks that God show him yet more wonders from the scriptures which he already knows well and carries in his heart.

Because of its length, and because its poetic structure makes this quite a repetitive Psalm, it possibly more known about – as the longest – than read for itself. Which would be a shame, because the example of this Psalm and its writer are really valuable. The example of each one of us taking God's word, the seed that produces the fruit, to heart.

I love that the Psalmist is not asking anyone but God to speak to him through his word. He does not invoke other teachers, and say "This is what I have heard." And I wonder, maybe we are too used to having everything explained to us and preached to us and spoon fed to us, and maybe too many of us don't feel able or equipped to think for ourselves about the Scriptures we read, and learn directly from them. The Psalmist prays "Open my eyes so that I may behold wondrous things out of your law." I am sure that God will honour such a prayer.

In church we tend to hear the theologian's explanation always: because that is how people like me are trained. And I am equipped to tell you how this or that part of Scripture fits with the rest and what the message is, and has been down the centuries of the church. But what about the horticulturalist, might she not have a view on this parable of Jesus?

What about the sociologist?

What about the educator?

What about the artist?

What about the scientist?

What about the child?

What about the older person?

What about your own ideas?

Perhaps we are too afraid of getting it wrong to draw our own conclusions and act on them. As the church, as this church and this denomination moves forward in this twenty-first century, I think we will move better and act better and bear better fruit if we listen to a far wider range of voices; as people listen to God, read and meditate on his word for themselves. If you do that, one of the voices leading us forward could well be yours.

**Hymn:** Thanks to God whose word was spoken

We heard this week that our Czech friends in Libis and Kostalek, who have been able to meet as usual for the past 5 months, have now had to close their church and stay home again in the next stage of Czech restrictions to curb the spread of the virus. Some of them may be worshipping with us by using this service, and if so we would like them to know that they are in our prayers.

And talking about prayer, this Wednesday it is Kingussie's turn for the 2.30 service.

**Prayer:**

Lord God, as we turn to you in prayer, we thank you above all that we can do this. We can come to you, to Almighty God, whenever and wherever we need to, and you will allow us to come into your holy presence and welcome us at the foot of your throne.

We praise you that in Jesus all other intermediaries between you and your creation have been done away with, and that we can speak to each other face to face. May we never take such an honour for granted, and may we never despise such a gift by refusing to use it. Keep us faithful in our prayers and thoughtful in our reading of Scripture. And by your Holy Spirit, show us that even when we are not able to meet, yet you can speak to us, and show us yourself.

We pray today for those who are feeling the effects of the current restrictions the most. We pray for ourselves and for our friends in Libis and Kostalek and ask that you keep them safe and help them to find ways of reaching out with your love that they might never have seen in more normal times.

We pray for those who are missing family members and long to see them and cannot plan for when that will happen. Hold our families close together in your love.

We pray for those who see business and livelihood slipping away. Provide for them in terms of physical and emotional needs, and may they find hope.

We pray for those who are ill in this country and beyond, asking for healing, especially for those we know who have Covid, and those we know who have other illnesses made more difficult to manage by the current circumstances. May we learn to depend wholly on you, and discover that when we do that, you will not disappoint us.

We bring you all those who must make decisions in government, asking for wisdom and generosity to mark these decisions.

And we pray that as we go through these days, we will take time to think and listen and hear you speak to us the words we need to hear. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

Before we close our service I want to pass on thanks to you from Inverness Foodstuffs, which was where we sent out harvest offerings. Their treasurer tells me that from these congregations, once gift aid is added, they have received £1482.50. Since the need is not going to lessen any time soon, they are very grateful to you.

**Hymn:** Spirit of God unseen as the wind

**Benediction:**

Seeking and loving God with your heart, soul, mind and strength  
Grow into the likeness of Jesus.  
And the blessing of God Almighty,  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit  
Be with you now and always, Amen.

**Postlude:** "Verset" by Lefébure-Wély played by John Crombie