

# St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

## Parables

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Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> March 2012

*Isaiah 55:6-11*

*Mark 4:1-34*

Jesus taught in parables. We know that. It is a given. He also taught directly in unambiguous words. But today we are thinking about his parables. When he taught in parables, what was he trying to convey? And why would he use this way of teaching so frequently? And does it matter?

The parable we have just read is one of the best-known of all Jesus' stories. It is also the only one where he gives a detailed explanation of the various elements in the narrative. We know it as the parable of the sower, which is interesting, since Jesus' interpretation focuses more on the seed and the soil than on the sower.

In all of Jesus' parables he is seeking to explain things about the Kingdom of God. This parable of the soils might be telling us that there is nothing automatic about God's Kingdom. The life and activity and future of the kingdom and its citizens is not a matter of fate and predetermination. In the kingdom of God we are asked to play our part, to listen well and bear fruit. If we choose not to, then it is not a matter of "What's for you will no go past you."

The parable of the soils tells us that the message, the invitation of the kingdom is heard in different ways. We saw that two weeks ago, when we saw the scribes accuse Jesus of acting by the power of evil. Not everyone wanted to understand what was going on with Jesus. This is definitely still true. There are still many people who don't want to have to think about what Jesus claims and what he stands for. This may perplex us - how can so-and-so (who may be someone very close to us) not *see* that this is good and true and worthwhile? But we should not forget that we too pose a conundrum to others, who ask of us - How do they know? How can they seem so sure?

We live in a time when we are encouraged to accept other viewpoints as just as valid as our own. No one, we are told, has a monopoly of truth. And that is a true statement. But this parable does not talk about our points of views. Jesus is not interested in what we think, but in how we hear, or listen, and what we do as a result. He clearly tells us that there is one way of hearing, one response to his teaching which is best, and that best way of hearing is proved by its results. So if you say that you believe, but do not produce fruit, what's the point?

A good gardener's results show the point in hoicking out the stones and keeping up with the weeding, and not wasting seed on the paths; in the same way the results of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control in our lives should show to others that it is worth putting some effort into our listening. It is worth listening and allowing

what we hear to change our lives.

That is what the parable of the soils tells us about ourselves. But what if you turn it around and think of the parable in the way that we usually name it: the parable of the Sower? When we think about it in this way it tells us something important about God. God, says the parable, is profligate with the good news, profligate with his love. He doesn't hoard it, or even test the soil (the hearers) to see if it is worth planting there - if they are worthy to hear. He says "The word that I speak will not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it." (Isaiah 55:11) That is what the parable of the *sower* teaches us: all about God's generous and trusting and unearned love.

What Jesus teaches in this parable is about the endlessly generous love of God and about our response, actual and ideal. What he is teaching is praise for God's giving, for the good news, and an encouragement to action. What he is giving is a blessing and a warning. This parable which we know so well is a good way of conveying a wide and multi-layered message.

### ***Read Mark 4:21-34***

These are some other parables which Jesus told. It seems he was always at it. But why? Why would he do that? He told the disciples, in a quotation from Isaiah, that it was so "That they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand, so that they may not turn again and be forgiven."

What? Did Jesus really tell parables so that people would not understand and not be able to respond to God? It doesn't seem very likely. If that was his aim, why teach at all? Why not keep his thoughts, his truth to himself? I do wonder what tone of voice he said these things to his disciples? We will never know if it was in deadly earnest or with a wry smile. I think myself that he told his parables, so that they would be remembered, and so that his teaching would go on and on long after his words were uttered.

When I was living in America, I heard it said that the policy of Macdonalds restaurant chain was that everyone living in urban areas should be reminded of them at least thirty times a day. There would be advertisements on television, and on roadside hoardings. Each restaurant had enormous iconic golden arches on immensely high poles, so that they could be seen from far away. And these restaurants were almost scientifically spaced out around the city, every so many hundred yards. Their campaign was clever and unavoidable. One friend of mine, who had small children, managed, at least while they were tiny, to get them to associate the arches with a playground - which each restaurant had, in an effort to prevent them from thinking of greasy, unhealthy food all the time. She felt she had to do something, because ignoring Macdonalds was not an option: they had seen to that.

Avoiding thinking about Jesus' parables was not an option either. Jesus told stories or used metaphors which were so rooted in everyday life, that every day people would see things which would remind them of what he had said. Jesus told parables so that people would think. A parable is not an allegory, with one item in the story or image standing for one definite thing in what we call real life. Even in the case of the parable of the sower, where we are given a kind of de codification, we are able, as we have seen, to look at the story from the hearer's point of view, making it the parable of the soils. Or we can look at it from the sower's point of view, or even, if you want to, from the point of view of the seed!

A parable is a story or a metaphor which can be mulled over again and again and teach different lessons. None of Jesus' parables are long: even the Good Samaritan takes only a few verses in your Bible. All Jesus' parables are about normal people or situations: normal to Jesus' audience, anyway, which made them easy to remember and, like the carefully positioned Macdonalds adverts, ensured that there were regular reminders of them built into life.

Jesus told parables about the light that nightly brought illumination into the home; about seeds growing, and the wonder and mystery of plant-life coming from the burial of something so small; about a specific seed, the mustard seed, which was used in foods and grown every day. We are told that he spoke many such parables to them. Jesus used visual speech, so that he would get over, not a fixed and static message, but a living and growing understanding of the all-pervasive and ever-changing manifestation of God's kingdom as it is lived out by Jesus and his followers.

Most of us are visual people. It is a very rare person who will remember abstract teaching better than a metaphor or a story. Jesus was a very clever, approachable, down-to-earth teacher, and just like the seed sown in the ground, he wanted his teaching to go on growing, bearing fruit, deepening and strengthening in us, until we are transformed and able to offer a refuge and rest to others. He wanted his teaching to shine light into the dark corners of life, and not be obscured by words over which scholars could wrangle.

Today we are placing the symbol of nails on our Lent cross of symbols. In the context of the parables we have read today, these can stand for the generosity of God. He is the sower who broadcasts his seed. He is the Father whose love for his creation is so great that he would send even his own Son, knowing that his teaching would be misunderstood and rejected, because its elastic nature did not accord with the spirit of his or indeed our own age. He sent him knowing that he would end up held to the cross by nails - but also by the love of God for us, and the love he himself had for God and his ways, and for us as his brothers and sisters. The nails stand for themselves, but also they are a parable, a metaphor, even a story about God's love, and any time we use a nail, or see a nail, we can let the parable of the nails teach us more about God's love.

Amen