

The revolution takes root—Matthew 13:1-23

Theme: In his most familiar parable, Jesus explains how we can learn and live the life of discipleship to which he calls each of us

The parables are not sweet little earthly stories with heavenly meanings. They are dynamite, blowing us out of our complacency—if we have the ears to hear them.

Jesus' most famous parable retells the history of his first hearers in a bid to shake them out of their spiritual torpor. If they have ears to hear, they will hang around—like the disciples—to find out more.

Questions:

1. Which is your favourite parable? Why?
2. What is a parable? Can we think of examples of biblical parables not in the gospels?
3. Why do we think Jesus spoke in parables?
4. What does Jesus' use of Isaiah 6:9-10 tell us about parables? How do we feel about that?
5. How would we explain the parable of the sower to someone who'd never heard it before?
6. In what ways do we think the parable retells the history of Israel? [you might find it helpful to read point 1 on p2]
7. How does Isaiah 55:10-13 help us understand the parable of the sower?
8. In what ways might Jesus be both the sower and the seed?
9. How do we learn about the Christian faith? How does it compare with what Jesus says in Matthew 13:11-17?
10. What do we think the secrets of the Kingdom of God are? How did we learn them?
11. Where do we see the Kingdom of God at work around us?
12. Which is the most important element in the parable—the sower, the seed or the soil? Why?
13. How do we ensure that we are good soil? How can we help one another to be receptive to God's word?

Your stories:

Potted summary

While the sower and the seed remain constant in Jesus' most famous story, the soils change. Three of them do not provide the environment needed to produce a harvest. One does. Are we going to hang around to find out what this has to do with us or will we drift off, hardened in our indifference because what we've heard just leaves us feeling baffled? Jesus wants to tell us the secret of the Kingdom but we've got to ask him about it. More over the page....

What the passage is about....

This is Jesus' most famous parable. We know it so well that we don't really hear it. It tells the story of the Kingdom of God (13:11, 19), who's in, who's out and how you can tell? It's a story that draws us in and demands a response. Are we listening?

1) A story about Israel

The parable retells Israel's history: a sorry tale of not listening, of hardened hearts, exile and only partial restoration: the country is occupied by the Romans, God does not appear to be dwelling among them, the nations are not flocking to Jerusalem to receive the Law—things prophesied by Isaiah about the return from exile (2:2-4; 49:8-13; 55:10-13; 65:17-25). It is like the parable of the wicked tenants (21:33-46) but more cryptic (v9). Jesus can't afford to be open yet—this story is political dynamite. If he heard and understood it, Herod Antipas would snuff him out like he did John.

This is a familiar story to its first hearers—they'd feel its pain; they were longing for the Kingdom of God to come. So the punchline is somewhat baffling: the crop is growing (v8-9; the fulfilment of all their hopes is within ear-shot: but where? 'if you have ears...')

2) A story about Jesus

The disciples don't get it—but they do see that it's about more than just history. So they ask Jesus why he's being so cryptic and what the parable means (10). He answers by talking about his use of parables in general and contrasts insiders—such as the disciples (literally with him in the boat)—with outsiders, before more explicitly explaining the meaning of the parable of the sower.

i) background: it's important to grasp the Old Testament passages lurking behind what Jesus says here—not just Isaiah 6 which Jesus quotes in his answer (13:13-15 quotes 6:9-10) but especially Isaiah 55:10-13. In these two texts God's word stands for God himself coming: in Isaiah 6, he is coming in judgement; in Isaiah 55, he is coming to end the exile of his people and usher in the wonderful new life

and joy of his rule.

ii) foreground: Jesus is both sower and seed. He is both the one bringing the fulfilment of God's plans and God himself visiting and restoring Israel, bringing the Kingdom right here, right now—hence 9:35-36; 11:4-6; 12:15-21, 46-50. The Kingdom is all about Jesus, all about hearing and doing his word, experiencing his revolution: Are we listening?

3) A story about us

The key to understanding why Matthew has put the parable of the sower along with other parables, that in their original setting told and re-told the story of Israel and God's dealings with her, comes in 13:11-23. Why would a mixed community of Jews and Gentiles find this helpful as they learned to be disciples of Jesus? Precisely because of the effect parables have those hearing Jesus: the Kingdom is here—do we want in? If so, how will that happen?

i) The way things are: in his response to his disciples, Jesus describes two groups of people. The first are those who hear the parables and shrug their shoulders. These are just pretty stories and nothing else. They don't believe the world needs to change or could change; they either don't believe that God is interested in them or can't believe that God would send someone like Jesus to rescue them. So they're not prepared to hang around and find out more.

In this, they are like the people Isaiah was sent to—settled in their rebellion, unable to see that their lives need the revolution that only God can bring. So when God comes, he comes in judgment: The parables do not to draw them in, they push them out (12b-15). Sometimes this is us—we're too distracted by life to pause and hear what God is saying.

ii) the way things could be: the other group of hearers that Jesus talks about are the disciples. They've been given the secret of the Kingdom (11). Is that because they're better than other people? No. It's because they've stayed to find out more; they are asking questions. This is what

v12a means. This is how we learn how to be disciples:

•Listen: we've heard and we want to hear more; just as the disciples asked questions, so do we. We ask one another, our teachers and leaders; we read or listen to scripture. There are no secrets in the sense that things are being intentionally hidden. There are only truths about God and his revolution that he longs to share with us *if* we hang around and listen. This is how we end up being the good soil producing the fruit that Jesus talks about in v9 and 23. Sometimes this is us—was it you this week?

•Look: understanding comes not just with the ears but also the eyes: 13:16. Jesus is the Kingdom in action; we see it in what he does as well as hear it in what he says. The disciples have seen him heal, feed the hungry, bring the isolated into his new family—this is the secret that is revealed to them as they pay attention. Do we see it?

•Live it: this is more than a story; it's a way of life. It's about leaving an old way of understanding the world and God and beginning a new one in the new community God is gathering together around Jesus, based on hearing and doing his word (12:46-50).

iii) how things'll change: Jesus explains the parable of the sower to those who ask because it's not a secret: the seed and the sower remain the same. The only thing that changes in the parable is the soil into which the seed is sown. In three cases the soil prevents the seed from being fruitful. Only one soil produces a good crop—though, of course, if God is half-way decent farmer, most of his seed will fall in good soil!

So what's the lesson for us?

•Sometimes God speaks and we're distracted, not interested, not paying attention, too caught up in our daily affairs—and we are unfruitful soil.
•Sometimes God speaks and we're receptive, eager for more and we feel the life of the Kingdom of God rushing through our veins. Others see it—and we're fruitful soil.
The trick is being the latter rather the former. So are we listening?