

Speaking in Parables

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[0 : 00] page. Over tonight and the next two Sunday nights we're looking at Matthew chapter 13 and a little bit into chapter 14 as well. Let's pray now.

God our Father in your mercy we pray that you'll open our eyes to see, our ears to hear and our hearts to understand so that your word may live in us and bear much fruit for your glory.

In Jesus name we pray. Amen. I predict that not all of you will die with Christian faith. Now I'm not a prophet or the son of a prophet. It's a sad prediction. I'm not claiming any divine knowledge in that. But simply from my experience of life and in Christian ministry, my guess will be that not all of you will die with Christian faith.

I pray that I'm wrong and I hope that I'm wrong. I hope that you'll prove me wrong. I hope that we'll all be in heaven and you'll be able to laugh at me for making such a silly statement. But sadly from experience, I suspect that that's right.

See, look around and think. Where is person X who used to be here month after month at our youth services, for example?

[1 : 28] Or where's person Y who used to lead our singing on a roster on a Sunday night? Where's person Z whose parents brought them up in Sunday school and youth group?

Parents who are still Christians but person Z, well, they don't really darken the doors of a church except if it's Mother's Day or Christmas. I meet people in wedding preparation and sometimes they say things like, well, I don't go to church any longer but, you know, I do know it and I do live by Christian principles.

I don't think so. Some people are more honest and say, well, I gave up being a Christian, you know, when I left school, when I left home, when I got a job, when I got a family. I meet people at funerals, a bit like Wayne was actually saying this morning in the sermon this morning.

Some people who say, well, I used to teach Sunday school as though, well, that'll qualify me but I don't actually go to church anymore. Some people are honest and say, well, maybe I should get back to church but they almost never do.

I know friends that I was at uni with who were very keen Christians but no longer. Some who became Christian but very quickly, it seemed, gave up the faith.

[2 : 45] I know adults who have attended here at Holy Trinity, some who were even baptized here at Holy Trinity but never darkened the door of a church anymore. I know families who've drifted.

I know men who've rejected it. I know women who've stopped believing as Christians. And from my experience of ministry, my prophecy is not all of us, not all of you will still be Christian when you die. I wonder how you respond to that rather solemn expectation. The crowds are following Jesus and so much so that he actually gets into a boat to push off just from the shore so that he could teach the large crowd that's on the probably little pebbly beach in the north end of the Sea of Galilee.

Still there are great crowds but notice that Jesus is teaching outside the synagogue here. Only one more time in Matthew's gospel will he actually go into a synagogue to teach at the end of this very chapter.

But there's still large crowds but in the chapters preceding the antagonism against Jesus has been brewing and coming to the surface more and more strongly.

[4 : 00] There's a greater and greater hostility and a clearer division between those who are following Jesus and hearing his word and those who are not who are rejecting him who are saying that he's performing miracles by the prince of demons and other such excuses.

The miracles and the teaching of Jesus which have amazed the crowds by and large have in fact led to a great and deep polarization around Jesus of those who still follow him to hear his words and those who downright reject him with some hostility that will culminate in his death on the cross.

How is this division around Jesus explained? I mean his teaching is wise, beautiful, provocative, profound. His healings are there in the public domain.

There were crowds looking and they're good things. Healing people who are lame or blind, lepers and women with fever. Raising somebody from the dead. Calming a storm. How could anyone reject such things?

How do we explain this division that's been brewing and coming more and more to the surface in these chapters leading up to this rather hinge point of Matthew's gospel?

[5 : 20] A farmer sows seed. And in ancient Israel the farms would be relatively small, not great big cattle stations the size of Israel that we have in our country. They'll often be terrace farms with little dirt paths through them, lots of rocks.

Israel is a very rocky country. Little rock fences by the side and a farmer without any equipment of course would hand throw seed. And invariably some scatters all over the place.

Some seed will land on the little path. Not deliberately. You wouldn't plant seed. Even I know that you wouldn't put seed deliberately on a path. And I'm pretty ignorant of such horticultural matters. But the seed on the path gets eaten by birds. Some seed will land on rather rocky ground.

Inevitably. Because that's the nature of the place. And some of it might sprout.

The little soil that's above a rock will actually warm up more quickly than soil that's deeper. And so that seed may actually sprout a bit quicker. But because there's such little soil, it won't put down roots.

[6 : 25] And a bit of hot sun, which is pretty common in Israel, will soon wither the little seedling. Others will be thrown and end up in little thorns that are around the place. Weeds and thorns and thistles and so on.

And it may grow, but it'll get choked by those stronger plants. And then of course there is the fertile soil that does lead sometimes to fruitful crop sowing.

Four possibilities for a farmer scattering his seed. And Jesus having said in one sense what is obvious, then says, let anyone with ears listen.

Now most of you here tonight have got ears. Some of you got long hair, so it's a little bit hard to tell. But my guess is from experience, probably about 100% of you have got ears.

Let those of you with ears listen. Well listen to what Jesus? I mean, you've just told us about scattering seed. It's a basic story.

[7 : 28] We know it doesn't seem particularly profound. It doesn't seem to be a great riddle of any sort. I've got ears, Jesus. What am I supposed to hear in what you've just said?

In some ways, that's the disciples' question to Jesus. In response, notice that Jesus has told that story to the crowds, but presumably a little bit later, the disciples came and asked him.

So what follows in the next section is Jesus speaking now not to the crowds, but to his followers, the disciples. Maybe not just the 12, it might be a bigger group, but people who are clearly following Jesus.

And they ask, why do you speak to them, the crowds, in parables? A parable is, it could be a riddle, it could be a wise saying, it could be something that's a little bit of a puzzle, it could be a little story or event that's described that is pointing to something more significant.

It's a slightly broad word in a way, but it's about speaking something that may not be quite so straightforward. That is, there's under the surface, perhaps some deeper meaning to work out.

[8 : 46] And clearly the disciples realized that Jesus telling about a sower scattering his seed is speaking a parable. Why do you tell them in parables?

Now Jesus' answer is, some people find it rather troubling. His answer is this, to you, disciples, that in the following circle, to you, it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven.

But to them, the crowds, it has not been given. It doesn't quite sound fair, but Jesus goes on to say, which in words that may even be a little bit more provocative, to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance.

But from those who have nothing, even what they have, will be taken away. Now Jesus is alluding to the fact here, that those who understand the kingdom of heaven, as it's described in Matthew's gospel, in Jesus' teaching, don't understand it because of their own ingenuity, or cleverness.

They understand it because it's revealed to them by God. God is the one who's opened their ears, and their eyes, and their hearts, to see, and hear, and understand.

[10:17] He's alluding to the fact that God chooses people, what theologically is called God's election. That nobody's actually a follower of God, or of Jesus.

Nobody's actually a Christian, fundamentally, because of their own ability, or cleverness. We're not Christians because we're clever. We're Christians because God's chosen us, and revealed himself to us, and he's revealed the secrets of the kingdom.

Not that Jesus is saying here, that everything about the Christian faith, is a complete puzzle, and you need somehow, a key to open it, a bit like the Da Vinci Code.

Not at all. Rather, in fact, what Jesus has done, and said very publicly, and very clearly, in the Sermon on the Mount earlier, and in the miracles that he's performed, that's very clear, very public. People ought to be able to see, and hear what he's done, and respond with faith. But maybe in particular, the secrets of the kingdom, thinking about Jesus' return, is what he has in mind here.

[11:22] And certainly the parables, that we'll see next week, pick up some of the secrets, of what the kingdom of heaven, is really like. It's a bit too, picking up the issue, from a couple of chapters before, in Matthew 11.

Where it's not, all that obvious, to John for example, that is Jesus the king of the kingdom, at first. But if we stop there, we could simply, and maybe rightly, charge God, with just choosing some, and not choosing others, and therefore it's not really their fault, if they're part of the crowd, and they don't understand, what the story's about.

The flip side of this, divine sovereignty, or election God's choice, is that humans have responsibility, and are culpable, or guilty, if they do not respond, with faith.

So Jesus goes on then, to say, the reason I speak to them, the crowds, in parables, is that, and here he quotes from Isaiah, seeing, they do not perceive, hearing, they do not listen, nor do they understand.

And then he, makes it even more explicitly, that he's quoting from Isaiah chapter 6, in verses 14 and 15. That is, Jesus speaks in parables, in part as judgment, against the unbelieving, hearts, minds, and eyes, and so on, of the crowds, as a whole.

[12:52] So at the one level, yes, you understand, because I've, because God has revealed things to you, but the fact that they don't understand, is not God's fault, but actually theirs.

And so, there is no excuse for sin. Jesus often quotes from the Old Testament. Here he quotes from Isaiah 6, in the famous passage, where Isaiah has the vision of God, in the temple, and is then sent by God, to be a prophet, for God's people.

And Jesus is picking up that language, and recognizing that he, like Isaiah, goes to a largely unresponsive people, but a people who ought to have known, and responded with faith.

Just as Isaiah's message fell, certainly in the early chapters, on deaf ears, basically, so does Jesus' message, in large part, especially to the Jewish leadership, that ought to have known better.

In some ways, Jesus quoting these verses, from Isaiah 6, is rebuking the Jews, and the Jewish leaders. And indeed, I think from now on in Matthew, nowhere does Jesus actually, we're told, speak to the Jews.

[14:04] There are still crowds, but clearly the division, is becoming more and more marked. And this is like a hinge chapter, in Matthew, as the cross looms ever larger.

But for the disciples, blessed are your eyes, now it's not a matter of, blessed are they who, and curse, or woe to them who, but now it's you, second person, addressing the disciples.

Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly, I tell you, many prophets, and righteous people, long to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

That is, these disciples have got the great privilege, of seeing and hearing, Jesus himself, long awaited from the Old Testament, by those who are righteous believers, in the Old Testament.

Blessed are your eyes, and ears, not because you've got good eyes, and ears by luck, or by cleverness, but rather by God's revelation, opening them, to the secrets of the kingdom of heaven.

[15:11] Now Jesus explains the parable. He makes it clear, by his own revelation words, what he was talking about, when he talked about a farmer.

See, Jesus is not simply giving, an agricultural lesson, about how to be a farmer, in ancient Israel. He's speaking about something, much more profound than that. And while there are four categories, as we saw, the path, the rocky ground, the thorns, and the fertile soil, it is actually two groups.

The first three, in the end, are all part of one group, the unbelieving, unenduring group. Jesus' parable explains, the opposition to him, and the division in humanity, around Jesus. The increasing polarization, in Matthew's gospel, in Jesus' life and ministry, is in part explained, by this parable. And more than that, people's responses to Jesus, which fall into the two camps, the first three soils, and the last, are the two sort of camps, anticipate a final division, on the day of Jesus' return.

Which we'll see next week. So what's happening now, in Jesus' life, is foreshadowing, what will happen on the final day, of the Lord's return. The wheat, and the weeds, as we'll see next week. [16:40] Notice that in these four responses, to Jesus, Jesus, it is the same word, that is spoken, to each group. It's not a problem, of the word.

It's not a problem, of the message. The fault lies, not in the word, that's spoken, but in the hearers. The first group, are those, who are likened, to the seed, on the path. Jesus says, when anyone, hears the word, of the kingdom, and does not understand it, the evil one, comes and snatches away, what is sown in the heart. This is what was sown, on the path. That is, there's, there's no root, there's no life, there's no understanding. And Satan comes, and snatches away, that word. How does Satan do that?

Well, it's a whole variety, of ways. One of Satan's, keenest things, is to stop people, responding to, the word, with faith. And so, Satan is ever eager, to quickly, grasp that seed, out of the path, or to grasp it out, of people's minds, and hearts.

[17:52] By making people ignorant. So ignorant, that they hear the gospel, and they're absolutely confused. It's just like a fog, in their head. Satan, takes away this seed, by making people inattentive.

So that when they come, to read the Bible, or hear the Bible preached, or their minds elsewhere, they're thinking about, their school work, or their girlfriend, or their boyfriend, or the weather, or the football, or something else.

I mean, to be honest, that's one reason why, with some confidence, my prediction, I think, will come true. Because week after week, I preach, and the other preachers here, will probably testify, to the same thing.

I don't think it's just me. But I can see people dozing off. People looking at watches, or playing with their mobile phones, or thinking about the football. You can sort of see it like a cartoon. You know, one of those little balloons, above their heads.

It's amazing how revealing, everything is from a pulpit. Let me tell you. Are you in this category? Are you in this category? Is the gospel, meeting your, lack of understanding?

[18:52] Is Satan, snatching away that seed, week by week, day by day? How are you countering that? See, it's not, this parable is exhorting us, to be fruitful soil.

That's the fourth category. It's not saying to us, well, if you're in that category, bad luck, you can't do anything about it. But rather it's saying, pay attention. Get understanding.

Get wisdom. Click into the gospel, before it's too late. What are you doing, to resist Satan's, snatches away? Are you praying for God, to reveal himself?

Are you praying for understanding? Are you searching the scriptures, to know the truth? That's how we counter, being seed, that's on the path. What about the seed, on the rocky ground?

As for what was sown, on rocky ground, this is the one, who hears the word, and immediately, receives it with joy. Yet such a person, has no root, but endures, only for a while, and when trouble, or persecution, arises on account of the word, that person, immediately falls away.

[20:00] Sometimes we think, that persecution is good, for the church. I'm not so sure always, because as here, and as in church history, there are many, who fall away. There are many, who under pressure, of persecution, and trouble, because of the word, or on account of the word, as it says here, give up the faith, too hard.

I'm not prepared, to risk my life, for this faith. It's an easy times faith. A bit like a little plant, and a little bit of drought, and plants gone.

About that much, I do know about plants. No root. And there are many people, I know, who've given up the faith, through hardship, through trouble. How do you counter this?

By making sure, that we get deep roots, in God's word. To take it seriously, and devote ourselves to it. To ensure, our understanding, so that we endure, hardship, and opposition.

In particular, this is troubles, that are on account, of the word, that is persecution. But given the next category, also talks about anxieties, or cares, or worries, we can expand, in general.

[21 : 14] Will you be a Christian, if you fail your VCE? Will you be a Christian, if you lose your job? Will you be a Christian, if you lose your health?

Will you be a Christian, if you end up spending, 30 years in a nursing home? Will you be a Christian, if you lose your marriage? Will you be a Christian, if you're opposed, by your parents, or your children, or your spouse, for being a Christian?

Will you remain a Christian if you're pressured at work to give up Christian values for the sake of that job? Will you be a Christian if you're bereaved when you're young?

Will you be a Christian if you lose a parent or a child or a grandchild? Will you be a Christian if you never marry, even though you long to? There are many who don't survive in faith those sorts of troubles and persecutions.

Rootless Christians dying in drought. Ensure your roots are strong and deep in God's word. But the other extreme is just as dangerous, let me tell you.

[22 : 27] If trials often lead to the loss of faith, so do riches lead to the loss of faith. So for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lures of wealth choke the world, the word, and it yields nothing.

See, while many Christians lose their faith because of some strife, problem, tension, loss or bereavement, there are perhaps even more whom I've known who've lost their faith because of, in effect, wealth.

So many Christians lose their faith and give it up when they leave school. That sense of independence. I don't have to wear a uniform. I'm now 18.

I can drink. I can do what I like. Yes! And the Christian faith just crumbles away. So many lose their Christian faith when they get their first real job because they begin to get some money.

They can begin to do things and enjoy life, so-called, more and more. And so being Christian takes a second back seat and in the end drops out of the boot at the back as well.

[23 : 45] So many Christians I know have lost their faith when they get that job or when they get their house or when they get married or have a child or retire.

All those transitions of ease and comfort and luxury. And I know Christians in all of those categories who've lost their Christian faith.

I know Christians who've lost their faith when they travel. That great desire to travel and see the world and go over to the other side of the world and set up and get a job there.

Well, there are people who used to sit in these pews who, as far as I can tell, are no longer Christians. And they're a long way away from Australia. The lure of wealth is dangerous and seductive.

And one of Satan's great desires, if we're not going to flinch against trouble, is to soak us in wealth and comfort. One of the things that I think I've personally found so helpful in recent years is ministering in places like China and Burma, where I see Christians who have so little and yet are so faithful.

[24 : 49] And it's a very humbling experience and a challenging one for me. And recognising how wealthy and complacent it is easy to be as a Christian in this country.

So beware the thorns that seek to choke your faith. The cares and the anxieties, the very thing that Jesus spoke about in the Sermon on the Mount in chapter 6, and the lure of wealth.

All three categories, whether it's the path or the rocky ground or the thorns, in the end, the outcome is the same. They do not endure in faith. Some die immediately.

Some last for a while and then give up because of this or that. In a sense, it doesn't matter. They're all part of the same category. And on their last breath, they are not confessing the name of Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

But the fourth is different. The good soil. As for what is sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another 60 and in another 30.

[25 : 57] The fruit is undefined. The fruit of the spirit, the fruit of faith, in a sense, it doesn't matter. A parable is not an allegory. We don't have to link up every little bit of the parable with some greater reality.

The point is that they are fruitful and endure. These are the disciples, the followers of Jesus, the ones who endure. And initially, they don't look any different from the second and the third categories, at least.

That is, they all sprout up initially, but it's which one is going to last that matters, through the trials and through the comforts of life. The ultimate test is endurance.

The Christian is the one who perseveres to the end, who bears fruit and endures in faith. The harvest is plentiful, Jesus has not long said before, but not all the seed lasts.

Jesus' parable here, and the parables that follow in this chapter, explain, in a sense, where we've come to in the life of Jesus on earth, greatly dividing humanity into two groups, those who are rejecting him, and those who are not.

[27 : 12] The separation now around Jesus anticipates, as we'll see next week, the separation on the final day around Jesus, the wheat and the weeds.

These verses remind us that we cannot hide behind God's election. We cannot say, well, if I'm not going to endure, that's God's fault, because he didn't choose me.

Not at all. This parable is actually provoking us to take responsibility to make sure that the seed grows in us. This parable, at least implicitly, urges us to consider, will I endure in faith?

Do I understand? Is the word becoming deep within me? Can I resist the temptations of this world? Can I stand firm in the face of the trials of this world? Will you endure? I urge you to prove my prediction wrong.

[28 : 19] The Jesus who heals the sick who heals the leper, who casts out demons and calms the storm, is worth embracing all of life.

The one who raises the dead is worth enduring for. The one who holds the keys of life and death in his hands is worth it to follow forever.

The risen one in heaven is treasure beyond any earthly lure. The one who says, the one who says, trust in your heavenly father is worth putting aside worldly cares for.

The one whose word is life and truth is worth everything to follow. The one who conquers the grave is worth forfeiting our lives for.

So prove my prediction wrong. Happy if with my final breath I might but gasp his name, preach him to all and cry in death, Christ Jesus is the Lamb.

[29 : 32] What will your final breath utter? What will your final breath utter? I think it will ever give a second breath in which I tell I'm true now.

And with my initial way I've decided to mesela about the fire and moving on as a Futures wherever I receive as a basketball board I'll give you a workshops before I give up and teaching carro and teaching all the time for me