

Sunday 28th April 2024 - The Parable of the Sower

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 00] I want to follow up something I shared in our annual meeting last week, because if you recall, if you were here or you've caught up online, we talked a little bit about the breadth of good stuff that's going on here at St. John's.

All sorts of groups and ways for us to spend time together and to build up our sense of community, all of which I think are great. And I'm very grateful to all those who are involved with them.

But within these groups, and I guess kind of underpinning everything we do, as I said last week, I suspect we do well to ensure that we're also working on the depth of our faith at the same time, alongside the breadth that we've got in terms of activities and ways we meet together, looking at ways we can deepen our faith and how that can be nurtured and expressed as well.

Now, what do we mean by depth of faith? Well, I suggest it's partly about deepening our understanding of God, getting stuck into learning more about God, about prayer, about the Bible, and so on, all of which can be beneficial for us.

But more than just that kind of understanding stuff, I think it's also about deepening our appreciation of God, appreciation above all of God's love for us and the world.

[1 : 22] It's a depth of appreciation that goes beyond just a kind of emotional feeling, I think, in our hearts as well.

Instead, the Bible talks about this depth of appreciation of God's love as being not a head thing, not a heart thing, but a gut thing, a gut feeling, if you like, something in our innermost being.

Indeed, it's interesting how this kind of gut feeling about appreciating and getting to know God's love is described in the Bible. So in Matthew's Gospel, for example, we're told at one point that when Jesus went ashore, he saw a large crowd and felt compassion for them and healed their sick. The word we translate as compassion here into English. It's a pretty spectacular Greek word in the original language because it's this word, *splanchnisomai*.

You want to join with me in saying that this morning, didn't you? Okay, *splanchnisomai*. Oh, one, two, three. *Splanchnisomai*. Excellent, excellent. It literally means to be moved in your guts.

[2 : 36] To be moved in your guts. Or better still, to be moved in your bowels. Okay, that's what it literally means. I guess it's there where we're trying to convey that gut feeling about love.

Love that kind of captivates us. Love that demands a response, shall we say. Now, it would be a brave person, I guess, who sends a Valentine's card that says, you know, you move me in my bowels.

That's the kind of stomach-churning, butterfly-inducing feeling. But that's what we're talking about. That kind of, I dare say, it's a bowel movement.

Not towards the toilet, but towards putting love into action because we feel it in our guts. You know, how deep is your love, sang the Bee Gees? Yes, well, *Splanchnisomai* could be the answer to that song.

Now, if you were Jesus, though, at the time, knowing this word and that feeling and sensation and stuff, how might you communicate the life-shaping importance of this kind of inner, deep-seated love to people who are listening to you?

[3 : 45] Well, we'll be relieved to know that instead of taking his cue from human biology in this, Jesus instead uses the natural world around him and his people to illustrate the depth of love that we're talking about here.

So, with this in mind, you're going to listen to a story Jesus told, a parable which is known as the parable of the sower. So, let's have a look at it. It's from Matthew's Gospel, chapter 13.

That same day, Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore.

Then he told them many things in parables, saying, A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root.

[4 : 58] Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop.

A hundred, sixty, or thirty times what was sown. Whoever has ears, let them hear. So, Jesus, he's telling this little story.

In the town of Capernaum, which was his hometown, as an adult, it's located, as we can see, just on the top left of the Sea of Galilee, the region where Jesus lived. This inland lake that kidney-shaped, I suppose.

It's in the north of Israel. And at Capernaum, you can still visit there today. There's the remains of the town on the Sea of Galilee there. It's that little town there.

And you can see how close it is to the shore of the Sea of Galilee. I guess that's why Jesus often spoke a lot about fishing and nets and so on, because it was essentially a fishing village.

[6 : 00] But then if you go back from the shore, you can see it's surrounded by fields. Very rural kind of place. Just as it was, it seems, in Jesus' day. And so it makes sense that Jesus not only spoke about fishing and nets, but also spoke about farming and seeds and growth, because everyone understood what he was talking about.

And so when you want to talk, it seems as Jesus does, about that deep gut feeling about God's love. Well, I guess what better way than to use the deep-rooted way in which seeds and crops can best thrive?

So we're told Jesus was on the beach, and the crowds gathered around him, and he began teaching on the seashore. But because so many crowds turned up, Jesus got into a boat to speak to them.

And he proceeds to tell a parable about a farmer who scattered seed in his field. Seed which lands on four different types of soil, we're told.

So some fell on the path, some fell on rocky ground, some fell amongst thorns, while some fell on good soil. And as we'll unpack, you know, this type of ground makes all the difference for the ability of the seed to put down roots and grow or not.

[7 : 24] So birds eat the seed on the path. The sun scorches the shoots which grow on rocky ground. The thorns can choke the growth of other seeds. But the good soil, last one he mentions, as you'd expect, that produces a decent crop.

And Jesus ends his little parable by saying, whoever has ears, let them hear. Which is fine, I think, but it's all a bit vague, really.

What is it that Jesus wants them to hear? Because he's only talked about seeds and the best places where they grow. It's almost like a farming lesson rather than a spiritual lesson, it seems. And so you can imagine a lot of the crowd who would have heard this, perhaps might begin to drift away. They come and see this rabbi, this guru type person, and he's talking about farming and seeds.

You can imagine why they might drift away, because they're unable to process it, unable to make sense of it, or unwilling, perhaps, to put the work in to try and think, okay, Jesus, what do you mean?

[8 : 32] What are you getting at here? And it's interesting, Jesus initially, he doesn't spell out the meaning of this parable to them. You know, it's not a spoon-fed spirituality that Jesus gives people.

Rather, it seems, he wants them to work things out in their own way, in their own time. Why might Jesus take that approach with his teaching?

Well, for me, I think it's part of what it means, perhaps, to deepen our faith in God. See, it generally seems that Jesus understands that the best way for us to grow in our understanding, or in our appreciation of God, is not simply to be told all the right answers, but to ponder things for ourselves. I think that's why in the Gospels, if you look through them, Jesus asks about a hundred times more questions than he ever gives answers. He's trying to help people to think for themselves, to consider their own way of what God's love might look like in practice.

And I guess as any teacher, any parent, any trainer knows, the best way for someone to learn is not by doing everything for them, but by encouraging them to think and work out and have a go for themselves.

[9 : 58] You can be the best physical trainer in the world, but if you don't let the person you're training actually lift the weights, they're never going to get strong. I guess that's the idea of Jesus teaching here. And I think that's how Jesus teaches us, by offering us an example to follow, but by then saying, go on, I haven't given you all the answers.

Now, you work this out in your own life, in your own context, in your own way. And so I guess in some ways, that's kind of the approach that I and others therefore try and follow here at St. John's. You know, not to tell us what to think, but to pose questions that help us to consider what God's love looks like lived out in our own lives.

Indeed, someone who's now left this church, they said to me once, the trouble with your preaching, Matt, is that you leave us with more questions than answers. And he meant that as a criticism, but I took it as a compliment, to be honest.

I mean, I trust you, you know, to work things out, because I see Jesus trusting us to work things out. Yes, as we'll see in the coming weeks, the Holy Spirit has a crucial role to play in helping us to find that wisdom and work things out.

[11 : 21] But in Jesus, we see someone who encourages us to think for ourselves, but not in isolation, but in community. Because the depth of our faith, I would suggest, is helped by the breadth of the views and the experience and the wisdom and the people with whom we can work things out with.

Whoever has ears, let them hear, says Jesus. You hear Jesus directly, yeah. But also be open to perhaps hearing Jesus speak to us through each other.

Now, having said all that, what's interesting with this parable of the sower is that Jesus does go on to explain what it's all about.

But his explanation comes not to the crowds who drift away, it seems, but to his disciples who approach him a little while later.

The disciples, it seems, have got that persistence. They've got that hunger to learn and a willingness to persevere with difficult teaching. They've obviously been trying to work out what it means for themselves and then approach Jesus and say, what were you talking about?

[12 : 41] We think we might have an idea, but you've got to help us here. We need more than this. I think Jesus, as he does with us when we are hungry for wisdom, when we persevere with working things out, he does then reward them with a deeper understanding that they can take away and ponder further.

And so we have the benefit of the disciples asking Jesus what he meant, and we're going to see now how Jesus explains his own parable to the disciples just a little bit later in that same chapter 13 of Matthew.

Listen then to what the parable of the sower means. When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart.

This is the seed sown along the path. The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time.

When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful.

[14 : 02] But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.

I love it that Jesus walks away while he's still explaining things. It's like, come on, keep up, keep up. So with Jesus having helped his disciples and us by turn to perhaps understand what he's talking about here, and we'll go through it a bit in some detail, how might we apply what he teaches us in our own lives?

And so to do that, if we take each of these four soils in turn, because firstly Jesus says this about the seed that falls on the path.

It says this, when anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart.

This is the seed sown along the path. So we know now that the seed is the message of the kingdom. We might say the good news of Jesus, good news that we are loved more than we can ever know, and that God calls us to love each other in the same generous, gracious way.

[15:28] But when this seed that's sown falls on the path, it's an illustration, it seems, of how this good news message is sometimes received, not with acceptance, but with misunderstanding.

It's that they do not understand it. You know, just as the birds in the parable eat the seed on the path, so says Jesus. It's as if the evil one snatches away the goodness of the message of love. Now, what kind of people might this be talking about? Well, all sorts, I imagine. But in my experience, these seedy path type people tends to be people who struggle to accept the idea of the grace of God.

Grace being this idea that there's nothing we can do to earn God's love, just as there's nothing we can do which will stop God loving us. For example, I remember chatting to a woman in the Vic down a pub once about forgiveness, quite how we got onto this subject.

I don't know, but we did. And she was talking in particular about how she couldn't forgive herself for some of the things she'd done in her life.

[16:48] And she shared with me in particular about an abortion she'd had a good few years earlier. And we talked about it. Now, I didn't give her my opinion about what she'd done.

You know, that wasn't relevant, I don't think. I simply did my best to assure her that there was nothing that God couldn't or wouldn't forgive if that was needed.

And in fact, God would long for her to know the guilt that she carried about it being lifted from her. And yet, despite a long conversation with her, it was clear she just couldn't comprehend this kind of love.

You know, love which seeks repair, not revenge. Love which offers care, not condemnation. And so the goodness of the message of love was snatched away almost from her before it could ever take root, snatched away by the guilt that she was carrying.

Guilt, which is always the opposite of grace. Indeed, seeing how Jesus responds to people in the gospel who are equally weighed down by guilt for various things.

[18:09] You know, for this woman, I have every confidence that she will one day comprehend the gracious, forgiving love of God for herself. But for now, you know, I still see her, still chat, I still pray for her.

I still long for her to know the freedom that comes with Jesus, lifting her guilt. And whether that freedom comes in this life or the next, I know God's got her.

God's got her. That's the seed perhaps that falls on the path. Well, what next? Well, we're told the seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. And when trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.

So here, the message of God's love, it seems, is received initially with joy. You know, you get these green shoots of life with God appearing.

[19:17] But the troubles of this life, the rocks and the stones, they hinder this joy being deep-rooted enough so that the shoot, the faith, can survive.

It's not rooted deep enough and it eventually withers away. Now, in Jesus' day, the troubles and the persecutions, they may have meant one thing. I guess for us, in our particular context here, what might these troubles be?

Well, again, you'll have your own ideas on what troubles people in life, especially in trying to pursue a life of faith. But I can think of various people who have been enthusiastically part of this church over the years, really keen in their faith, but have drifted away because of life, because of life.

Maybe they were so knackered from working long hours to make ends meet that remaining part of things here became too hard a thing for them to include.

Maybe their partner put pressure on them to choose between time with them and time with other Christians and the fire of their faith slowly went out.

[20:32] Maybe anxiety took hold, especially post-COVID, perhaps. Anxiety in crowds of social interaction. Anxiety, and I appreciate this is a real one for many of us, of walking in alone to a busy church and not knowing where to sit or who to sit with.

And that can stop us being an active part of a community of faith. Maybe that's too overwhelming for folks. In all of these, the initial joy, perhaps, of knowing God, it becomes difficult to sustain in isolation.

And so faith withers without the support and the care of others. But do you notice in this, just as it's the evil one, we're told, who snatches away what was sown from those on the path, and it's troubles and persecutions in life which hinder the joys of those who initially take root in faith.

Neither of those two factors are the fault of the one who initially hears God's message of love. And so here, from Jesus, there is no criticism.

There is no condemnation when the troubles of this life crowd in and cause faith to fall away.

Instead, there's quite a tone of understanding here that Jesus gets it again.

[21 : 58] And again, that gives me hope that Jesus will one day clear those troubles away to ensure the seed that has already been sown in people can once again take root.

In fact, it's a similar theme to the seed that falls among the thorns. Because as Jesus says this time, he says, the seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful.

So here, faith is choked by the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth. Again, these thorns, they're sadly all too prevalent in life.

You know, the almost constant messaging we receive about consumerism or materialism and forever homes and buy now, pay later mentality. These influences being paid to declare that what we have is not enough and that we should always aspire for more.

If you couple that messaging with the burgeoning inequality brought on by political policies and corruption, and it's no wonder these thorns are so choking of a simple life of faith because, well, I will be told, because they are deceitful.

[23 : 26] They're built on the lie that money and material wealth brings happiness. Whereas I can vouch that it's a life lived in true community under God that brings the deepest gut feeling happiness.

But again, it's difficult to blame people, I think, for being sucked in by the lies and the deceit of wealth any more than it is to blame people for voting for Brexit on the broken promises of prosperity.

Instead, these thorns, these lies and the worries they produce, again, if you read it, there's no judgment here from Jesus for those who are choked by them.

Rather, the eternal message of love remains, calling us, as Jesus says elsewhere in Matthew, to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

And then all these things, you know, in other words, what we need for a fulfilled, gut-satisfying life, that will be given to us as well.

[24 : 34] Indeed, if we take on now that the final type of soil, where we're told this, that the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it.

This is the one who produces a crop yielding 160 or 30 times what was sown. So what is this good soil, finally?

Well, as the crop size would indicate, it's where seeds grow, not in isolation, but together. There's lots and lots of ears of corn here.

That implies the good soil brings a community of faith in which the message is both heard and understood. And so what does it mean for the message of the kingdom of God to be understood in community?

Well, I'd suggest that it's connected to what we were talking about earlier. It's the kind of place where questions are embraced because that's the way I would suggest, that roots can be deepened.

[25 : 40] Indeed, the message of God's love is understood best, I would say, when we work out together how to put it into practice, where the breadth and the diversity of our community means that all sorts of people are included and those who are different are not excluded because it's through inclusion that our understanding of God's love gets bigger and not smaller.

What else? The message of God's love is understood, I guess, when we're honest about our lives within this community, honest about our needs and our fears and our hopes because it's only through that honest vulnerability that we're able to offer the informed, appropriate support that's needed to help us grow.

You know, one of the main reasons we've got all these groups and clubs and so on in church is because in response really, again, post-COVID often, for people who were honest enough to say, look, I'm struggling a bit here, to make friends here, to go a bit deeper in my relationships, if I'm honest, I'm a bit lonely and so as a community, we can respond to that honesty, that vulnerability and put things on which help to combat loneliness and that isolation that people might feel. So understanding and the depth of faith that accompanies it, that comes from honesty in community, not hiding things. What else?

Well, the message of God's love is understood and it takes root when the soil in which we're planted is turned and broken up and ploughed and fertilized.

[27 : 24] In other words, when change is embraced in a community and not feared. When new ideas, new insights, new voices, new theologies can inform our understanding rather than be rejected because of simply what we've grown up thinking or experiencing which was perhaps a bit different to what the voices are saying these days.

After all, if we think about it, good soil, what is good soil? It's mainly the decaying remains of past things which have died. But out of that death, out of that decay, comes new life, resurrection from the dead, we might say.

It's a God who says to us, look, I am making all things new and he invites us to faithfully follow him into a fruitful future.

So that's the kind of depth. That's the kind of faith I think God is calling us into. We might say a faith rooted in the past, growing in the present and hopeful for the future because the seeds being sown, the message being shared is one of love and of community, one of grace and of hope.

And just to finish, this word hope, I think that's what Jesus' parable of the sower is actually all about because regardless of the paths and the rocks and the thorns of life, God the sower is the one who continues to scatter the seed of his good news all around us.

[29 : 03] If only we have eyes to see and ears to hear what he's already up to. Our job, I'd suggest, is to encourage understanding and nurture growth so that the evil, the troubles and the deceits of this life can be overcome through sharing and living out the good news of God's eternal love for us and for our world.

Amen. Amen. Amen.