

Christian Growth – Seasons of the Soil

The sermon given by Rev Eddie Sykes at Rosyth Methodist Morning Worship
on Sunday 16 July 2023 – his final sermon at Rosyth before retirement

The readings were: Psalm 119:105–112; Romans 8:1–11; Matthew 13:1–9, 18–23



I must admit that when I was at school, I found Shakespeare incredibly tough to make sense of. It wasn't until I had left school, left college in fact, that a teacher colleague gave me the opportunity to go to Stratford-upon-Avon to the Royal Shakespeare Theatre to see a live Shakespeare play – Hamlet. To be honest I was wondering whether I would follow it or not, but didn't want to appear dim to my friends – two English teachers – whom I went to the play with.

I have to say that seeing the play in this context completely mesmerized me – same words I'd read at school, but now they had become alive. And from then I have been going to Stratford whenever I can.

I say this, because so often we dismiss something if we don't get it first time – we don't go back with the wisdom of age and experience to re-look at it from a different angle. So, it is with the stories, the parables that Jesus taught.

Parables which often used, as in this case, the examples of rural life and the events of the rural community that were all around him.

Often, for example, when we read the parable of the sower, we think of the way in which the seed falling on different kinds of terrain produces different results. We see the 'responses' as the different ways in which

different people respond to the message of the kingdom of God. Indeed, that is what Jesus' intent was – when he told the parable. However, there is another side to the story, which my attention was drawn to – and that is the seed falling on the different types of ground can actually show the different stages or experiences in our life of faith. Then, the harvest or otherwise, as it were, is about the growth of the seed or otherwise in the soil of our lives.

The soil, if you like, can thus represent for us the ways in life in which we handle different issues that come our way. The sower, seed and soil picture is an extremely effective way of communicating the message of the kingdom – especially as we are reminded in Genesis that we are made from dust and to dust we shall one day return. Dust into which God has breathed life – his life breath.

So, yes, we are soil – and our hospitality towards the good news message – thus from this parable we can see four different ways in which we respond to the message of the kingdom.

Not different people responding in different ways, but us as individuals in the ways that we respond.





Along the path

Along the path the birds come and eat up the seeds.

These are the times when we don't understand the word of the kingdom – and sometimes we can be like that.

The seed of heaven falls on us but fails to germinate and quite literally disappears. However, it leaves an impression – something we might remember years down the road of life. Something which glanced our life but was gone as quickly as it came.

I think such experiences happen when the path we walk is beaten and worn – when we are world-weary and our sense, especially our spiritual senses have been dulled. When we get like the writer of Ecclesiastes, pretty fed up with life who says, "Vanity, vanity, everything is vanity." Nothing seems to have any depth.

Jesus describes such people as those who hear the message but don't understand.

This experience of not understanding can come at any time in our lives. Often we think of it in our childhood, where we learn Bible stories, and maybe see them as having cute morals but the lessons don't really hit home – yet later in life the glancing effect takes hold.

Sometimes we can actually refuse to understand – it can be like those who come to church regularly, but in a sense have kind of said to themselves 'I do not want to hear the good news'. Maybe bad preaching has made them bad listeners, or life has worn down that capacity to see new light. Maybe some do not wish to understand so that they do not have to respond. They do not want the Christian faith to get in the way of their daily living.

Whatever the case there are those times in our lives, when for one reason or another we do not understand the message – and this is when the enemy takes advantage of us.

Rocky ground

There are those times in our lives when the seed falls on shallow soil. This is not the kind of shallowness that makes us reject the message, but rather it is when we greet the message with short-lived enthusiasm. Some people seem to be shallow all their lives as they constantly skip from one enthusiasm to another, a bit like Tigger in Winnie the Pooh. It is as if whatever has grabbed their attention for that moment is the greatest thing.

But then don't we all have those periods in our lives when we show a kind of shallow enthusiasm.

When I was at teacher-training college, a friend became a Christian, and was full of enthusiasm. Yet, when a friend died in a road accident a couple of years later, that person denounced the faith and, sadly, became quite anti-church.

Jesus referred to this shallowness as happening when trouble comes. The other ways it happens are when people come into church and they either have expectations which are too high or misdirected.

I have seen it when church members go away to conferences – and they are all enthused, but then despair quickly when the church can't replicate that atmosphere and put them on that enthusiastic high.





When are we likely to be shallow?

Probably when we are susceptible to quick and easy enthusiasms – the pressures of one's peers for example. I know this is not true for all us – but when we are impulsive then we can be vulnerable.

Another time can be when we are lonely and may grasp at the first emotional straw that comes our way – and that can sometimes mean we are taken in by the religious charlatan – the false prophet – because the soil has no depth.

Among thorns

When the seed falls among thorns, it is like the message being throttled by the worries of this life and the deceitfulness that wealth creates. We are never immune to this peril – because every age has its distracting toys – and this age has more than most.

The other week I was being a bit nostalgic and was commenting on how we have all this security now for our homes. When I was growing-up I never had a door key as the house was only locked at night. My brother later commented that when you think about it, we didn't have much of anything worth pinching in the first place.

Different stages of life where we are vulnerable may include: career, courtship, maybe starting a family, seeking to establish a financial base for the future. These and other things can choke out the best of God's seed in our soil. And that which can distract us from the best that God wants to give us can only be classified as a weed.

You could say that this category is about seed and weed. Where a place is overgrown with weeds there is no room for nice plants.

That is probably why Jesus told disciples to hate mother, father, spouse, children, siblings, if one wants to become a true disciple. Jesus tells us to tear up those good things which throttle the seed of the Kingdom in you.

On the surface this seems pretty harsh, to put it mildly. But, if you think about, if the soil can grow weeds and thorns it means there is soil there – we just have to make sure that it is the right seed that is growing.

In a sense what I am saying is that the conditions which make it possible for life's choking elements to thrive, under better circumstances make it possible to be truly productive.

Wouldn't it be true to say for all of us that when our lives offer the best potential for God, and capable of the best productivity for God, we are so preoccupied with other things?

In the years of our greatest potential to be effective disciples, we become effective in tending and being overcome by weeds.

Good soil

Then there are the times in our lives when we experience good soil.

Here Jesus reminds us of our potential – he is telling us that the seed of the Kingdom can produce in us purpose in being effective, devoted disciples. These are the times when we are more likely to respond with goodness than cynicism. There are times in our lives when we are simply more open to God – and being a conduit of God's compassion, mercy, justice, love and grace.





All of us express these different aspects of reception to the message of God's kingdom at different times in our lives. If we feel that is so for us, it should remind us to be open to touching other people's lives with the Jesus' message of hope, because we do not know where they happen to be on this path of faith.

We might even discover that the uninterested, distracted or unresponsive person, may actually be nearer to the kingdom of God than we - or they - realize.

As the sower scatters the seed on all kinds of terrain we are reminded not to give up on anyone, at any time - and that includes not giving up on ourselves.

So where are you in your growth as a Christian - is your soil deep and rich, or crowded with weeds, or just plain shallow?

Remember, too, that the seed, the message of the Kingdom of God is not compromised - what is crucial is the depth of the soil.

God gifts us the seed - are we ready to receive it, grow it in our lives and to share it?

The sharing is the harvest.

To God be the glory forever. Amen.

The picture, entitled "The parable of the sower by Madison Murphy", appears on a small number of websites in the early 2010s, but is nowhere attributed.