

Beloved

Once more Jesus went out to the sea. Wherever Jesus went a crowd was soon to follow and this one may have been the biggest one yet. Mark tells us that the crowd was “great” he uses an emphatic word there that may mean it was the greatest crowd thus far. Whatever the case may be, the beach was filled with so many people that Jesus got into the boat he had prepared and anchored just off shore he sat in the boat and began to teach them. Do you see our King who is building the Kingdom as a prophet? It will become clearer as we move along. Now Jesus teaches in a different manner than at other time in that Mark tells us that He began to speak in parables.

The old Sunday school definition of a parable is still a pretty good one. A parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. It is from the math point of view (parabola) a figure of speech. Jesus uses believable stories that come right out of the experiences of those who were there by the sea. The parables then were a way to make a point in a colourful and powerful way. Yet the parable was a bit of a puzzle too. Mark lays out four parables as we have them in our English Bible in Mark chapter 4 beginning with the parable of the sower. (Matthew in the 13th chapter of his gospel records some others one as well not mentioned in Mark 4.) Mark tells us that Jesus taught many things by the use of parable. Now it is likely that we don't have before us every parable that Jesus used but have enough of them to understand the Kingdom of God which was and still as then is so near at hand.

Why did Jesus use parables? Why didn't Jesus just tell the people the truth? In verses 10-12 we read that the disciples and the very close followers of Jesus wanted to know this as well. Jesus answered them by saying,

To you it has been given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God, but to those outside all things come in parables.

Jesus quotes from Isaiah and Jeremiah. God had from of old told the prophets that many would see and still be blind, hearing they would not understand. The divine mystery is revealed divinely. Yes, many today have even had the parables explained for them and still cannot grasp the meaning it has for our life. Many hear the good news of the Kingdom of God preached simply and wonderfully and it is too profound or it is considered to be foolish and so many reject it. Why is that? The parable about the Sower, Seed and the Soil will make it clear and yet it is only by the gift of faith and by the Holy Spirit that if we understand we will believe it. Jesus tells us that the Word by means of parables is to reveal to some the good soil) and conceal to others (hard, rocky and weedy soil). Some have difficulty with this saying that is sandwiched by the parable spoken (verse 1-9) and then explained (13-20). For our purposes we are going to understand that we need to understand this parable, so that we can understand the others, understanding why some believe and others don't. Ye we must still respond in faith! These are the mysteries – secrets of God from the world revealed to us!

Jesus said, "He who has ears let Him hear." The Word comes to us that we might hear. Let us listen then to Jesus' parable and explanation of the parable of the sower, seed and the soil. I bring to you God's Word under the theme:

Jesus Came To Preach The Gospel of The Kingdom That Men Might Hear and Respond 1.

The Sower 2. The Seed 3. The Soil

The Sower Mark writes, “And it happened (or behold) a sower went out to sow.” We understand who the sower is don't we. Even you children understand that sower is Jesus. Though the NIV says that farmer, properly, literally the sower went out to sow or even more literally “the seeder seeded.” Now some think that the sower is God the Father, but we get more the sense of God the Father as the soil preparer and Jesus as the sower particularly but we can also see that it is not limited to the preaching of Jesus but also the preaching of the disciples and then to the church in time. In this parable we must see the already of the Kingdom of God as Jesus does His earthly ministerial work as Prophet-King and is training the 12 He has commissioned as we read in chapter 3 to continue that work—this is how the Kingdom of God will fill and subdue the earth (Genesis 1:28-9). When Jesus comes again we are going to see an amazing harvest!

Remember that Jesus now had been preaching and teaching in Capernaum for some 18 months or more by this time. Mark condenses much of time into three chapters. Matthew and Luke take more time to lay out more detail for us. But thus far in the Gospel of Mark we have seen that John the Baptist came to prepare the people for Jesus. Jesus was further prepared by His baptism and time in the wilderness. We have read how Jesus chose 12 men to learn from Him and how He empowered them to preach, to heal and to cast out demons. We have in past sermons on this Gospel of Mark seen how the multitudes came to Prophet-King with all kinds of theories about Jesus. The Pharisees and scribes stood opposed. Even Jesus family, his mother and brothers did not believe. Need we mention the Devil and the demons? Now Mark takes the Words of Christ (who is the Word of God) so that we might understand better what the disciples needed to learn. If God's Word is going out- sent out like seed from the sower's hand: Why did people not believe who Jesus was or His teaching of the good news of the Kingdom of God?

Why had Jesus come? You would be correct when you answer: To do the will of His Father. But earlier in Mark's Gospel we read how Jesus wanted to preach the gospel of the kingdom to His people. The many signs and wonders were given in order that people might see the power of God in Him and to understand what the kingdom was going to be like. Jesus by means of the parable of the sower, seed and soil once more makes clear His task on this earth. He had come to sow the seeds—that is—to preach the good news of the Kingdom of God. He had not come to win military victories. Nor was His intention to cast out Herod, get rid of the Pharisees or usurp Cesar. Part of the reason for this is that the prophet is in fact already King, these other upstarts had tried to depose Him and Jesus will not be conquered! He came as the way, the truth and the light. He came to preach the truth for it was the truth that would set people free. He had come to free people from their sins. And the way that God determined that this would happen was by preaching. Later Christ through Paul would write,

...how shall they believe if they have not heard, and how shall they hear without a preacher? (Rom. 10:14)

This is the way the Father had determined that the kingdom would now be built. In the Old Testament the nation of Israel, the priests, the temple and Jerusalem stood as the witnesses of God and His Kingdom on earth. But under the reign of Christ the Church would be on the move,

just a Christ was on the move sowing the seed of the Word.

So Jesus would work. So Jesus called to Himself twelve men to be trained for this preaching. So Christ gathers, preserves and defends a Church that faithful men might be raised, trained and supervised as they now become the sowers of the Word. Our work as the church is primarily Christ's work. We are to follow His lead. But what did Jesus sow?

The Seed Mark tells us that Jesus said, "The sower went out to sow and behold some of the seed fell by the wayside." What does a sower sow, but seed? There are not too many that sow the way they did in those days of Jesus anymore. Today a farmer has machines for such things. But sometimes still you will see a person sow seed in the family garden. The seed of course is what is sown. Jesus interprets and said, "The sower sows the Word."

Now perhaps you're saying, "Preacher, tell me something I don't know." We of course know all these things. What else would Jesus sow but the Word of God? And yet the wonder of it should not be lost on us. For Jesus Himself is the Word. In one way then, Jesus sowed Himself. The Prophet tells us that the Kingdom of God is about the King who is true God and true man. The gospel is about Jesus Christ who saved us from our sin and fulfilled the law that we should have died under. Jesus sowed the Word.

And that is what Jesus had been doing? If the disciples of Jesus then or the readers of Mark back in first century Rome (or here in Toronto today) have not yet understood, they should by now understand that Jesus was preaching the Word. God in His wisdom answers the skeptics of today. These skeptics tell us that Jesus preached a new philosophy, a new social theory or a better morality. Jesus, they say, came to give the world a new way of thinking that He Himself had developed. Some say that Jesus was so taken by His own thinking that He soon believed that He really was the Son of God which of course leads to His tragic death (Albert Schweitzer). But God sends Jesus to sow the word for us and the sower, Jesus says, "He came to preach the Word." It was the same word that Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel had spoken. It was that same word which Israel sang in the psalms and had received from Moses. It sounded different perhaps by means of this parable or Jesus' method of preaching but Jesus nonetheless, Jesus the sower was bringing the fullness of God's Word to light. He was showing that not only was He the fulfillment of the law and prophets, He was fulfilling them right in front of Him. Adam and Moses and David and Isaiah all spoke of Him and pointed to Him and Jesus is standing right in front of them the New Adam and the son of David our King. Jesus as God is the revelation of God as a perfect man does the will of his Father and brings the truth of God's Word.

O that the church would take heed. So many like to move to the end of the parable, some produced, 30, 60 or hundred fold. Some preachers and churches think that they can produce this miraculous outcome. This is what they see as the end of the parable. But the sower, even Jesus, simply, obediently does His work and leaves the rest to God. God gives the harvest. We sow and reap but God gives the growth. So many in the church either say, "We have to preach to convert," or they say, "Why do missions at all, the elect will come." Now to the Church through her called preachers specially and by the buttress of the witness of the children of God, the work of sowing handed to the prophets has been handed to us—Christ body on earth. That means we do not sow our own words nor our own thinking but God's word, the Gospel of Jesus Christ must

be sown from the pulpits across this land, for it is this seed alone that will bear the fruit of the Spirit. Paul tells us that the Word [reached is Christ and Him crucified. So we who labour in the Word want you to see the Prophet-King who gave His life unto a complete remission of our sins. He as the Word revealed Christ love for us in this: while were yet sinners He died for us. He rose again from the dead and He lives forever. Jesus is Lord! This is the word of truth and the seed we sow! This is the Word that is confirmed for us in the Lord's Supper and sealed through Holy baptism? The sheep hear the shepherd's voice else they run away (John 10). When the seed is sown the voice of the Shepherd is heard: His body was broken, his blood was shed, He arose again and He has ascended. He alone is the risen Lord. This is the Word. This is Christ whom we confess!

But you say, we participate, we do sound the Word. How many countless sermons have preached and yet we such a small harvest here in our reformed churches: why?

Well, how many parables didn't Jesus speak yet so few believed? Jesus now explains this. There is both comfort and encouragement in this explanation. For if we judge simply by numbers our work might be terribly discouraging, but having ears let us hear so that we may understand.

The Soil Jesus gives to us the picture of a typical farm in Palestine. The fields were laid out side by side. They were relatively small compared to our farms today. Each field was separated by a pathway where the farmer and the sower could get to his field. The sower then would walk over the tilled land scattering the seed by taking some in his hand and throwing it over the field. Some of the seed would land on the hard packed down earth of the pathway. The seed would simply lie upon the hard earth and the birds would come and eat. So too says Jesus is the heart of some who hear the word. The heart is hard to the Word does not penetrate the heart. Satan comes and takes the Word away so that it has no impact. The heart hardened by sin can bear no fruit of the Spirit.

This analogy calls to mind what Paul tells us about Pharaoh (Romans 9:14ff) who we read in Exodus rejected the word of grace and was hardened in his heart and would not listen to the word of the Lord from Moses. But it also reminds us the Pharisees who hearing the Word, refused it. Satan came and took the Word away so that they took counsel to destroy Jesus. This was what was involved in their sin of the blaspheming of the Holy Spirit (Mark 3:20ff).

Other seed landed on the stony or rocky ground. The land of Palestine is still much the same. In parts of the land, even among the small patches then of farming land the top soil is a thin layer of dirt which lies upon a huge sheath of hard rock. As the rock is worn down by weather and the forces of the creation soil develops with stones in the soil pushing their way to the top. When the seed lands on this rocky soil there is no way for the seed to develop deep roots. The plant cannot hold much water and so when the sun comes up the plant which pops up pretty quickly because it can only grow upwards—the roots cannot go down—cannot survive and it is burned by the sunlight and withers away. No roots and not enough soil to hold water and quick life and death. Jesus says this is the person who hears, becomes excited about the Word but when trouble or persecution comes faith cannot survive because there is no depth of commitment to God and the faith withers away.

How often haven't we seen this? People it seems on fire for the gospel and then when tragedy comes or they are confronted with their beliefs they give in and deny Christ. Later this would happen at Golgotha where so many of these same people who came to hear Jesus and were so excited would cry out for His crucifixion. The Christians of the first century in Rome saw this likely many times as converts confronted with prison or death faltered and turned away. R.C. Sproul speaks about the day he and his friend received Christ. The next morning Dr. Sproul went to write his girlfriend his friend told him it was nonsense and never again accepted the faith. In the one moment R.C. Sproul's life was forever changed and His friend's quickly flourished and sadly died!

Other seed and grew up among the thorns. The growth was soon snuffed out as the thorns grow in strength. These are the ones who hear the word but give it up for the cares of the world the temptation of riches and the desire for other things and become unfruitful. This seed reminds us of Judas Iscariot who appeared as one have a living faith but would later be tempted by his own desires and deny Christ, even giving Him up to death. Judas himself became unfruitful and lost his life both on this earth and the next life!

And this too teaches us of the dangers of this earth. Satan goes about like a prowling lion seeking whom He might destroy (1 Peter 5:8). Against the strategies of the devil Christ called us to put on the armor of God (Ephesians 6). I can think of men who confessed Christ and have left the church for a woman who did not and woman for such men. I have seen men who forfeit all for the dollar, for the business of for power. We are to set our desires on things of heaven lest we lose our life!

Do you understand now that as the Kingdom of God goes through the world by means of the sower who is sowing good seed; that the seed does not always fall on good soil! See what Jesus says too about the parables. They are meant to conceal the truth. Romans 9-11 helps us understand that back then Jesus preaching hardened the hearts of those who heard it then so that even the crowds who it seemed loved Jesus really did not love the truth and called for His execution by the cross. God in His sovereignty accomplished His purposes hardening their hearts for in fact they already did not believe! And yet Jesus cast out the seed picking demons, converted the likes of a Peter who cowered under the pressure and Paul who heart seemed like the hard path and even his brother James! The Father can do many things! Trust and obey! Let him who has ear to hear, hear the words of Isaiah (55:6-11):

Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I

purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

Thankfully the parable does not end here does it? What if this was the case? There would be no faith, no Christianity, no Church no Kingdom of God on earth. But! But some seed falls on the good soil and grows up and produces 30, 60 and 100 fold. Just a note- but a good return on gain or barely was 5 x's maybe 10 x's! This is miracle growth! This Jesus tells us are the people of God. God, the farmer, has prepared the soft hearts which the Word penetrates and takes root. They are protected from thorns and thistles and the cares and desires of this world seeking the world to come. From them comes more seed. These people are actively bearing fruit that God made be praised. There are many of them and on the last day it will all be revealed. Be of good cheer! The Kingdom of God is a force on earth!

This parable teaches us of the seed that falls on hearts that believe. These are the ones who are baptized and have their children baptized too. These are the ones who come to the Table of the Lord confessing a belief in that Word. They are convinced that Christ has died for them. That seed sown bears fruit in their lives (think of John 15: I am the vine and you are the branches and the branches that remain in Christ bear much fruit for by this the Father is glorified). In them lives the Holy Spirit and they cannot help but bear witness of the fruit they produce in their lives. They come to Church with joy. They come to the Lord's Supper in a faithful humble assurance that their faith came by hearing the Word of Jesus about Jesus and that they were given hearts that seek to hear the Word, prepared for them before the foundation of the world.

The parable teaches us then of the sovereignty of God who by the Word gives faith and hardens the hearts of the hardened. He does this by the work of Christ our Prophet, King who became the priest and gave His life that the Word might be sown and revealed to the Church. Christ sows the Word now through the Church. Our sowing, like Christ's, is to be done in accordance to the Father's desire and glory. The seed is still the same, the whole Word of God from Genesis to Revelation including Mark 4:1-20! We wait patiently as God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit gives faith. And for us the covenant people of God we must respond. We must bear fruit

See the masses who have heard the gospel preached and read countless of times and still they do not believe. Our work is to sow, then in praise let us wait upon God who by His spirit prepares the soil. See our hearts were like a hardened path, or a rocky soil or a weed filled path until the Spirit prepared our hearts by the Word to receive the Word. Now there is a mystery revealed! He who ears to hear: let him hear! Repent and believe for the Kingdom of God is hand. Surely you understand! Amen

Mark 4:1-20

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