**The Parable of the Soils** 1/10/23

Read: John 15:1-17, Mark 4:1-20

Text: Mark 4:1-20

Psalms: 49:1-9, 119:33-40, 26:1-8, 116:1-9, 117

At school I read ‘Animal Farm’ by George Orwell. I loved this story about animals taking on human characteristics, and eventually driving away the human owner of the farm. But my teacher started talking about this book being an allegory, about it referring to Stalin and Communist Russia. I would have been content with the story about pigs rising up to take over the farm, but learned that this story had a much deeper meaning. Orwell wrote at a time when relations between Britain and Russia were good. He was critical of Stalin, but even writing in the form of an allegory he still had difficulty getting this book published in 1946.

When Jesus began preaching and teaching in the synagogue he did so in straightforward terms: ‘The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel’ (1:15). But the political leaders, the scribes and Pharisees, took exception to Jesus and his claims and started opposing him. His teaching became more focused on his disciples, on those who believed and followed him. He moved out of the synagogue to teach in open spaces, and to teach using parables. He told this parable while sitting in a boat on the edge of the lake (4:1); the boat was necessary to avoid the crush of the crowd.

Jesus started teaching in parables that, ‘hearing they may not understand’ (4:12). Parables are short stories with a spiritual lesson, a lesson not understood by all his listeners. These stories related to everyday scenes, often rural scenes familiar to his listeners. They may have been able to see a farmer on the hillside next to the lake at the time of telling this story. Note that not every detail of the parable necessarily has a spiritual meaning; some have just one lesson for us. This parable is about four types of soil representing four types of human heart, more than it is about the sower; despite what some scholars say. The seed is the word of God (4:14) which must be sown in all the world, as I said when going to the mission field, but this is not the point of this parable. Jesus is not saying, ‘Don’t waste seed by throwing it on the path’!

Parables are intended to both reveal and conceal spiritual truths. Some will go away saying, ‘That was an interesting story’, while others, like you I hope, will go away saying, ‘Which type of soil is my heart?’ Jesus said, ‘He who has ears to hear, let him hear!’ (4:9). Mark has Jesus beginning the parable saying, ‘Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow’ (4:3). We begin important teaching, not stories with the word, ‘Listen’. ‘His parables are designed to test, not the intelligence, but the spiritual responsiveness of his hearers’. Whenever the gospel is preached there will be those who hear, but don’t hear, those who see, but don’t see.

There are just three parables in this chapter, compared to seven in Mathews’ gospel. Two are ‘kingdom parables’ beginning with, ‘the kingdom of heaven is like’; this is not a kingdom parable. This parable is the best known of all the parables, but not necessarily the best understood. It is usually called the ‘Parable of the sower’ but the title, ‘Parable of the soils’ is better because the focus is upon four different types of soil. Every human heart, including yours, falls into one of these categories, hard, shallow, overcrowded, or good, depending on how you receive the gospel of Jesus Christ.

**1. Hard heart**

‘As he sowed, some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds came and devoured it’ (4:4). Seed was broadcast by hand from a shoulder bag. Around a field, or maybe through it, would be a walking path. Seed falling on this path would not get covered by soil; birds would soon find and eat this seed. In explaining what this meant to a small group of disciples, Jesus said that this soil refers to those who hear the word but do not understand it (Mat 13:19). What happens is Satan comes and snatches the word from their heart, ‘lest they should believe and be saved’ (4:15, Luke 8:12).

This parable is about hearing, believing, and being saved. The first person’s heart is like stone. It is hardened by sin, by the love of sin. The gospel is heard but it fails to impact the mind and heart of the hearer; it is like water of a duck’s back! People who do not believe in the devil, or pay no regard to his tactics or his power, are sitting ducks for the devil. He is doing his utmost to keep men and women from hearing the word and, if they do hear, to keep that word from entering their heart. He does not want one more person to be saved.

Where do people hear the word of God? They hear it when the Bible is read. They hear it when the word is preached. ‘How shall they hear without a preacher’ (Rom 10:14). Where is the word preached? Most commonly in the church. How can Satan stop a person going to church? By threats of violence or imprisonment? Yes, although such threats often backfire and the church grows. Satan can be more subtle. Let me suggest a few of his subtle ways. As you are getting ready to come to church a relative or friend drops by. What do you do? Your child is invited to a party on Sunday morning. What do you do?

The word is also heard when the Bible is read at home. Can Satan keep you from reading your Bible? How often have you been too busy to read your Bible and pray? You may have visitors at the time you have family prayer. Do you invite them to join you in reading the Bible? Your reading the Bible and your coming to church may have an effect on whether others hear and are saved - your children in particular.

Even while hearing the word of God, Satan tries to distract people. He tries to get in the other ear with some sort of distraction. He tries to distract people with visual things. Some churches have pictures and icons plastered over the walls. Nowadays they have pictures flashing across the screen. Some say these help with understanding the word but the hearer is more likely to be hindered than helped. How will they hear without a preacher! (Rom 10:14). Let us be aware of distractions when the word is being preached. People going in and out are distracting to others. An evangelist in India was acutely aware of the devil prowling around when he was preaching the word. He asked for the doors to be closed so no one could come in or go out. He knew he was in a spiritual battle. He wanted the word of God to be clearly heard and to enter the hearts of those who heard it. He prayed it would be established and bring forth fruitful lives.

**2. Shallow heart**

In the field described in this parable were rocky outcrops. The soil in such places was shallow. The seed germinated quickly and flourished but only for a short time. When things got a bit dry these plants started to wither because they had a shallow root system (4:5, 6). This soil type, this shallow soil, represents individuals who hear the word and respond with gladness (4:16, 17). They are enthusiastic about the gospel. They may join a church and get involved in everything. Life is great. They are sailing along fine, but then something happens. It may be trouble in the fellowship; it is amazing how many people stop coming to church because they do not like someone who attends! It may be trouble in their personal life. There may be relationship problems at home, sickness, or loss of a job. If the word has not sunk deep into their hearts through good teaching, study of the Bible, and the work of the Holy Spirit, they will stumble. Those who ‘have no root in themselves endure only for a time’ (4:17).

Stephen, the first martyr, was a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit. The word entered to the depths of his heart. His heart was filled with the knowledge and the love of Jesus Christ. In Hebrews 11 we read of other men and women who were tested and persecuted for their faith. You can read of yet others, especially the Reformers, in a history book. In every age Christians have faced persecution because of the word of God (4:17). We may know little of persecution arising from the Bible; although this may soon change. Believers are being persecuted today in many parts of the world. Unless they have deep roots in the word of God they will stumble and fall. Those who think church is all about food and fun, about good music and festivals, will not stand when persecution comes. Persecuted Christians do not get to have feasts and festivals.

**3. Overcrowded heart**

Ever since the Fall farmers have struggled with weeds coming up in the crop they plant. Weeds usually grow faster and smother the crop unless they are controlled by cultivation or herbicides. In the scene pictured by Jesus, some seed fell among thorns or weeds (4:7). The weeds sprang up and choked the crop. This soil was not hard, or shallow, but it was full of weeds.

What does this soil represent? It represents hearts that get strangled by ‘the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things’; it represents hearts and lives that ‘become unfruitful’ (4:19). Luke calls ‘other things’ the ‘pleasures of life’ (Luke 8:14). These people heard the word and took it in. They established a good root system. Yet they fall away because of prosperity and the pleasures of this world. These people have the potential for spiritual growth but, as Leon Morris writes, ‘Life will hold just so much, and these people fill their lives with so many things that there is no room for spiritual fruit’. How tragic!

The materialistic life is all about filling one’s life with things, with treasures and pleasures, with goods and gadgets of all kinds. There are hundreds of acres of factories is China with the sole purpose of producing new things for people in the west to consume- and consume them we do, at a vast rate. We work to buy things, and then worship things- call them idols if you like. Some work long hours, maybe in two jobs, and then in their rest time, including the Lord’s Day, they are out buying more things, or enjoying the things they buy; the new boat has to be taken out, the new dress worn to a party etc. Riches and the pleasures of life have choked the spiritual life out of so many in our day. What about you? Good to see you here worshipping today, but what about next week?

Moses was brought up in Pharaoh’s palace with all the treasures and pleasures the world had to offer. But his mother had taught him not to be deceived by riches. One day he realised that these things were not enduring. He turned away from the short-lived pleasures of sin. He turned to the Lord. He realised that far greater riches are to be found in Christ than in this world. Are you looking to the things of this world that are passing away, or to eternal rewards found only in Jesus Christ?

**4. Good heart**

We come to the fourth and final type of ground on which some seed fell, friable and fertile ground. Seed that fell on this good ground yielded a crop, ‘some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred’ (4:8, Mat 13:23 has the reverse order). Why does Jesus mention these numbers? All good ground produces a crop but the yield varies. It is interesting that a head of wheat contains on average thirty grains. If a head can hold only thirty grains how can the plant produce more? It multiplies the number of tillers. It produces another head- sixty, and then another - ninety or a hundred. Amazing! Clearly, Jesus was thinking about a bountiful harvest with a hundredfold increase. Are we to think of fruit as proclaiming the gospel such that one hundred others believe?

The good ground represents an open, receptive heart, ‘an honest and good heart’ (Luke 8:15). This individual hears the word and, with the help of the Holy Spirit, understands and accepts it. They know they have found something precious and hold on to it (Luke 8:15). They say, ‘This is the most important thing I have ever heard. I know this is the truth. I will cling to it with all my being. I will love the Lord with all my heart, all my soul, all my mind, and all my strength. I will love him all my days’. The word grows deep into their heart and takes control of every aspect of their life. They are truly saved, saved by grace through faith, and they bring forth the fruit of salvation. They bear fruit to the glory of God. Jesus said, ‘He who remains in me and I in him, bears much fruit’ (John 15: 5). That sounds like a commentary on the good soil here in this parable.

Each of us must examine our own heart in the light of this parable, remembering that bearing fruit is about patient endurance (Luke 8:15). Will trouble or persecution because of the word cause you to stumble? Or will your faith be choked by the cares and riches of this world. Such choking can be a gradual process, so be on your guard. Be serious about prayer and regular in worship. Pray for yourself, and family or friends who hear the gospel that neither your heart nor theirs will be like hard ground, or shallow ground, or weedy ground, but like good ground.