

Seeds and power: Mark Bigland-Pritchard, 2017:Jul:16

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying:

"Listen! A sower went out to sow.

And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up.

Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away.

Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them.

Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!"

Then the disciples came and asked him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" He answered, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For 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. The reason I speak to them in parables is that 'seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.' With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says:

'You will indeed listen, but never understand,
and you will indeed look, but never perceive.
For this people's heart has grown dull,
and their ears are hard of hearing,
and they have shut their eyes;
so that they might not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,
and understand with their heart and turn –
and I would heal them.'

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

"Hear then the parable of the sower:

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.

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.

As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing.

But as for what was 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 sixty, and in another thirty."

Matthew 13:1-23

This is part 1 of a 2-part sermon. I pray that God will work in all of us so that each of us hears what God wants us to hear and to act on.

For me, summer is often a time for reflection and self-examination: much of what I will say assumes it is for you too. As I thought about preaching today, I found myself thinking a lot about Dr Alan Kreider, who died this last May after a life dedicated to Christian teaching, research, writing, preaching and action. Alan had a big influence in my life – he was a mentor to me at a formative time in my 20s. Some of you probably also knew him.

When Alan was Director at the London Mennonite Centre, one of the texts which he and his wife Ellie treated as foundational to the Centre's work was from Romans 14:17:

The kingdom of God is not food and drink, but justice, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

So when, in the parable that we've just heard, Jesus uses the image of the seed to represent the beginnings in us of the kingdom of God, that's what he's talking about - justice, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. "Kingdom" is a starkly political word – it's about how society is structured, and power relations, and to whom you surrender authority. But for Jesus, the kingdom is about right relationship rather than, for example, economic growth or political dominance. Right relationship is the fruit of the kingdom which Jesus came to initiate, and it starts not in power structures but in the lives of his followers.

And through the work of Jesus, and through the empowering of the Holy Spirit, we bear fruit. This church is full of people living out the values of the Kingdom, and I'll say a bit more about that in part 2.

But could we bear more fruit?

I'd like us to think a bit about what are the obstacles that prevent us from bearing more. Jesus puts them in 3 categories:

- There's the seeds on the path: the situation where the kingdom cannot grow in us because of lack of understanding. The word for understanding is about more than head knowledge – it's more about perceiving clearly, or spiritual understanding, or wisdom. So this category would include lack of vision. And it could include failure to actually trust that Jesus has overcome sin and death and evil and so enabled us to live differently.
- There's the seeds on rocky ground: the situation where the kingdom cannot grow much in you because of an inadequate root system – maybe your faith is inadequately nurtured, maybe it's more a matter of emotional excitement or intellectual speculation than something deep and relational and fundamental to who you are.
- There's the seeds among thorns: the situation where the kingdom cannot grow much in us because it is crowded out by the cares of this world and by concern for wealth. Too much worry. Too much busy-ness. Too much seeking for money, or things, or comfort, or worldly security, or importance, or power, or control, or fame.

This is where I get you to work. In your bulletin you will find some pieces of paper like this. There are white pieces and there are [other colour] pieces. You should also have some spare white pieces in your pew. I would like you to take one of the white pieces and think about yourself, or about a friend, or about someone that you are praying for or seeking to help. You can use more than one piece for more than one person if you like. And I would like you to just tick the box that fits you or the person you're thinking about most closely. If this is a difficult exercise, don't worry too much, but I hope that nearly everyone feels they can do this. Except, of course, those people who are themselves perfect and who have either perfect friends or no friends at all.

Then, on the [other colour] piece, I would like you to do exactly the same thing, except this time about our church as a body.

This whole exercise is, of course, totally anonymous. When you've finished, I'd like to ask the ushers to collect up your sheets, and I will go out with [volunteer] to count them. The result of the count may affect the content of part 2.

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.

For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

Romans 8:1-11

Just to balance out part 1 a bit, I'd like us to think about all the ways in which this church is living the values of the Kingdom – either as individuals or as a whole. Careful patient relational work with offenders and ex-offenders. Careful patient relational work with hospital patients. Work to support youth at risk. Care for elders. Offering hospitality. Facilitating legal support for the most vulnerable in our society. Building understanding and positive relations with First Nations people. Supporting MCC. Working with MDS. Supporting the Food Grains Bank. Building a local food movement, and growing high-quality food in an environmentally-responsible way. Working through municipal politics to make both Saskatoon and Osler better and more just places to live. Generously giving time and money to support refugees. Volunteering at Friendship Inn. Supporting and nurturing our young people. Building thoughtful and sometime innovative worship. Working for a better education system. And there are people here who just care about whoever crosses their path. And people who pray prayers of intercession. What have I missed out? (allow time for answers) And that's just things that people are doing now.

Two questions come to my mind about all this good activity. Firstly, how do we know we are doing the right thing? – not just something good but something that God wants me, specifically, to do, and to do now. And secondly, how do I maintain the energy, the stamina, the mental, physical and emotional capacity to keep going?

I think I will let the first question be answered by implication in what I have to say. When I ask my secular colleagues in the climate justice movement that second question, they sometimes talk about having to have an energising event from time to time – a gathering, a conference, a successful demonstration, a big rally. Sometimes they talk about meditation or mindfulness. But mostly the response is along the lines of “yes, we need to talk in the group about self-care”.

I don't think that any of that is necessarily wrong, but I don't find it to be enough. Yes, we do need to look after ourselves – and there is the biblical concept of Sabbath, after all - but the way that “self-care” tends to be framed is highly individualistic, conforming more to the values of modern western society than to the gospel. It doesn't seem to have been a priority with Jesus. When he went off alone to pray for hours on end, that wasn't just Oprah-style “me time”. It was about staying in intimate contact with God the Father - and consequently also with his purpose on earth. If a need arose he would break off and deal with it – it was all just part of the flow of that relationship with his Father. If loving your neighbour as yourself is to mean much, you do need to love yourself - but Jesus also talks about denying ourselves and taking up our cross. So “self-care” is not a sufficient answer.

Today's text from Romans points towards something better. “You are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit, for the Spirit of God dwells in you”. And then that promise, that bold declaration: “If the Spirit of Him that raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he that raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through His Spirit that dwells in you”. I don't think that's just life after death but a real sense of being alive now.

Being “in the flesh” is about reacting to stimuli with our natural survival mechanisms – our fight/flight responses, our prioritising of our own security and our own provision, and our indulging of various types of appetite. By contrast, being “in the Spirit” enables us to be satisfied with “enough”. More than that, being in the Spirit enables us to trust God for our protection and provision – one of the first things I learnt from Alan Kreider was that faith is all about where we go for those two things.

Let's come back to the parable of the sower. [Include numbers from count] The lesson I take from today's texts is actually quite similar whichever box you ticked:

- For the seeds falling on the path, pray to be filled with the Holy Spirit for deeper understanding and wisdom.
- For the seeds falling on rocky ground, pray to be filled with the Holy Spirit so as to have a more intimate relationship with God.
- For the seeds falling among thorns, pray for inner transformation through the power of the Spirit, so that the priorities of “the flesh” give way to the priorities of the Spirit.

[Possibly some further comments on the number of ticks in each category]

And so, I find I regularly need to do these three things:

- Invite God’s Spirit to come in. However many times I have done so before – because we all leak. That’s the easy bit.
- And invite God’s Spirit to direct my work and my life. That’s more difficult for me, because one dimension of my “flesh” is a pretty determined ego. But the outcome is real joy, and the growth of justice and peace.
- There are times when we are not clear what specifically we are being called to – and this applies to the calling of this church as well as the calling of any individual. At those times, then I suggest we follow Alan Kreider’s simple but profound advice to his AMBS students – ask God: “what are you doing, and how can I help?” Then, when we get an answer, which usually takes some time for me, because I’m not that good at listening, rely on the guidance and the power of the Spirit to make it possible.

I’ll close with this. Ultimately receiving the Holy Spirit is a deeply personal experience which it is difficult to describe, but I will try to tell you about what I think of as my “first time”. Back in 1981 I was spending weekdays studying for my Masters degree. At weekends I was doing civil disobedience for peace. Every Friday evening I would cycle off about 50km to Molesworth peace camp, and every Sunday evening or Monday morning I would cycle back again. The peace camp was a witness against the nuclear arms race, on a site where the US air force was planning to house nuclear-armed cruise missiles. My cycle route was mostly on quiet roads where I was as likely to meet an owl as a car, so it was a time for reflection. And I needed a lot of reflection because, despite my determined ego, I felt totally out of my depth. I was afraid of the threat of nuclear war – that’s a natural human reaction. And I had deep anxiety about what could happen to me in my interactions with military police or with US personnel or with local people who viewed nuclear weapons as a means of deterring the communist threat. Given the strength of feelings at the time, that was also a natural human reaction. On one of those rides, I was considering whether this really was what I should be doing, when I had a sudden sense of the presence of God, and a power filling me. The anxiety and the fear dropped away, and while they would keep coming back I now somehow knew experientially that God was bigger than the military-industrial complex and bigger than the taunts and threats which I would have to face. I was empowered for service.

The things which I have felt called to have changed over the years, but, whenever I have at least come somewhere close to understanding where God wants me, that power has been available. I believe it is available for all of us. We just have to ask.

Benediction (adapted from Ephesians 3:14-20):

We pray to the Father from whom every family in heaven and earth takes its name:

May we be strengthened in our inner being with power through His Spirit;

May Christ dwell in our hearts through faith, as we are rooted and grounded in love;

May we have the power to comprehend what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that we may be filled with the fullness of God.

Amen