

Practicing the Way Session Three

Spiritual Formation 2

The parable of the sower is a classic scripture to have at a Harvest Service. Jesus' use of farming problems as an illustration of the spiritual life is well known.

If Jesus used this parable today about farming problems perhaps he would include Brexit, Inheritance tax, climate change, dry summers and Jeremy Clarkson.

Instead we have stony paths, rocky ground, thorns and finally good soil.

In its day the people of Jesus time were wanting to know how God would rescue them from evil. Like a farmer starting a new agricultural year, God would sow a field with crops that would bring in a harvest. Isaiah, Jeremiah and other prophets had spoken this way. Seedtime and harvest as part of God's created order had long been a picture of how God the creator would act to redeem the people of God from their sins, rescue them from exile and deliver them from oppressors. Here comes Jesus with a reputation for bringing hope and new life and his listeners were expecting a story of how Israel would be restored to its own land and achieve the greatness they dreamt of. Instead, they got this parable which spoke more about failure – all the seed that didn't produce a good crop, than about success.

It's a strange story. What farmer wastes two thirds of his seed like that? Maybe Jesus was exaggerating the normal problems of farming in a rugged hill country to make a point. But what was the point? Would God have difficulty with this project of hope for all humanity? Were they going to have to wait even longer. What sort of good harvest was Jesus thinking would happen. After all a hundred-fold yield was quite spectacular. How would it come about?

This parable flows into the series we are going to start on Thursday looking at hope and God's hope for us here and now and in the future. What does the bible say about death resurrection, heaven, hell, salvation and the future of the earth.

But it also follows on from last week's sermon when I looked at spiritual formation. How do we grow. How do we change? More often than not our formation is unintentional.

I said Spiritual formation isn't a Christian thing or even a religious thing; it's a human thing. To be human is to grow, to mature, to adapt over time. Formation is simply the process by which our "spirit," or inner person, is formed into a particular shape or character. Over a lifetime, we are spiritually formed by a complex alchemy of genetic inheritance, family patterns, childhood wounds, education, habits, decisions, relationships, environments, and more. The problem is, most of our spiritual formation is unintentional. It just happens.

If you follow Jesus, if you want to be with Jesus and become like him then you have to be intentional about it. That means looking at your habits, your relationships, the stories you tell yourself and try to live up to, that influence your understanding of life and your worth, and the environment you live in. You could describe this as checking out whether you are planting yourself in good soil. If you are serious about following Jesus and want that to change your life for good – you need to check out whether you are in good soil.

John Mark Comer in his book *Practicing the Way* suggest that good soil will involve being in community of like-minded people who can encourage you in your faith and practice. It will involve you being open to the teachings of faith, the scriptures. It will involve doing some of the spiritual practices, such as silence, solitude, prayer, fasting, generosity, service, sabbath, community, witness. More about them in a couple of weeks time. And it will be about intentionally abiding in the Holy Spirit, being open to an experience of God within you and around you.

That's all well and good. But the parable of the sower is realistic about life. We are easily blown of course. We can be discouraged in our faith. We can be distracted from our faith. We can come to be critical and resent our faith. Spiritual formation which is intentional – i.e. we want to become like Jesus -is not straight forward and many fall away. And those who are left can often regress or stagnate or become disillusioned.

The gospels have it all. The word Jesus speaks changes the lives of some and falls on deaf ears with others. Some allow evil to snatch the words of faith away straight away. Some have given in to cynical and sneering critical reactions. Some seem to be enthusiastic but when the gospel starts to make demands on them, they quickly show that the word never really went down and became rooted in their hearts. Some really do have a deep-rooted hearing of the word but then allow other things to take root in their hearts as well – a desire for riches, and pleasures for example. Some get choked up; stuff happens, hurtful stuff, unpleasant stuff – the thorns of life. These are all ways of getting stuck in our journey of faith and not finding our way through to the joy and peace of knowing Christ.

As we read the parable today, we should ask ourselves : are we too stuck somewhere? Are we in danger of any of these reactions? Do we have the desire, the intent, to become unstuck? To move on?

But the promise of the parable is that some seed really does bear fruit. This takes time. Luke version of the parable of the sower mentions the word persevering. Its not there in Matthew and Marks version. It takes time. You have to be patient. And sometimes it involves hard work. A casual glance at the scriptures, or dropping in to church now and

again is probably not enough. Care and thought needs to be put into the task of growing in the way of Jesus and being part of the kingdom of God. Stones may need removing from the soil; thorns may need uprooting. More on that in future weeks. But when hearing brings understanding we know we're getting close to the goal, to the heart of the gospel and our lives will not only be more peaceful and joyful but we will bear fruit, our lives will make a difference to the world around us.

There's been a few times in my life when I was in danger of being blown off course, of the seed of faith being stifled in my life.

When I was made unemployed after graduating from university in the eighties I became one of Maggie Thatcher's three million dole queue. Being unemployed can make you question your worth and value. It can lead you to be depressed and hopeless, wondering if you will ever make it good. And as a Christian I had a bit of a naive view that prayer would answer all that. Ask God for a job and hey presto by magic it would turn up like a slot machine. Put your prayer in and get the answer out thank you very much.

Six interviews later and no job. Feeling fairly despondent and what was faith worth. It wasn't delivering what I was expecting. This was a raw deal.

What kept me from going under was the power of community. People in my church just meeting up with me, inviting me round for meals, taking me out and therefore taking me out of myself. If the teachings of the church and the spiritual practices felt cold and irrelevant the community element saw me through by God's grace.

Another time when I nearly lost it was feeling my singleness and wanting a partner and getting attracted to a girl who whilst beautiful wouldn't have been good for me and certainly would not have been good for my faith. I nearly walked into something that I would regret. Fortunately, though hard to take at the time, another guy barged in on the scene and stole her away from me. I was jealous and jilted at the time but hindsight is a wonderful thing.

Romans 5 says

We also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

These trials can be the crucible to form and forge us into people of joy and peace and to realise it is by God's grace we are here. So we don't go wagging the finger at those who have fallen away -it could have been me.

But sadly, we also know the reverse of this text from Romans. Suffering can crush you, trials and distractions can pull you away from faith in Christ.

By God's grace we are here. And now we can decide to set our direction and our intention to follow Christ. Now we can pursue good soil to grow faith and Christlikeness in the hope of harvesting the fruit of a transformed life for the good of all.