

**THE MESSAGE OF JESUS  
AND HIS KINGDOM**  
The truth that could change everything



**Part 6 'Jesus the Artist'**

**Matthew 13**

**8<sup>th</sup> November 2009**

Imagine for a moment that you are in the large crowd that gathered one morning on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. You watch Jesus getting into a boat and pushing out into the middle of the inlet. He stands up to speak and everyone can hear his voice coming across the water, clear and crisp in the morning air. Matthew tells us, '*He had much to say to them, and he said it all in parables.*'

In our series we are trying to get to the heart of Jesus' message about the Kingdom of God. But in doing so you cannot help but notice that this message comes to us again and again in this unique literary form known as *parable*. Though Matthew is obviously exaggerating somewhat to make his point, in chapter 13:34 he says, '*He did not say anything to them without using a parable*'. The question for us is why would Jesus do this. Why would he convey his essential message using an art form that was made up of short, fictional stories?

We have just read the first in a whole series of parables collected together by Matthew in chapter 13 - the parable of the seed and the soils. Now it is clear that Jesus wasn't commenting on the farming problems of his day but rather was explaining the strange way the kingdom of God was arriving. Many of his hearers were expecting something big and obvious to happen, like tanks suddenly appearing on the streets. They were looking for a new king to overthrow Herod, a new and legitimate priest to oust the present high priest and in particular for a Jewish movement to get rid of the hated pagans who were their ultimate masters. Human kingdoms sadly are advanced by force and violence with falling bombs and flying bullets. We are seeing that daily on our TV screens and on this remembrance Sunday we are remembering the tragic cost in human lives of such conflicts. But none of that was happening. Jesus was keen to open their eyes and ears to see and hear what God was actually doing. Amazingly, God's kingdom was advancing by stories, tales that are quickly dismissed and easily misunderstood.

Each of the parables in this collection ends in the same way, rather like a health warning on the packet. *Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear*. It would seem that as Jesus tells each story he is saying to them: *Don't just listen with your ears, listen with your heart. Don't just hear my words, hear my deeper meaning. Don't listen to the literal meaning which is accessible to your rational mind. Seek deeper for a meaning that requires that you make a personal investment of will and imagination*. Last time we looked at Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus and then with the Samaritan woman. Jesus was saying to Nicodemus – don't just think I'm talking about literal, physical birth. And to the woman at the well, he was saying, I'm not talking about water you carry in a bucket. To each he was talking about something much deeper.

When you look at each parable you soon realise that each one involves something that is hidden and then becomes visible. In image after image, there is this hidden to visible pattern. We have seeds in which are hidden the potential of a mature plant, seeds which are themselves hidden in the soil until they mysteriously germinate and grow. There are weeds whose identity is initially hidden because they resemble grain. They are secretly planted among the grain until their identity is revealed at harvest. There is a mustard seed

which is planted, hidden under the soil whose potential for growth eventually becomes clear. There is yeast kneaded or hidden in a lump of dough, where it rises mysteriously and visibly transforms the dough. There is treasure hidden in a field, an exceptional pearl hidden among average pearls. There is a mix of edible and inedible fish hidden under the water till they are brought to the surface in a net. The pattern is repeated again and again.

And then in each parable there is the element of surprise – a surprising variety of harvests, a surprising infestation of weeds and a surprising answer about what to do with them, a surprising size of the full-grown mustard plant, and so on. Are we beginning to get some idea of how parables work? They hide the truth so that we need to do more than simply *hear with our ears* on a literal level. We have to commit ourselves to an imaginative search for the meaning – a meaning that will surprise us when we dis-cover or unhide it for ourselves.

Imagine yourself as one of the disciples. You hear Jesus tell the first parable about the seed and soils and you can't figure it out – you've got ears but you can't hear. So you come back to Jesus with a fascinating question – *'Why do you speak to the people in parables?'* Interestingly enough, you don't ask the obvious question – *'What does this parable mean?'* But you ask why: *'Jesus, why are you doing this? You're telling all these stories, but nobody is getting the point. Can't you make it clearer?'*

Do you see what is happening? You are being drawn back to Jesus with your questions. If you were given easy answers and obvious explanations, you could listen, achieve a level of understanding and then go on your way. But the parable entices you to come back to the teacher, and that is the goal. We thought last time that at the heart of terms like the *kingdom of God* and *eternal life*, is the idea of an interactive relationship. That is the goal and that is what parables can achieve. Parables entice their hearers into new territory. They invite us to ask questions and so stay connected to the teacher himself.

Who hasn't felt confused by some of the parables of Jesus? When that happens we have a choice. We can respond with pride and impatient anger – *I've no idea what he is saying. This is a waste of time* – which makes us walk away. Or we can respond with eager and curious humility – *I can't let this go. I must know more!* – which keeps us coming back. In that way parables can do so much more than merely inform their hearers. Parables have the power to help transform them.

Jesus' response is as fascinating as the disciples' question. He explains that they are being given a special gift: *the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven*. Quoting the prophet Isaiah, he explains that when people's hearts become hardened they lose the ability to see and hear at deeper levels. The crowds might hear Jesus' words with their physical ears but if the soil of their hearts is not good they will miss the message.

If Jesus' primary purpose had been to convey information, then he would have been wiser not to have used parables. But his purpose was something much more important than information; it was transformation. That's what parables can do. They can shape the heart of the person who is willing and eager to enter into an ongoing, interactive, persistent relationship with the teacher. The parables of Jesus help shape the heart that is humble enough to admit it does not already understand and thirsty enough to ask questions. A parable renders its hearers not as experts or scholars but as children.

Do you see how some of the sayings of Jesus begin to make sense, sayings about the kingdom of God belonging to children, about needing to become like children to enter the

kingdom, about needing to be born again? Children learn by asking questions of those they trust. They are curious, inquisitive and dependent.

This is what *repentance* is all about. Fundamentally, the word means to *rethink* – to reconsider the direction you are taking and consider a new one – to admit you might be wrong, to give your life a second thought. As Jesus said to Nicodemus that night, it means having to begin again, become like a child again - be born again.

It is no wonder Jesus makes his message a secret, no wonder he hides it in metaphor and parables. If we are too 'grown-up', too independent, too self-centred and know-it-all - the parables give us the opportunity to become what we need to be – teachable children. And if we don't have time for childish stories about seeds and yeast and sheep, they expose our arrogance and impatience, and they shut us out.

As we read the gospels we see that many people were not teachable children. They didn't ask questions. They didn't soften their hearts. They didn't seek the *secrets of the kingdom*. Like the villagers in the synagogue at Nazareth who heard Jesus' sermon on Isaiah but were unwilling to accept what he said. The word was trampled underfoot and the birds of the air snatched it away.

Others did get the message and they didn't like it. It didn't win their hearts. Like the Pharisee who invited Jesus to dine because he wanted to give him a hearing. But what Jesus did and said was so unexpected and shocking that he quickly tried to distance himself. The seed had landed among the stones of prejudice. It made them angry. On one occasion Jesus told a detailed parable about some tenants who rented a vineyard. When the owner sent his servants and eventually his son to collect the rent, the tenants resorted to horrific violence to hang on to their wealth. The religious leaders got the meaning and hated it because, according to Luke, '*they knew he had spoken this parable against them.*' (Luke 20:19) Their hearts were hardened, determined to pursue their own hostile agenda. The seed had landed among thorns and was being choked.

But then in Matthew 8 we come across a Gentile centurion who believes that Jesus has the authority to command even the serious illness of his servant to depart. Along comes Levi, the tax-collector, who leaves his shady business and follows Jesus. An unnamed woman shows by her extravagant behaviour with an alabaster jar of ointment that she has experienced God's forgiveness deep within her heart. Already in the first few weeks of Jesus' kingdom project there are many who show that the word he is speaking is bearing fruit. Even among the Pharisees a few were won over. There was Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. And later there was a Pharisee named Saul who became known as Paul.

But at the end of the day, it is all about the heart. Hearts can't be coerced. Nobody can be forced. Hearts can be invited, attracted, intrigued, enticed and challenged but not forced. That's the genius of the parable. It doesn't grab you by the lapels and scream, '*Repent, you vile sinner!*' It works gently, subtly, indirectly. It respects your dignity. It doesn't batter you into submission but leaves you free to discover and choose for yourself. Perhaps that's why the message of the kingdom comes, not as a simple formula or list of information, not as an angry threat or ultimatum, but instead as a secret hidden in a parable, like a treasure hidden in a field, like a seed hidden in soil, like yeast hidden in dough.

Tom Wright uses the illustration of a maze, suggesting that the parables are like mazes, designed to challenge his listeners to work out for themselves how to get to the heart of things. Sometimes the hearers get lost, and Jesus then provides a map so they can see

where they are and then help them to see how to get to where they ought to be. As with most mazes there are several ways of going wrong but only one way of going right. Jesus had already seen, in the responses of many people to his announcement of God's kingdom, that there were certain common reactions which all lead to dead ends; but he knows there is one reaction which will lead to the person becoming part of God's new work, a kingdom-person who will be like a seed that produces a great harvest.

How many of us know we have taken the wrong turning in the maze? Maybe we have reached one of those dead ends and settled down. We've stopped searching for the centre. How many of us have lost that sense of excitement? We are no longer curious and thirsty for God's word. Let's pray that through the Word and the Spirit our hearts are transformed and we come back to Jesus.

*For use in your*

**Cell, Accountability Group or on your own**

**Pray** for ears and hearts that can hear God's word.

**Read Matthew 13** and explore imaginatively each story.

*Like the crowds on the lakeshore that day, our task, again and again as we read scripture and think about what God is doing in our own day, is to think it through and figure it out. It won't always be easy. Christianity isn't about cosy little lessons to make us feel better. It is about what God is doing in the world – what he's already done in Jesus and what he wants to do through us today.*

- How are we going to seize the opportunities presented by Christmas?
- What sort of stories ought we to be telling to get people to listen?
- Where can we tell them so that people will be able to hear, like the crowds on the lakeshore?
- What can we do to sow the word more successfully?

*Are we ready for the unexpected? Or are we too in danger of deciding so firmly what God ought to be doing in our lives, our church, our world that we become blind and deaf to him when he tries to tell us that it's actually going to be rather different?      **Pray into this.***

How much mature growth, how much fruit, is the word producing in my life?