

Sermon for GS and CC – Sunday 16th July 2023 Rev Alison Bruton

Readings:

Romans 8: 1-11

Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

I wonder what you remember of your school days and in particular what you did or did not understand at the end of it all. For me I found the study of English really difficult whereas I found the concepts covered in the sciences and maths pretty straightforward and easy to get to grips with, hence my subsequent teaching career in this field.

When I was reading our Gospel passage for this morning it made me think about what it means to really understand something. For example, in terms of other languages, I suppose it means that we can understand and speak a language that is not our native tongue, but this doesn't necessarily come easily – having two children who are fluent in other languages I am all too aware of the time, effort and practice that it takes to get to this point. However, our granddaughter, who has just turned 5, is being brought up bilingual and for her it doesn't seem to be quite such a challenge!

Having a background in teaching I can well recall those moments in the classroom when a student's eyes lit up and a smile appeared on their face 'ah yes, I get it now'. These moments were really precious as they demonstrated that the information had moved from being head knowledge to heart knowledge, and that the principle could be applied, with practice of course, in new and unusual situations.

In our Gospel reading we see Jesus referring to understanding when he explains the meaning of the parable of the sower to his disciples. In v19 Jesus refers to what results when there is a lack of understanding of the word of the kingdom and later, in v23 to what happens when the word is understood; here we see that the impact of that understanding is a great harvest. Historically a seven to tenfold harvest (that is 7-10 seeds coming from one seed planted) was considered average, so we see here that what Jesus is talking about is really remarkable, an abundant yield, well beyond what might be expected.

Sandwiched between these two references to understanding Jesus explains two other types of bad soil, rocky ground and thorny ground, neither of which are able to nurture the seeds to fruitfulness. While Jesus doesn't actually use the word 'understanding' in relation to these two illustrations it is perhaps reasonable to infer that throughout his explanation of the three types of bad soil he is implying that the underlying issue is a lack of understanding of what the 'word of the kingdom' or as we might feel more comfortable to describe it 'the Gospel' means, in particular its implications for discipleship. We're not just talking about head knowledge, but rather heart knowledge and the ability to apply our understanding day to day as we live out our Christian lives.

As we look at the explanations that Jesus gives in v19-23 it is worth noting that the failure of the seed to grow is as a result of the soil not the seed itself. The word of God cannot fail, it is only the growing medium that impacts on the fruit it will bear.

In the first example, where the seed falls on the path, the lack of understanding is perhaps due to a hardness of heart and an unwillingness to listen to the message we are hearing; perhaps it makes us feel uncomfortable or is demanding too much of us. Whatever the

explanation for the hardness the outcome is that the words of salvation and forgiveness are dismissed and have no impact.

In the second example, where seeds fall on rocky ground, the lack of a good root causes the plant to wither. So what do we do in the garden where the ground is full of stones and rocks? It takes a lot of hard, often back breaking work, to prepare the soil so it can support the growth of the plants. Jesus is saying here I think that to be fruitful for God does take some effort. We can get excited about what God is calling us to do and decide to follow it up and act differently; perhaps we decide to spend more time in prayer or perhaps visit neighbours we don't know too well. However, if we haven't prepared our lives well enough and understood what the long term implications will be the short lived signs of growth wither away and our lives return to their previous rhythm. We haven't understood that the Gospel requires us to commit fully and put in some effort.

The last example of poor soil is one that is already inhabited by thorn plants which easily choke the seedlings. The gardeners among us would see the need to clear the ground before planting – yet again effort is required. Here Jesus is talking about hearing the Gospel but allowing the demands of everyday life to detract us from our walk with God. When preparing for ordination I well remember hearing a sermon which emphasised that my first priority must be to nurture my relationship with God by spending time with him. Perhaps we all, like me, need to take a look at how we spend our time and energy and reflect on the amount of time we devote to focussing on God.

If we were to paraphrase v18 we might easily read it as 'You disciples, listen to the parable of the sower'. The 'you' is emphatic, Jesus is asking the disciples what type of soil they are; whether their hearing leads to understanding. By inference then, we might well examine ourselves in this respect, what type of soil are we? Not moving to judgement on the reactions of others, rather, examining our own responsiveness to the Gospel and our own fruitfulness.

Turning to our reading from Romans Paul talks about living according to the Spirit and contrasts this with living according to the flesh. But what does this 'living according to the flesh' mean? We're not talking about living a life of gluttony and self-indulgence but rather, living in a way that is shaped by the standards and values of this world, much as we see the reaction to the Gospel in the three unfruitful soils. In each case the lack of understanding is driven by the influence of the world around, hardness of heart, not making time for God or a focus on immediate circumstances and desires.

So what difference does living according to the Spirit make? Paul assures us that the Spirit has set us free to live a life of love and peace. This freedom will enable us to live lives that please God and, as we have been thinking of today, to be fruitful. The gardeners among us will be all too familiar with one of the requirements for fruitfulness – good soil that is well prepared and composted with the nutrients that plants need.

In living according to the Spirit we will have the power to witness boldly to our faith and to be fruitful. All we are asked to do is to be fertile soil, nourished by the Spirit of God, so that our lives and our words can model the saving grace of our loving God to the world around us.

Amen