



The
PARABLES
of
JESUS

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4 ON THE WAY TO THE NEW WORLD

It is all very well to say that Jesus proclaimed and brought the kingdom of God, the divine revolution. But of what value is such a claim when we look at the world around us, or even at the church? It hardly looks as though Satan is out for the count; it does not feel like the new age of God.

This problem is not a new one. There is evidence that Jesus' contemporaries had the same sort of questions: John the Baptist, for one, sent messengers to Jesus to ask if he really was the 'coming one', because from John's position in Herod's jail it did not feel like the kingdom of God (Mt 11:2–3; Lk 7:18–19). The kingdom of God would surely mean the end of the oppressive rule of corrupt people like Herod, but Jesus showed no sign of achieving that. John was not the only person who felt such frustration over Jesus; Jesus' disciples felt similar impatience over his lack of decisive action (*e.g.* Lk 19:11; Acts 1:6).

Jesus' reply to John the Baptist was to point to the evidence of the divine revolution in his own ministry, for example in his healings, which were the fulfilment of Old Testament promises. His parables about seeds and sowing, which we find in Mark 4 (and Mt 13; Lk 8), may also be seen in part at least as a response to this concern.

The sower (Mt 13:1–9, 18–23; Mk 4:1–9, 13–20; Lk 8:4–8, 11–15)

In our world of big supermarkets, agricultural surpluses and mechanised farming we are far removed from the fragile agricultural economy of first-century Palestine. The peasant

farmer sowing his plot of ground was a very familiar sight then, and everyone will have been conscious of the importance of his work. On the results of his sowing everyone's livelihood depended; only the very rich would be unaffected by a poor harvest.

In his parable Jesus describes one such farmer's sowing. Jesus' hearers will immediately have pictured the scene – the farmer, with a supply of seed (probably of wheat or possibly of barley) in a bag hanging from his neck or in a fold of his outer-garment, walking up and down his field, dipping his hand into the seed and scattering it evenly across the soil.

But the focus in Jesus' parable is less on the man doing the sowing than on what happened to the seed. Some of it was lost almost as soon as it was sown, since it fell on the beaten paths around the field, where it lay on the surface, only to be picked up by birds. It is no discredit to the farmer that this happened; it was inevitable if the sower was to sow to the edges of his field. Some of it fell on places where there was only a thin covering of soil over rock – a very familiar feature of the rocky Galilean hillsides; it grew for a little in the rainy season, but the roots could not go deep, and when the hot weather came it withered. Some of it fell in places where there were thistles growing. The thistles may have been quite invisible to the farmer when he sowed his seed, but in due course they grew up with the wheat, and it was an unequal battle, with the vigorous weeds choking the wheat. Finally, other seed fell into good soil, grew steadily, and produced the all-important fruit, the yield being thirty, sixty or even a hundred times the amount of grain sown.

Jesus' hearers will have identified with the scene. Many of them will have had farmers in the family and have known the frustrations as well as the joys of farming in Palestine. There was nothing very extraordinary or unexpected about the story. A number of modern commentators have worried over what they have seen as the carelessness of the farmer in the story in scattering so much seed on unproductive soil: some have seen this as a clue to the parable's meaning; others have explained it in terms of then-current agricultural methods. Thus one particular idea is that the sower would

have ploughed the seed in after completing the sowing, and that the path on which he sowed, apparently carelessly, was a track across the field that would have been ploughed up.

Such explanations are unnecessary. The best farmer then, as the best farmer today, experienced the sort of agricultural problem described in the parable, and there is nothing in the parable to suggest that the quantity of seed lost was enormous. We need not suppose that three quarters of the seed fell into unproductive soil and only one quarter into good soil, or even that half of the seed fell into poor soil and half into good, although three unproductive categories and three productive categories (thirty, sixty, and a hundred) are described in Matthew and Mark. The point of the parable is to describe types of growth (or absence of growth), not to give a statistically accurate breakdown of the yield of the field.

Scholars have also got excited over the figures thirty, sixty and a hundred, arguing that these are miraculously high, since it has been calculated that the average yield of a field was approximately sevenfold. But the figures thirty, sixty and a hundred describe the yield of productive parts of the field, not the overall return on the total seed sown, and so, although the picture is indeed of a good yield, there is no need to see miraculous significance in the figures.

But what significance then had this parable, with its description of a familiar scene? The answer suggested by the gospels themselves is that it is (1) about the kingdom, (2) more specifically about the preaching of the kingdom, and (3) more specifically again about people's response to that preaching. Let us look at these points in turn.

The kingdom

The parable of the sower is about the kingdom, about the revolution of God announced by Jesus. It does not start with the words 'The kingdom of God is like . . .'; in fact the word 'kingdom' occurs only once in the parable and its interpretation, and then only in Matthew's version of the interpretation (Mt 13:19). But in all the gospels the general context of the

parable is Jesus' ministry in Galilee, with its focus on the kingdom. It is accompanied by other parables or sayings explicitly about the kingdom (*e.g.* Mt 13:11, 24 *etc.*). And the immediate context is the gathering of a huge crowd around Jesus: Matthew and Mark describe Jesus retreating to a boat and using that as his pulpit. The people's enthusiasm is, no doubt, because of their excitement over Jesus' message.

Given this context, the parable must be a parable about the revolution and its coming. We have seen that a problem to Jesus' contemporaries, as to many Christians since, was Jesus' failure to bring the kingdom in the forceful way they anticipated. Instead he had met with strong opposition, even from his nearest and dearest (Mt 12:46-50; Mk 3:31-35; Lk 8:19-21). The parable addresses this situation.

The sowing metaphor is a particularly potent one as applied to Jesus' ministry, and it is no accident that the gospels contain several parables about sowing. Sowing is, on the one hand, something that seems quite weak and unimpressive at the time, and the seed is very vulnerable. On the other hand, the sowing of seed is the initiation of something of the greatest importance and power. Jesus' ministry was such a sowing: apparently ineffectual, certainly vulnerable to rejection, yet still the initiation of the kingdom of God.

The preaching of the kingdom

The parable of the sower is not simply making a general point of that sort, though some commentators have read it that way. The parable is about four seed-in-soil situations, and it is accordingly interpreted in the gospels themselves in terms of four categories of response to 'the word' (Mk 4:15).

The explanation of the seed as the 'word' or, as Matthew has it, 'the word of the kingdom' (Mt 13:19) makes a lot of sense. Why was the coming of God's revolution in Jesus' ministry not totally and immediately successful? Answer: because Jesus depended not on military force or even on supernatural power for the bringing of the kingdom, but on the 'word', in other words on telling people about the

revolution and calling them to join it ('to repent and believe', to use the Bible's terminology). Of course there were marvellous signs of the kingdom in Jesus' ministry, but nothing to force belief. People had to decide whether to respond to Jesus' message of revolution or not.

The importance of 'the word' to Jesus is clear from elsewhere in the gospels. He was tempted to use political or spiritual force to bring the revolution – tempted by the devil and tempted by his own followers (e.g. Mt 4:1–11; Lk 4:1–11; Mk 1:36–39; 8:31–33). But he saw his calling as being to 'preach the good news' and also to die, in other words as a calling to conquer by love, not force. Sowing is something gentle; Jesus' ministry was sowing. It is interesting that John the Baptist spoke of the coming one as a harvester, as someone who brings things to completion (e.g. Mt 3:12); Jesus in his ministry was a sower who did not bring the kingdom of God completely, and so mystified people like John.

Sowing, though weak and vulnerable, is also something powerful and life-giving. As the seed brings a harvest of life-sustaining grain, though not overnight, so Jesus' word would produce the longed-for revolution of God. It has been said that the parable of the sower is a parable about parables. It may not be exactly that, but it is about Jesus' preaching of the kingdom, of which parables were an important part. Precisely the same thought is expressed in the parable of the two houses, where the wise man who builds his house on rock is the person who hears and does Jesus' words (Mt 7:24–27; Lk 6:47–49).

The idea of the transforming power of the word is not just the idea that propaganda is effective in motivating people to action: every revolutionary believes that. It is rather the idea that the message Jesus brought was, like seed, something creative, producing new life – the new life of the kingdom of God. As for how it does this, the reference to the word being sown 'in the heart' may be a clue (Mt 13:19; Lk 8:12, 15). Jesus, as we mentioned in the last chapter, diagnosed the human problem as having to do with Satan on the one hand and with the human heart on the other. By the 'heart' in this context is meant not the body's blood-pumping system, but

the inner life of thought and will; so in Mark 7:20-23, where Jesus is discussing cleanness and uncleanness, he says: 'For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man "unclean".' This was a radical statement to make in a context where people tended to think in terms of religious cleanness and uncleanness having to do with keeping one's body ritually pure, and it helps us to see where the 'word' comes in. The effectiveness of the 'word of the kingdom' is that it has the power to bring cleanness and renewal to the heart, producing that inward revolution which is the key to any real revolution.

The prophet Jeremiah looked forward to such a revolution when he spoke of God making a new covenant (or agreement) with his people: 'I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts' (Jer 31:33). The old covenant, described in the Old Testament, involved animal sacrifice and the giving of the written law of God through Moses (see Exod 24). Jesus proclaimed the coming of the new covenant, involving (1) his sacrificial death for the sins of the world, (2) the preaching and hearing of 'the word', and (3) the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Jesus' view of the 'word' as life-giving seed is echoed in various passages in the New Testament; quite likely the authors have been influenced, consciously or unconsciously, by the parable of the sower. James 1:21 says: 'Humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.' 1 Peter 1:23 says: 'You have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God,' and Paul in Colossians 1:5-6 speaks of 'the word of truth, the gospel that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing . . .' This understanding of the saving power of the word of the gospel was reflected in the priority given to their preaching and teaching ministry by the apostles, when they commented that it would not be right to 'neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables' (Acts 6:2). Waiting on tables and social concern are the work of the kingdom, but the bringing of the good news of the kingdom is a priority, since it

generates revolution in people and the world. The word is the 'sword' of God's revolution – the sword of the Spirit, as Paul puts it in Ephesians 6:17 – because it pierces the human heart, challenging and changing it (see Heb 4:12).

The idea of a powerful creative 'word' does not appear for the first time in the New Testament. The psalmist speaks for the whole Old Testament when he says: 'By the word of the Lord were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth' (Ps 33:6). Isaiah comments:

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire. (Isa 55:10–11)

The Old Testament writers are speaking of God's word. In Jesus' parable of the sower he is speaking of his own word. The implied claim is clear, and is made explicit by Luke, who identifies the seed not simply with 'the word' (as does Mark) or 'the word of the kingdom' (as does Matthew), but with the 'word of God' (Lk 8:11).

People's response to the kingdom

The parable of the sower is, then, about Jesus' preaching of the kingdom. But in particular it is a comment on the variable success of his preaching. Sometimes Jesus' word is like the seed on the path, meeting with no response or understanding and being immediately rejected or forgotten, snatched away by Satan. Sometimes there is enthusiasm at first, but the hearers immediately give up when things get hot, *i.e.* 'When there is pressure or persecution for the sake of the word'. Sometimes there is response, but then the word is gradually strangled by competing forces, 'the cares of the world, the deceit of wealth and desires for other things'. But finally 'those on the good soil' are those who listen to the message, receive it, and in due course bear fruit, living out in practice the life of the revolution.

The four-part interpretation of the parable given in the gospels is a brilliant analysis of the experience of Christian

ministry. Some scholars have seen it as a reflection of the church's experience rather than of Jesus' own experience. But in fact it fits very well indeed with what we know of Jesus' ministry. He faced blind Satanic rejection from some (see the preceding story of Mk 3:20–30). He encountered many others who were interested in him, but who were eventually not prepared for the cost in terms of suffering or material sacrifice. It is no accident that precisely these barriers to discipleship are referred to elsewhere in Jesus' teaching, for example in his emphatic words about the need to take up the cross, which were so difficult for the disciples to accept (Mk 8:34–38), and in his call to the rich young ruler and others to 'give up all' (Mk 10:17–31), a call which the young man was unwilling to face up to. But Jesus also saw the 'revolution of God' take root in his disciples, and with painful slowness grow and bear fruit.

In analysing people's response to the message of the kingdom in this way, Jesus was explaining something about his ministry and its apparent 'ineffectiveness', but at the same time he was challenging the great crowd who were around him to consider their position and to ensure that they were producing fruit. The parable is an invitation to see the kingdom in Jesus, despite the disappointments that could lead the reader to doubt Jesus; but it is also an exhortation to the reader to consider where he or she fits into the picture. The parable is about the preaching of the kingdom, but it is also itself preaching of the kingdom which looks for a response. Thus Jesus concludes the parable: 'He who has ears to hear, let him hear' (Mk 4:9; Mt 13:9; Lk 8:8).

The lamp and the measure (Mk 4:21–25; Lk 8:16–18)

The parable of the sower is followed in Mark and Luke by sayings concerning a lamp and a measure. A lamp, according to the first saying, is not designed to be put under a bowl or a bed, but on a lampstand; the picture is of a small oil lamp containing a floating wick, the usual form of lighting in a Palestinian home. By our standards it gave out very little