Seed, Soils and the Greatest of Stories
Matthew 13:1-23

I want you to imagine two pictures, two scenes. The first is of a father, sitting on the edge of his little daughter's bed, and he's reading her a bedtime story. And his little girl is tucked up under her duvet, snuggled in with her teddy bear, and the only light on in her bedroom is her bedside lamp, which casts this warm glow over the two of them. And her eyes are wide as her father reads her a story of adventure. Now picture a second scene. It's of an army charging, thousands upon thousands of men, and line upon line of tanks pushing forward, as they launch a lightning invasion of another country. And there is smoke and gunfire everywhere, and overhead fighter jets roar, and bombs rain down on their enemy, as their overwhelming firepower crushes any defence that stands in their way.

What do those two images have in common? The father, enchanting his daughter with a story, and an army conquering a nation by force? And you might think, they have absolutely nothing in common! I mean, one is a picture of love and nurture, of sweet memories and of imagination, of a mind expanding and bonds of love being formed, and the other is just raw power, and one nation, one power, one kingdom, forcing its way on another. They have nothing in common.

And you'd be right… and wrong! You see, in Matthew 12 we've seen how there is this increasing controversy surrounding Jesus and how he faces growing hostility from the religious leaders, and there's this polarisation in response to him. And now, in Matthew 13, Jesus tells us why that's the case. But to do so, he uses parables, he tells stories. And the first one he tells is of how the kingdom of God comes, how the kingdom of God conquers – and it's not by overwhelming fire power, it's not by crushing those who stand in its way – it comes by people hearing its story, and responding to its message – and being transformed.

And the question Jesus leaves us with is, is that what's happening for you?

Willing to Listen
Verse 1, 'That same day…' So Matthew links the growing opposition Jesus faces with what comes next. And what comes next is that Jesus leaves the house where he was staying and heads down to the Sea of Galilee. And Matthew tells us, v2, that 'great crowds gathered about him.' So despite growing opposition from the religious elite, there is this growing popularity among the crowds, because there is just something deeply attractive about this man Jesus of Nazareth, and people want to hear him.

But so they can hear him, Jesus gets into a boat, and he does what any of us who have ever sailed have experienced, and he uses the lake and the beach as a natural amphitheatre. And what Jesus tells them, v3, is 'Many things in parables'. Verse 3 again, "A sower went out to sow." Now in v18, Jesus calls this parable, "The parable of the sower." But as he tells it, what you realise is that it's not really about the sower, it's about the soil, and how the seed does or does not transform the soil.

And in v4-8 Jesus describes four different types of soil: there's the hard, compacted soil, that never takes the seed; then there's the shallow soil, and the

seed lands and springs up, but the plant withers under the sun; then there's the soil where the seed lands and the plants spring up, but they get strangled by thorns; and then there's the fourth and final good soil, which yields the farmer a harvest.

But then, just as you're thinking, 'Er, why is Jesus giving the crowd a lesson on farming?' Jesus says, v9, "He who has ears, let him hear." Now, everyone in the crowd would have had ears wouldn't they; and everyone there would have heard him – so why say that? Because Jesus is calling them then, and you and me now, to listen. To hear. To be receptive to what he's saying. Why? Because that's how the kingdom of God comes, that's how the transforming power of God's rule and reign is unleashed in your life.

You see, in v11 Jesus talks about "the secrets of the kingdom of heaven." But what's so secret, what's so mysterious, about God's kingdom? Well, if you were a Jew at that time, maybe even if you're a Gentile, now, you would think that God's kingdom is going to come at the end of history, with a great climactic final battle, and evil will be overthrown, and God's rule and reign will be finally and totally established, forever.

Well, sure, but the secret Jesus is revealing is that God's kingdom, God's transforming power, his rule and his reign, is breaking into this world and our lives now, bringing forgiveness and reconciliation, putting right our alienation from God, bringing recovery and healing and true freedom, now.

But how does it come? Does it come by the angelic equivalent of blitzkrieg, thousands and thousands of angels coming in devastating power? Does it come by God overwhelming and overturning all his enemies with shock and awe? No. It comes by a seed. The smallest, tiniest thing that you can hold in the palm of your hand, that to look at properly you need a magnifying glass. And in v19, Jesus says that seed is "the word of the kingdom." The message, the story, the good news of the gospel.

And you think, really? God's power, his kingdom, his rule and reign come's like a seed? But a seed's nothing! It's tiny, it stands no chance! Look at the size of a field, what can a handful of seed do to a field – it's dwarfed! And how can a message, a story, a handful of words, bring God's power to our lives, how can that ever change the world for good? And yet, every year seed transforms the fields, doesn't it. Out of a seemingly insignificant nothing, a garden grows, a field sprouts up, a tree rises. And the seed transforms the ground that receives it. And Jesus is saying that the message of the kingdom, the gospel, the word of God, will do just that to our lives, if we will let it do its work, if we will receive it.

The question is, will we?

Hard of Hearing

When I was a junior doctor I had a colleague who people recognised early on had a problem. And her problem wasn't that she was unqualified – in fact she had done very well at medical school, or that she was inexperienced, we all were. Her

problem was that she didn't listen. She heard, but when other doctors, whether seniors, or other juniors, gave her advice on a clinical issues, and how to manage a patient, she just wouldn't listen. And in medicine that's pretty dangerous. But not just in medicine.

You see here the disciples don't understand what Jesus is telling them in this parable. They've heard it, but they don't get it. So what do they do? They go ask him. Verse 10, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" "I mean, we're finding it difficult enough to understand you Jesus, so what hope do the crowds have? And this is no way to grow your ministry, Jesus." And Jesus' answer is shocking. Verse 11, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given." In other words, to those Jesus chooses, parables reveal truth, they make things clearer, you see the picture that Jesus is using to compare something to, and you have this 'aha!' moment, as the penny drops. And that penny dropping moment of spiritual insight is *given*, Jesus says, 'to you it has been *given*', it's God's gift to you. But to those whom Jesus does not choose, parables *conceal* truth. Rather than shedding light, they make things darker. And you hear the parable and think, 'nice story, but totally irrelevant to my life. I mean what have seeds and fields got to do with me. Please, let's move on. Let's talk about science!'

But the question is why? Why would God choose to hide truth, or at least obscure truth from people, by tying it up in a story? And why does Jesus say in v12, "For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away"? Because, as one writer puts it, there is the law of *spiritual atrophy*. I mean, imagine a man who works out, who goes to the gym, who exercises, his muscles are going to grow. But if he takes to his bed, or lies on the sofa, with a beer and the remote, those same muscles will atrophy.

So Jesus isn't hiding truth from sincere seekers who want to know it. It's that for those who reject Jesus, who take to their spiritual sofas, they will lose even what little understanding or openness to him they did have. So, if you're searching for light, parables are like a beam of light shining into your heart, and you see the truth. But if you're not seeking, and you don't care what Jesus has to say, if you're like my junior doctor colleague who refuses to listen, then parables just increase your darkness and confusion, and you just think that's weird religious stuff.

It's why Jesus says in v13, "This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand." In other words, I tell them stories they don't understand because they've already decided they don't want to understand, they've already made themselves spiritually deaf. And to back that up, Jesus quotes from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, chapter 6, because Isaiah faced exactly the same problem. God commissioned him to take a message of repentance to the people of Israel, but then God warned him that that message, rather than bringing the people to their senses, would actually harden them further against God, because they had already hardened their hearts to him; because in the words of v15, their hearts

were dull, and their ears deaf, and their eyes closed. And Jesus says that exactly the same thing was happening in his day.

So, just as with Isaiah, there's a sense in which Jesus' parables are a judgment on the hard-hearted and spiritually deaf.

Now, is that just depressing? Is that all Jesus offers? That if you're lazy, or disinterested, or too prejudiced, all he has to offer is bad news? And the answer is no. You see, having warned Isaiah that the people wouldn't listen, God tells him that he will reserve a remnant, that from out of the wreckage and the rubble of people's disobedience and God's judgment, hope would spring. That though the people would be like a tree stump, chopped down and burned, that tree contained a holy seed. That new growth would come. And Jesus says the same is true now. Verse 16, "But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear."

So, for those who genuinely want to discover truth, parables bring light. They make you think. They leave you wanting to know more, searching for an explanation. And like when you're in danger of falling asleep, and an alarm goes off on your phone, so parables prod you awake from your spiritual drowsiness. And like these disciples, you go to Jesus looking for answers.

Which is great, but how can you be someone like that, someone who hears that message of Gods' transforming power, rather than someone who's hard to it?

Receptive Hearts, Transforming Power

And in v18-23, Jesus explains the parable to the disciples, and in doing so he says there are 4 types of soil, 4 types of heart, and whether or not that seed of God's word bears fruit depends on what type of soil, what type of heart it falls on.

And the first is the ***hard heart***. And Jesus says this is like the seed that falls on the hard, compacted earth of the paths that would have surrounded the field. And this is someone, Jesus says, v18, who 'hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it.' So you can be someone who hears the good news about Jesus for the first time, and it just bounces off. Or, you can be someone who comes to church regularly, and every week you hear God's word, but that seed never penetrates. It never breaches your defences, it never affects you. You hear it, but you don't hear its challenge, you're not moved by its comfort, you're not taken up by its vision of God. You hear it, but it's just intellectual, it never gets to the level of your heart, you don't know its power. There are never any 'aha!' moments when you see and understand something about yourself like you've never understood it before, or see things of God like you've never seen them before.

And in a blink, Jesus says, the evil one, like a bird, comes and snatches the seed away. Because you're not hearing truth in a sterile vacuum are you? There are any number of other philosophies of life out there that are competing with God's word for your heart, and like God's word, they also seek to change you and mold you and transform you.

Then Jesus says, there is the ***shallow heart***. Verse 20, 'as for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself.' And in the original parable Jesus says, v5, 'they did not have much soil' so when the sun comes up, when the temperature starts rising, that lack of depth, that lack of root, results in those green shoots of excitement withering away.

So this is someone who hears the word, and they like what they hear, and there are immediate signs of hope, there's a green shoot of joy! Because it can be exciting being around Jesus, can't it? It can be exciting getting involved in a church, meeting new people, getting stuck in. But then the temperature starts to rise. And Jesus says trouble and opposition comes on account of the word, and they can't take the heat, they can't stand the pressure of the environment. Maybe you get criticism from work colleagues or family members for being a Christian. Maybe living and working day in and day out under the hot sun of a secular culture takes its toll. Maybe you thought Jesus was there to make your life better and to bless you, but things just seem to be getting worse. And that green shoot withers. And when you're asked to share the sufferings of Christ, you pull back. 'I'm not sure Jesus is worth that much. I'm not sure he's worth the loss of reputation, or comfort, or friends, or personal freedom.' And when that happens you discover what it is you really want in life, what's really the ultimate for you – it's the thing you've lost or you don't want to lose. Because that matters more to you than Jesus and his word.

Then there's the third heart – and it's the **conflicted heart**. Now, with the previous two soils, it was pretty obvious they aren't genuine Christians. There was either no response or the response doesn't last. But what about this one – the one where the seed finds itself sprouting up amongst thorns and thistles? Verse 22, 'As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.' Is this person a Christian, or not? That's the problem, isn't it? It's difficult to tell. And maybe you look at this soil and think, this is me, and I feel choked by this other stuff, and I know I'm not bearing fruit as a Christian. Am I even a Christian? And you're never sure. You have too much religion to be happy in your sin, and too much sin to be happy in your religion. Your heart is split, it's divided, you're conflicted, you can't decide whether you want to be all out for God, and allow his word to transform you and root out these thorns, or not. And as someone else has put it, of all these other soils, you're the only one who isn't happy. The hard heart and the shallow heart, and the receptive heart, they're all happy with their situation. But not this one. This one is choked,

And Jesus tells us why. It's the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches, they choke the transforming power of God's word in your life. You have too many other commitments, too many other loyalties, your loyalty to Jesus is divided with all this other stuff. And especially with money and possessions. Now, why does Jesus call it, the *deceitfulness* of riches? In fact, that word *deceitful* could also be used to mean *delight*. So Jesus is talking about the deceptive pleasure of wealth. So why are riches seductive? Why are money and possessions deceptive?

Because they promise you what they can never deliver. Get this latest phone, invest in this pension fund, buy this car, and your life will be transformed. Except it isn't, or not for long. Money promises you freedom, and you end up enslaved, counting the pennies or ruled by your holidays. It promises you riches, and you end up poorer – relationally, spiritually poorer. It promises you influence, and you end up surrounded by hangers-on. Because just like thorns compete with the seed and the shoot for nutrients and water, so this other stuff competes for your heart. As the American philosopher and theologian Stanley Hauerwas writes, 'It's hard to be a disciple and be rich.' Because you end up possessed by your possessions, owned by what you own. And all the time Jesus calls us to a counter-culture where wealth and possessions don't have our hearts.

But then there's the fourth and final soil, the good soil, the ***receptive heart.*** Verse 23, 'As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit.' And the seed transforms the ground into a harvest field. And when the message of the kingdom, when the good news of Jesus comes together with an open and receptive heart, that allows that word to sink in and do its work, life transformation happens.

Why? Because of what the message of the kingdom, what the good news is. That the one who was richer than you could ever imagine, not with our small trifling, suffocating riches that rot, but with the riches of heaven, became poor that he might make you eternally rich. That the one who existed in total security risked everything, and faced tribulation and persecution, to bring you to safety. Because the one crowned king of heaven, gave up that crown and took up a crown of thorns, that you might become his royal son and daughter. Because at the cross, his blood dripped onto the hard ground of Golgotha, and his dead body was laid in a tomb cut from the rocky ground. And all so that you might have life and life in all its fullness. And as that truth, that story sinks into your heart it will melt your heart, with love for God and love for others. And you'll know you're loved by your Father, so it will kill your self-loathing. You'll know he loved you when you were far off, and a stranger, so you'll love the stranger and the refugee; you'll know that he loved you when you didn't deserve it, so you'll love and reach out to those the world thinks are underserving; you'll know he gave his life for your good, so at school or work, you'll work for the common good. And you'll live a life of fruitfulness, thirty, sixty, a hundredfold, as you see your life, and the lives of those around you, transformed by his powerful word, as you let it sink deep into your heart.

He who has ears to hear, let him hear.