The Parable of the Sower
Luke 8:1-15

Before you learn to drive here in Switzerland you have to do a first aid course, called the *Cours Samaritain*. Now, why would you name a first aid course after a tiny, insignificant, ethnic group thousands of miles away in the Middle East? Because, Jesus once told a story about a Samaritan who helped a man injured on a roadside. Or, when someone is backward about coming forward, and you know they're really good at something, but they're reluctant to show it, why might you say to them, 'don't bury your talent!' Since when has anyone taken a spade and buried a talent? Well, since Jesus told a story about a guy who did just that. Or imagine a family where a teenager goes off the rails and gets into trouble, why might you hear someone say, 'he's the prodigal of the family' – when prodigal means lavish, or extravagant? Because Jesus once told a story about a son who lived lavishly and his life fell apart.

And the stories Jesus told have left this mark on our culture. But they can do something even more remarkable than that – they can leave a mark on your life, they have the power to change your life So over the Summer we're going to look at them, beginning with the Parable of the Sower.

Reading: Luke 8:1-15

Have you ever experienced the frustration of talking to someone and they're not really listening? Like this week: I was sat at my laptop working, and one of the girls started talking to me, so I started making sympathetic noises, and then she said 'Dad, you're not listening' and I said, 'yes I am', and she said, 'well what did I say?' and it never ends well, does it.

And Jesus has just told this parable, and then he says, v8, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." Now everyone in the crowd had ears, didn't they? Jesus wasn't addressing the annual convention of the Galilean Deaf Club – everyone could hear him. The question is, were they really listening?

You see, Jesus tells us that in this story, v11, "the seed is the word of God." So he's saying that this crowd and you and I need to hear, we need to be continually receptive to what God is saying. And the reason is because in v12 Jesus tells us this is how we believe and are saved. That it's through his word that God's kingdom comes into your life. That it's through God speaking to you, and you receiving it, that God's rule and reign can be unleashed in your life in powerful ways that can wonderfully transform your life.

A Message for Everyone
When I was at primary school I learnt an expression that you could use against others kids who were being mean to you in the playground. And it goes, 'sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.' And it's great isn't it… except it's just not true. I know nothing about geography now, but I once got 100% in a geography test at school, which I was really pleased about, until the class finished, and we went outside and every other boy in the class chased be round the playing field, it was like a wild animal hunt, before catching me, bundling me to the ground and then they beat me up. But the bruises of that

faded within days. But I'm still scarred by some of the unkind things people said to me years later.

Because words have power, don't they. A power to hurt and a power to heal. And, if that is true of our words – what about God's words? If when we start talking we can hurt or heal, what happens when God starts talking?

You see, if you want to create something, you go and get the raw materials and set to work, don't you? Hazel's very creative and she'll go get some driftwood from the beach, and you and I would look at these bits of wood and think – er, it's driftwood, but Hazel puts a bit here and a bit there, and this 3D picture of a boat emerges.

But how does God create? The Bible opens by telling us that in the beginning there was nothing but God, until he started speaking and then everything started happening – light started shining, trees started growing, birds started singing. And then the New Testament opens with the gospels, and it's as if God has been silent since the last prophet, 400 years ago, but then Jesus starts speaking, and the sick are healed, lepers are cleansed, demons flee, storms are stilled and the dead are raised. And it all happens because God's words are words of power and life.

So, what could happen if he speaks into your heart and you receive it? Well, that's the point of this parable, isn't it?

But before Luke recounts it he sets the scene. In v1 he tells us that Jesus 'went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God.' And in v4 he says, 'a great crowd was gathering and people from town after town came to him.' But in between, almost out of place, Luke mentions another group, v2, 'some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities… who provided for them out of their means.' Now why does Luke feel the need to give us that little detour about the women who provided for Jesus?

Because women were second-class citizens. Remember that famous prayer for Jewish men that included the line, 'thank you God I am not a woman or a gentile'? And rabbis viewed women as inferior, and refused to teach them. So when it comes to social status, you don't get much lower than a woman who's sick or demonised. Yet Jesus welcomed them and taught them. Now why tell us that just before this parable? Because, for whatever reason, maybe you feel like one of these women. Maybe by the way society makes judgments about people, you feel second class or excluded. Maybe you don't feel beautiful enough, or sophisticated enough, and you know only too well what people mean when they talk about self-loathing – and you feel on edge of the crowd. Or maybe you look at the stuff you've done, or are doing, and you think that puts you beyond the limits of the crowd of God's people or God's love, and you doubt, deep down, whether he would ever welcome you.

But by this little detour, Luke is telling us, it doesn't matter how you feel about yourself, or what others might say about you. Christ has come for you and his message is for you. And here, there are loads of people in the crowd. But it's not the size of the crowd that matters. What matters is are you listening and receiving what Jesus says? Do you have ears to hear?

A Message that Divides

Now if you grew up with a picture of Jesus as gentle Jesus, meek and mild, and you start reading the gospels, you're in for a shock! Because you meet a Jesus who calls people foxes, or piles of rotting bones, and flings furniture around the temple – whilst at the same time loving the sick and the broken. And you meet a Jesus who says, don't think I've come to bring peace on earth – I've come to bring a sword – a sword of division – whilst at the same time being the Prince of Peace.

And in the middle of this Parable of the Sower we meet just this seemingly contradictory Jesus. He tells a story about the importance of hearing and receiving his word, and then says v10, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables, so that 'seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.'" And you think, hang on, Jesus, I thought you told stories to help people understand spiritual truth, not hide it from them? And he did. But as well as reveal truth, Jesus says his parables also conceal truth.

You see, one aspect of God's judgement on an individual or a nation or a culture, is that he gives them what they want: 'Ok, you've rejected me, and instead you want this other thing, so you can have it, and see how it goes with you.' And when Jesus says that 'seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand' he's quoting the prophet Isaiah, who God commissioned to call the people of Israel to repentance. But the people had already hardened their hearts to God, they'd already decided they didn't want him, so God warned Isaiah that rather than bringing the people to their senses, Isaiah's message would harden them further.

And that's what Jesus is saying here. If people don't really want to understand, they won't, and his parables will divide - the casual enquirer – the guy who doesn't really care, who's just happy to be in the crowd, from the sincere seeker. But, if you do want to understand, and you let God's word sink in to your life, then it will begin to do its work.

A Message that Transforms

Look again at v9-10: 'And when his disciples asked him what this parable meant, he said, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God."

Now, what's the secret behind the success of just about any earthly kingdom or empire you can think of? Pretty much, it's military power, or brilliant military strategy, isn't it? The Greek empire was built on the military genius of Alexander the Great; the Roman Empire was built on the overwhelming force and skill of its army; the British Empire was built on Naval fire-power; and Hitler conquered

Europe by Blitzkrieg. Even our modern business empires succeed by outflanking and outgunning their competitors and taking their territory.

But what's the secret of God's kingdom? How does his reign advance? How does the wholeness, and fullness, and fruitfulness of his rule take ground in your life? Through a message that Jesus says seems as small, and as insignificant, and as seemingly powerless as a tiny seed. But just like a handful of seed can transform a garden or a field so the message of the kingdom, the good news of Jesus, can do that in your life, if you'll receive it.

So, Jesus says in v5, "A sower went out to sow." And he'd take handfuls of seed from his bag and scatter it about him. And that seed fell on four different types of soil – that represent four types of human heart. And the parable is disconcerting because each of our hearts are represented here, and the question Jesus is putting to us is, which one are you? Which will you be?

Firstly, there's the ***Hard Heart.*** Verse 5, "As he sowed, some fell along the path and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air devoured it." So someone's heart can be like the hard compacted earth of the paths around a field. They might hear the word of God, you might even come to church regularly and hear all that Jesus has done for you, but it never sinks in, it never penetrates. It never breaches your defences; it never troubles you, or comforts you. There are never those moments when you suddenly understand something about God, or about yourself, like you've never understood it before. It never goes beyond the merely intellectual level to the level of your heart.

In fact, Jesus says, the word of God can be trampled underfoot. Now, you've probably heard someone say, 'he walked all over my feelings' or, 'I felt trampled on'. Well, Jesus says we can do that with the word of God - we can dismiss it, and give it no chance to germinate. But what should give us pause for thought is that Jesus says that behind that kind of attitude a darker power's at work. And the birds that come and pick off the seed Jesus says in v12 represent "the devil [who] comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved." You see, none of us hear truth in a spiritually sterile vacuum do we? Instead, there's this cosmic struggle going on for your heart, and any number of other philosophies of life, or spiritual powers, are competing for it.

But secondly, there's the ***Shallow Heart.*** Verse 6, "And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture." And Jesus says that these are people, v13, "who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away." So, at least here the seed here does breech the surface. It just doesn't go much further than that. And the person's response doesn't go much further than an emotional response to the message.

Now, don't get Jesus wrong. Emotions are good. Joy is good. And to receive God's message to you with joy is good. But if it's *only* an emotional response – that's a problem. You see, think how this might happen. Imagine you receive a letter in the post telling you that you have won an amazing prize. And you think, this is

wonderful, I'm so happy. Until you realise that to claim your prize you have to sign up for a life-time's subscription to Underwater Basketweavers Monthly – and you think – no thanks. The prize isn't worth the cost.

And someone might hear the gospel and think, this is wonderful. I feel unloved, but the gospel tells me Jesus loves me; Or, I feel guilty, but the gospel says I can be washed clean; or I feel lonely, but the gospel promises me family. All of which are true! And you respond with joy, at an emotional level. But it never goes beyond getting what you want. And when troubles come your way, especially if those troubles are to do with being a Christian, you begin to think the prize is not worth the cost and your joy begins to wilt. And under the heat of the day, under the troubles of life, with no root, with nothing to draw life from, such people wither.

You thought Jesus was there to make your life better and to bless you, so you responded with joy, but when it doesn't work out like that and you're asked to share the sufferings of Christ, you pull back, and in doing so you discover what really matters to you – it's that thing you might lose, like your reputation, or your comfort, or your friends, or your personal freedom, if you hold on to Christ. And what you were really worshipping was that new job you needed God's help to get, or your marriage that needed sorting, or that habit you wanted to kick.

So whilst the seed goes in and there's joy, both of which are good, it doesn't last and Jesus is saying, you don't want to be this type of soil.

But thirdly, there's the ***Crowded Heart.*** Look at v7, "And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it." And to explain Jesus says in v14, "As for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature."

I've got a confession to make: a couple of weeks back I was round at Armand and Anke's and I was seriously covetous, because the lawn in their garden was perfect. There was not a weed in sight. But on my lawn, you have to pull back the weeds to try and find the grass. And there's this little blade of grass trying to drink up the rain, and the weeds go, oh no you don't, I'll have that. And the blade is trying to peek out to see the sun, and the weed goes, o no you don't, get back under my shade, the sun is mine!

And Jesus says the same can be true for the human heart. The cares of life, wealth, pleasure, are all competing with God's word for the ground of your heart, and your life can be so crowded with this other stuff – that the word of God has trouble bearing fruit. There simply isn't room for it.

Now, with the hard heart and the shallow heart, it's pretty obvious they aren't genuine Christians, because either there is no response to the gospel or the response doesn't last. But this one is different – it does sprout up, it just doesn't bring any fruit to maturity. And so the question is, is this person a Christian, or not? And that's the problem, isn't it? It's difficult to tell. And maybe you look at

this crowded heart and think, this is me: I feel choked by anxieties and money and always wanting more, and there are all these other things I'd rather be doing, and am doing, than living and growing as a Christian. I know I'm not bearing fruit. So am I even a Christian? And you're never really sure. And as someone else has said, you have too much religion to be happy in your sin, and too much sin to be happy in your religion. Your heart is divided, and you're conflicted, you can't decide whether you want to be fully committed to Christ, and allow his word to transform you, or not. And you feel choked.

Well listen, if you think that's you, and you think, 'how can I root out these thorns in my life?', that's not your job. That's the farmer's job, not the soil's. The soil never goes and get a spade and sets to weeding, does it? The soil's job is to receive the seed and trust the farmer to deal with the weeds.

Because if it's unclear whether this heart is a Christian or not, what is really clear is that, of these four types of heart, there's only one Jesus speaks positively of.

So, fourthly and finally, the ***Receptive Heart.*** Verse 15, "As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience." So look how Jesus describes this honest and good heart. They hear the word and they *hold it fast*. They hear what God is saying, they receive the gospel and they believe it. It's as if your heart has hands of faith and you grasp the message of Christ and don't let go of it. And the result is you bear fruit with patience. When life heats up, and life is hard, even when others are wilting you endure, you continue to be fruitful. You don't dry up and you don't blow up. Instead, you're fruitful. Because when you believe all that God has done, and is doing, for you in Jesus, it can't help but turn your heart into a garden.

You see, when you know, deep in your heart, that Jesus was not hard-hearted to you – but gave up his riches, and concerned himself with the cares of your life; and when you know his head was crowned with these thorns and his body was sown into this hard ground, so that you might experience eternal, lasting pleasure, as that message of his love and grace to you germinates in your heart, it will change you and transform you like seed does a field.

It will make you fruitful in acts of service for others, because you know Christ served you. It will make you fruitful in giving, and acts of generosity, you'll become liberal with your stuff, because you know Christ gave himself for you. It will make you fruitful in hospitality and welcoming of others, because you know Christ welcomed you. It will make you fruitful in joy and encouragement of others, because you know that for the joy set before him Christ endured the cross for you. It will make you fruitful in going out into the world and sharing your faith, because you know Christ went out into the world for you.

So, hear the word, receive the word and be changed by it. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.