

**Text: Mark 4:1-34**

**Theme: The King and His Kingdom: Parables of the Sower and the Soils**

**Sermon delivered by Revd Canon Dele Agbelusi during Service of the Word on 05/11/2017 at 10.30am**

There is no doubt that Jesus was an amazing storyteller. Jesus used the ordinary things of life to grab the attention of His listeners. He didn't tell stories just to entertain, but to teach spiritual truths. In the past weeks of our journey through Mark's gospel, we have seen how Jesus burst into the scene by announcing that the kingdom of God was in their midst because He is the king of the kingdom. We have seen how he proved this by his miracles and display of power and authority in his speech and his works. He has now acquired a celebrity status far greater than anyone you can think of. It is like combining Mother Theresa, Nelson Mandela, Beckham, Hussein Bolt and Diana in one person and yet it does not match Christ's popularity. He was a super celebrity. And with this status, he had antagonised the religious leaders who called him bad. He has disappointed his siblings and mother who thought he was mad and the crowd who were just out to get what they could from his ministry had to contend with his parable!

So, in this passage, Jesus was teaching by the lake and he must have borrowed a boat to use as his pulpit. And this time he chose to teach them by parables. The first parable was that of the sower and the seed. "Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. <sup>4</sup> As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. <sup>5</sup> Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. <sup>6</sup> But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. <sup>7</sup> Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. <sup>8</sup> Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times." (Mark 4:3-8)

Then in (verse 13) Jesus said to them, "**Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?**" **In other words, understanding this parable is fundamental to understanding the rest of Jesus' parables.**

I wonder what the disciples thought when they heard a story about a sower. We are not told what the crowd thought, but we are informed about what some of his disciples thought. It looks as if they were puzzled by an unusual message. They could not understand why he said what he did. And if they did not understand him, we can assume that most in the crowd did not do so either.

But there was one detail about Jesus that they had picked up since they had become his disciples and it was that he was approachable. And they came to him to ask questions. It looks as if the mark of a true disciple was that he or she would ask Jesus for more explanations about what he had said. **So what was important was not the listening to the parable, but an ongoing interest in what the parable meant and aims to achieve.**

Let's take a look at the parable and how Jesus explained it.

## **THE INTERPRETATION OF THE PARABLE**

### **1. The seed**

Jesus says that the seed is the word of the kingdom. It is the going forth of God's Word. And although God's Word is powerful, it's just in seed form. It's not fully developed; but it contains within it all the potential of new life and fruitfulness. **The first detail that we observe from the explanation given by Jesus is that He only has one kind of seed to sow - the Message about the kingdom of God.** Everyone is called to listen to the message of repentance from sin and dead works and turn to Christ, receiving a new life. It is a call to discipleship – a commitment to follow Jesus wherever he leads.

## **2. The Sower**

Now that we understand what the seed is, we can understand who the sower is. The sower is the One who sows the seed, the one who plants the Word of God, in this case Jesus, the King. But it can also be anyone who speaks God's Word. Every time you speak the Word of God, whether you're in a pulpit or in a coffee shop with a friend, you're sowing God's Word and this parable and its' principles applies to you.

## **3. The Soils**

**This is the focus of this parable. Although we call it the parable of the sower, we could just as easily call it the parable of the soils. As we go through today's talk, ask yourself, "What type of soil am I?"**

We may imagine that the sower is depicted as indiscriminate, almost careless, but I don't think that is what is being stressed. Jesus is referring to various kinds of people and the seed that had been sown among them. Their responses are illustrated by what would happen if a sower had sown in such places.

**Jesus says that there will be four responses to his message. The first three responses are each illustrated by a different kind of soil where the seed fell, and the fourth response is found in the good soil.**

### **THE THREE BAD RESPONSES**

#### **1) The Seed that fell along the Path – the well-worn road.**

The wayside is a hard path, and a hard path represents a hard heart. It is interesting that in the parable Satan is only to blame for this soil. He may have a hand in the other two bad responses, but he is not said to be the main cause of them. This detail indicates that the initial stage of hearing the gospel is a very vulnerable time as far as responding rightly is concerned.

How does the devil take away the word from such a person? I suspect he takes it out of their minds by getting them to think of something else, or to doubt the veracity of the message being preached. Jesus said that when the Word of God is sown into this kind of heart, the devil, Satan, the wicked one, comes and snatches it out of their heart by making them doubt, disbelieve it and not act on it. Just think of what happened to Jesus Himself. In Mark 1:9-11, at the baptism of Jesus, He hears the Father speak to Him saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." That is God's word being spoken to Jesus.

What happened next is that Jesus went into the wilderness and was tempted by the devil. How did the devil tempt Him? He immediately set about trying to snatch the Father's Word out of His heart. Two of those temptations began with, "If You are the Son of God." But the Father's word had already sunk deep into the heart of Jesus, and he acted on his authority as God the Son. He ordered Satan to get away. He is our perfect example in dealing with Satan.

#### **2) The Seed among Rocks**

These are the people who hear God's Word and receive it joyfully. But shallow ground means a shallow heart. So the Word is unable to send down deep roots.

So, what is it that causes the seed of God's Word to be scorched and wither away?

If we put together the information we get from Matthew's version with Luke's version, we see that what causes a shallow believer to fall away is persecution or trials or temptation. The person initially warms up to the gospel but at the slightest trial of his or her faith, he succumbs to the pressure. He gives up and says: "I did not bargain for this." Whereas Jesus says, "If you want to be my disciple, you must carry your cross and follow me. Jesus had plenty of followers like that. They loved His miracles, loved His healings, His wonderful teaching and the way He stood up to the religious leaders. But when it came to the crunch, they had not allowed God's Word to take root in their hearts and they deserted Him.

### 3) The Seed among Thorns

It is interesting to compare this group of hearers with those before it- the seed that fell on rocky terrain. Their demise is inevitable but gradual. It is like a drip-drip situation. Again, the Word of God became ineffective because of the condition of the heart of the hearer.

So what chokes God's Word? Jesus mentioned a few things:

**First**, the cares of the world. This is worry, and the Word says we should not worry about anything. (Philippians 4:6-7). Anxiety, worry will kill the word so that it cannot grow.

**Second**, the deceitfulness of riches. Paul is very strong in his warning against this in 1 Timothy 6:6-10. And in 2 Timothy 2:4: He warns that anyone engaged in warfare does not entangle himself with the affairs of this life, in order to please his commander. The affairs of this life can even include good things like success, business, your marriage, your ministry, money, your career, education. There's nothing wrong with any of these things, but if they come in between you and your pursuit of the Kingdom and God's righteousness, they're nothing more than idols.

**Thirdly, the same goes for pleasure.** There is nothing wrong with pleasure as they are God's design, but when it takes your heart away from serving God and believing His word, you are on the road to death.

All of these things can spring up as thorns in your heart and choke God's Word.

### 4) The Seed in Good Soil

This is the kind of ground, the kind of heart, God is looking for, the kind of ground that produces fruit. It hears God's Word, accepts God's Word, understands God's Word, and walks according to God's word. He regularly examines his heart if he is becoming lukewarm to the Word of God, if His love for the Lord is not as fervent as it used to be and makes amends. He is not satisfied with himself but wants to be like Jesus in all things.

God advised Joshua on how to run a successful race as God's servant. In Joshua 1:8 "Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. Meditation allows God's Word to sink into your heart, to take root, to grow, and to produce fruit. Meditation on God's Word means to think about it, reflect on it, allow it to do its work in your life.

The seed in good soil produces the family of God. Remember that when Jesus' mother and brothers came and He was told <sup>32</sup> ... "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you." He said, <sup>33</sup> "Who are my mother and my brothers?" ...<sup>34</sup> Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! <sup>35</sup> Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."

If your heart is like good ground, let me just say this: Keep up the good work. Keep (guard) your heart with all diligence, keep the weeds out, and cultivate the kinds of things that God wants for your life to remain true to God's family. In verses 24-25, Jesus warns: Consider carefully what you hear and how you respond.

There are two more kingdom parables in this section but we will just touch on them briefly:

#### Verses (26-29) The parable of the growing seed.

When a farmer plants seed and it grows **by night**, when he sees the seed sprouted in the morning, he has just worked as a partner with God. Man has done what he could do – plant the seed; and God has done what only He can do: grow the seed.

This shows that the word of God works *invisibly* within us. God promised that His word would accomplish the purpose for which He sends it (Isaiah 55:11). So when you hear the word, it works in you – even as you sleep.

Because Jesus said that the Parable of the Soils was a key for understanding other parables (Mark 4:13), we can say that the **seed** He speaks of here represents the Word of God, as it

did in the Parable of the Soils. Therefore, with this parable, Jesus shows the way the word of God works with hidden and mysterious power, just like a **seed**.

**(Verses 30-34) The parable of the mustard seed.**

**It is the smallest of seed but grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.** Some regard this as a beautiful picture of the church growing so large that it provides refuge for all of the world. But this mustard seed plant has grown into a monstrosity, and it harbours **birds** – who in the parables are emissaries of Satan, according to the foundational parable of the soils (Mark 4:13). Jesus, in considering the growth of the work of God, reminded us that size and status are not necessarily benefits. Corrupt Christianity has been a curse to the world, being the form of godliness without the power.