

Reflection - Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
16/07/2023
St Cuthbert's Anglican Church – Tweed Heads

Genesis 25: 19-34 Rebekah and Isaac have twins – Esau and Jacob

Psalms 119: 105-112 I have set my heart to live by God's laws

Romans 8: 1-11 Sin gives death, but the Spirit in you gives life

Matthew 13: 1-9,18-23 Jesus tells the parable of the Four Soils

Introduction

In today's Gospel reading we have the parable of the four soils. This is one of the few Gospel readings where Jesus also gives an explanation of the parable for the disciples at the time. Today I would like to look at these four soils, and see how they might be relevant for us, in our lives today.

The Parable Overview

Let's firstly have a look at an overview of the parable. Jesus used parables in much of his teaching. Parables are stories of events from everyday life, that people would have known about, that are used to expound religious or moral truth. This year, as we go through Matthew's Gospel, we will be hearing lots of parables where Jesus usually starts by saying, "The Kingdom of heaven is like ..."

In this parable we have the Sower, representing God, who is sharing the Good News with everyone. We have the seed, which represents the Good News of God we have in Jesus, and we have the 4 different soils which represent our lives and how we respond to Jesus. Let us now look at each of these four soils, so as to see what we might learn from this parable, about how to avoid being a bad soil, and about how to be a good soil, so that through our lives, the Good News of Jesus will be shared and grow in others.

First Soil – The Path

These are the words from the parable for the first soil :-

⁴ And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up.

And here is how Jesus describes the soil on the path:-

¹⁹ When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path.

What comes to mind when you think of a path? Paths generally have pretty firm ground. If a path is walked on, for even a small amount of time, the ground hardens under foot because it is being continually compacted. If you place a seed upon a very hard piece of soil, then even if the seed germinates the root is very unlikely to penetrate the surface.

The path describes people who hear about Jesus, but for whatever reason are unable to respond positively. It might be that they hear about the Good News, and decide to reject Jesus, or it might just be that they are indifferent and feel no need to respond either positively or negatively. This type of soil describes someone who resists becoming a Christian at any stage of their life.

The only way that someone would be able to overcome this type of rejection of Jesus, would be to become more open and accepting to the Good News of Jesus for their lives.

A challenge before us in hearing about this soil, is how may we work to unhardened people's hearts so that they might be open to accepting the Good News of Jesus.

Second Soil – The Rocky Ground

These are the words from the parable for the second soil :-

⁵ Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. ⁶ But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away.

And here is how Jesus describes this soil :-

²⁰ As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹ yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away.

If we think of rocky ground, it is ground that doesn't have too much of the good soil, which is required for seeds to grow. There may be pockets of good soil, but if it is mostly rocks, then seeds may germinate, but the roots will not have enough nutrients around them to feed the plant and allow it to thrive. Seeds might germinate, but they won't grow and survive with mostly inert rocks around them.

The rocky soil describes people, who actually become Christians, but end up losing their faith in Jesus, because they have not grown in their faith sufficiently to be able to endure the challenges that life brings. What a tragedy.

A way to overcome this loss of faith is to learn from the beginning what it means to be a Christian, and to continue to learn more, and more, about Jesus and how to follow Jesus in our lives. Learning about our faith and what it entails is critical to maintaining and growing the faith of a Christian.

We are challenged in this as to how we are continuing to learn more and more about Jesus, and what it is to follow Jesus in our lives.

Third Soil – The Thorns

These are the words from the parable for the third soil:-

⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them.

And here is how Jesus describes the soil with thorns:-

²² As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing.

The soil with the thorns is actually good soil, but it is contaminated. In the example of this soil we see how the seed actually grows but it is unable to develop and produce more seeds as it should.

The thorny soil also describes people who become Christians, but their ability to continue to live lives of faith, is stopped by the other things that surround them in life. This paints a very sad picture. If Jesus is the best thing we can commit to in our lives, then how sad it is that other things can muscle in and take precedence in our lives.

We live in a world full of “ism’s”. Of these I think “materialism”, “consumerism”, and “individualism” are “ism’s” that help us to understand this soil.

A way to overcome being lured away from the Good News of Jesus, is to be committed from the start and continue to commit to following Jesus throughout our lives. If we commit to prayer, if we commit to reading the Bible, if we commit to spending time with other Christians to be encouraged in our faith, then we will be more likely not to actually be distracted by other things in the first place.

What are the things that distract us from really coming to know and experience the Good News of Jesus in our lives?

Fourth Soil – The Good Soil

These are the words from the parable for the forth soil:-

⁸ Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

And here is how Jesus describes this soil:-

²³ But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.’

This soil obviously describes the sort of life we should be aiming to achieve. A life where we hear the good news of Jesus, accept the good news of Jesus, and are able to share the good news of Jesus in such a way that those who hear are also able to accept and share it. As followers of Jesus, we will all be different, that's why the parable talks of yields of 100 or 60 or 30, but the expectation is that as Christians, there will be evidence of God's fruit being produced in our lives.

Conclusion

It seems to me that at differing times in our lives, we can be like all of the soils that we have heard about, in our parable today.

We are not born with faith in Jesus. Faith is something that we must accept and choose for ourselves. The "hard path" reminds us that at some stage we have all had to soften our hearts and accept Jesus.

The rocky ground reminds us that we all need to be continually learning about who Jesus is in our lives, so that we will be enabled to grow stronger in our faith.

The soil with thorns, reminds us to stay committed to Jesus, and not let other things take priority in our lives, so that we won't be distracted, but rather, we will be enabled to do God's work in the world.

Being good soil is a high ambition, but it is the best way to live our lives. I pray that we will be enabled to continue to be "good soil", so that we will be enabled to produce "God's good fruit" in our lives. Amen.