

MARK 4:1-20
LISTENING WELL?

What is preaching sermons all about? Is it the opportunity for one person to spout lots of hot air for 20 minutes or even longer, while rest of congregation have a quiet snooze in the corner? I heard of one church recently, where the preacher was particularly academic and one listener said that she “followed him for the first minute, but by the second minute was thinking about what to have for lunch!” Is that how we see sermon-time in Church? The Church has had some very famous preachers in the past and some fairly decent ones still and we continue to train candidates for ministry in the art and skill of preaching; it is still a skill we look for in our ministers. But, we do wonder what it is for: is it one person six feet above contradiction, airing his or her views and the rest have to listen?

There is another view of the sermon: it is time for us to engage with the Bible together, a time to examine what the Bible says and learn from it. This is a much more positive view of the sermon and certainly my attitude in writing this sermon is seeking to engage with the message of the parable of the sower in Mark 4; we take a Bible passage like this and learn from it together. There are questions as to whether this is the most effective method to teach, but it is a way of declaring that God is good, that there is good news and of reminding ourselves of important things.

Jesus was a preacher. He taught some important and profound things about God and about life. He did so, amongst other ways, by some good stories which you can picture in your mind's eye. You can almost see the farmer in the field. Parables are a bit of a puzzle at the same time, though. They are good pictures, but what do these pictures mean? Why did Jesus use parables rather than just say what He meant? He seems to have done this deliberately to make people think. Those who came with honest searching hearts went away to work out the message; those who couldn't be bothered just heard a nice story. Jesus may have been content to let it be that way! Parables have one lesson to teach us: the point of the good Samaritan is “love your neighbour”; the point of the prodigal son is that God is the loving, waiting father. It is possible to read all kinds of things into the parables, but so often that is unnecessary; they have one point to make; find that one point and learn it!

“The character of the hearer determines the effect of the word upon him/her.” (Taylor) Perhaps the parable should be called ‘the parable of the soils’ because it is actually all about the place where the seed lands; this is all about what happens to the seed when it hits the ground. The sower is the person who gets the seed there! This is all about listening and how people listened to Jesus first of all and how well we listen now to sermons that open up Jesus' teaching and the gospel for us today. This is the nearest thing we have to Jesus explaining His ministry. I once heard Billy Graham interviewed on TV and he was asked to explain his ministry as a preacher of the gospel and he did that by the parable of the sower. People react in different ways because our hearts are different; we all hear the same message, but each one reacts in different ways to what hear.

So, to the picture: some imagine that as Jesus sat by the lake, there was a farmer on the hillside in the distance sowing. He would be walking up and down the field with his seedbag over his shoulder and rather than the precise seed-sowing of your garden or seed-tray or pot, the farmer is broadcasting seed into the field. He would be taking handfuls of seed and simply throwing it about as he walked, so that the whole field would be covered by the time he was finished. It is a common picture, the way in which the framers did it then! Now it's done with a tractor and a seed-drill that

puts the seed into the right place, so that they know where they've put it and it will grow up in nice neat rows.

In Jesus' story, the seed falls in four places: it falls on the path that runs along the side of the field or through the field; it is as dry and hard as concrete because it is the place where people have walked and the seed just sits on top and the birds come along and eat it. Every field has a pile of stones in the corner, collected from the field and left there; there is a little soil attached to these stones and among them and some seed falls there and it grows for a little while in that thin layer of soil, but the sun comes up and scorches the plant, and because it has no depth, it dies. There are the weeds! We all know that weeds grow more strongly and grow faster and so the seed the farmer sows has to compete with weeds and fails; the weeds choke them out and the plants will not produce fruit and may simply die. Some seed falls on good soil; this seed gets well-watered and germinates in the sun and grows strongly in good soil and come the harvest time will produce a crop that the farmer can harvest.

"The character of the hearer determines the effect of the word upon him/her."

Have you ever left Church not being able to remember a single word of the sermon, with no idea what the sermon had been about? It may have been because the preacher was bad and that's a different thing. Let's assume that the preacher is easy to follow and understand, but you can still remember nothing. There are times when we hear a sermon or read a Bible passage and it makes absolutely no impression on us whatsoever; we can't even remember it. This is the path-like heart! "*Some people...*" (v15) We are quite unresponsive! There are others who simply will not listen at all; "all religion is bunk! I have no time for it!" So nothing that any preacher can say will persuade them or change their mind.

Some are impulsive: "*Others, like...*" (v16f) people respond well to begin with and it seems as if the gospel has made a huge impression on them, has changed their life completely, but then hard things come along, they face trouble and they give up; faith has been good for a time, but perhaps theirs has only been a superficial response, and the gospel has made no lasting impact on them. This is the seed among the stones. Going back to Billy Graham and those like him, some people who heard him preach at big events in the Kelvin Hall or at Murrayfield, responded well and made professions of faith, perhaps in the heat and emotion of the moment, but when they went back to their families or friends who made fun of them, or to real life without any Church support, it was too difficult and so they gave up.

Some are preoccupied with other things: "*Still others...*" (v18f) This is what bothers me most about our communities. There are a lot of good people in here and out there and lots of people with good intentions about faith and following Jesus and being involved in Church, but they are preoccupied with so many other things, and are busy people. They have to keep family life going; to take their children to a whole pile of activities that in themselves are all good; they have to work long hours or shift patterns; they are looking after family members who are ill or needing care; etc etc. Where then is the time and space to consider the Bible and faith and the gospel and Jesus? It gets squeezed out and if we keep squeezing it out, faith will never have chance to thrive and grow and influence the way we live life; so faith gets choked out and may even die! We need to make and keep time and space for faith.

Finally, there is good news. "*Others, like...*" (v20) In a moment, there will be a point to this sermon, something to do as a result of this parable. Take that point away; consider it; think about how to put that point into practice and then do something about it and let it shape something of your life. That is the responsive heart that is the

good soil. The more we are like that, the more impact and influence Jesus' teaching and the Bible will have on us and the more we will become like Christ in character, attitudes, faith etc. The fruit of our engagement with sermons and with the Bible generally is Christian character; is about becoming more and more like Jesus and stronger in our faith; that's the whole point of this and that is what we have to work hard to learn and remember. So take away what you hear and remember it; consider it and think about it; put it into practice.

Here is the point: James' letter is full of practical wisdom. He sums this whole theme up like this: "*Do not...*" (*James 1:22*) Listening is good; in fact listening is essential; if we don't listen, we'll never learn. Listening is more than hearing; how many conversations do we have when we hear the other person talking, but two minutes later can't tell a thing they've said because we've not been listening? Listening is an attitude, first and foremost, being willing to take in what the preacher says, what the Bible says and being willing to learn. Listening is good, but it is not enough; not only are we to listen, but we are to put into practice what we hear; to do what it says. The Church calls the Bible "it's supreme rule of faith and life" – that means that what we believe and the way in which we live has to be shaped by the Bible and what it teaches. When it says "*Love the Lord...*" (*Mark 12:30*) then we have to learn to love God and to love Him wholeheartedly. When it says "*love...*" (*Mark 12:31*) again, that is what we are to do, to love our neighbour in the best possible way.

God has called me to be a preacher of the unsearchable riches of Christ. That us an enormous privilege. I have to do that with imagination and creativity to make these unsearchable riches come alive and be clear and plain to you. But I can do nothing about the way in which you hear; it is up to you how you hear! There are people who seem completely hardened to the gospel; there are weeks when we don't listen. There are people who are impulsive and seem to respond well, but it doesn't last; there are weeks when you'll tell me this was a great sermon, but on Monday morning you've thrown it away. There are people who are caught up with so many other things that they have no time to listen; there are times when we're so preoccupied with other things that we forget to read the Bible or come to Church at all. There are times when we listen, take to heart what we hear and change; our attitude is different, we behave differently, we believe something we never understood before, we become a more Christ-like person. This is what we must aim for more and more: to listen well, to consider what you hear; then to do it! "*Do not...*" (*James 1:22*)