

The Seed of Change

Luke 8:1-15

John Tucker, Milford Baptist Church, 5 February 2006

If you've been following the news this week you'll know that last Tuesday night people were crowded into the Orewa Rotary Club to hear one of our political leaders present his prescription for remedying the ills blighting New Zealand society today. The leader? Don Brash. Then on Wednesday, the world's media gathered at the US Capitol to hear another great political leader outline his vision for building a new society, a new world. Who was that? George Bush giving his annual State of the Union address. In this passage, crowds of people have gathered around another great leader – the greatest leader the world has ever known – to hear his vision, his plans, for the renewal of our world, for the coming of God's kingdom. But instead of carefully outlining a programme of reform, or mobilising the crowds with a stirring speech, he tells them a story, a bizarre, perplexing riddle of a story about a farmer sowing seed. Even his disciples don't understand it. But, for those who have ears to hear, for those who are willing to listen, there are some vital lessons or insights here on how this world can be changed, how the kingdom of God advances.

1. The impact of God's word (v11)

The first insight concerns the impact of God's word. The people of Israel expected the Messiah to inaugurate God's kingdom by military conquest, the sudden violent overthrow of their enemies. But the secret about God's kingdom, Jesus says, is that it will advance – the world will be changed – not by the sword but by the seed. And "the seed is the word of God" (v11). A single seed can look so small and insignificant. But it carries enormous life-giving potential and power. On Anniversary Day we were down at the waterfront enjoying the shade of a pohutukawa tree. What started off as a little seed grew into a large tree that has cracked and warped a concrete footpath? Out the back of our house we have a climbing plant that has wrapped its tendrils around our carport. It looks innocuous enough, but when my mum first saw it she said, "That's a wisteria plant. Cut it out. Those plants can climb under a house and destroy the foundations." Millions of words are spoken or written on behalf of Christ every day. Sometimes it can seem like they have very little effect. But with this metaphor of a seed Jesus is saying that there is power in the word of God. When you speak God's word to someone, you are never wasting your breath. You are sowing seed that could crack open their heart and shift the very foundations of their life.

2. The inevitability of disappointment (vv12-14)

In this story you'll notice that Jesus mentions a sower and four different kinds of soil. If a marketing consultant were telling this story perhaps it might well be the other way around: one soil; four different sowers. "The first sower sowed seed this way, but it didn't work. A second sower used a different technique, but it was no good either. The third tried yet another method, but still had no success. Finally, along come a sower who had done his market research and perfected his technique, and so he got a harvest." But that's not how Jesus tells it. In this parable, the success or failure of the seed does not seem to depend on the sower's technique at all. On the contrary, the seed is sown in what seems like an artless, almost wasteful, fashion that demands no skill at all. It is simply "scattered." And it is the quality of the soil, not the expertise of the sower – not the ability of the speaker – that determines the harvest. I find that comforting. Don't you? But it's also a little troubling. Because if the quality of the soil determines the harvest, and you are seeking to share God's word with others, then you must face the inevitability of failure and disappointment.

(a) Hard hearts (v12)

As Jesus speaks, he looks out at the vast crowds streaming to hear him. Many would be tempted to count these people as converts. But Jesus is not as easily impressed by numbers as we are. "No," he says. "This is a very mixed multitude. Some of these people coming to hear my words are like seed that falls along a path. They won't receive my message. Their minds are closed off. It's amazing how easily we close our minds. In the 1840s an Austrian obstetrician, Ignaz Semelweiss, became

convinced that one reason many women were dying in childbirth in such large numbers was because doctors weren't washing their hands. Even though this simple hygienic measure reduced deaths from childbirth from 9.92% to 1.27% he was laughed out of Vienna and hounded out of medicine. A few decades later Louis Pasteur announced his discovery of the very same phenomenon. He argued that infectious disease was caused by microbes that were passed on by unwashed hands. So embarrassing and offensive was his claim to the medical establishment, that one fellow scientist challenged Pasteur to a duel and the Academy of Medicine in France expelled him from their membership. Intellectual pride can harden us to truth, whether it be scientific or spiritual. Some people, when they hear about Jesus, say "You don't seriously expect me to be taken in by this nonsense do you? I can't believe that!" But in my experience if someone says they can't believe in Jesus, very rarely is the problem simply intellectual. Usually it's moral. There's something in their lives – an activity, a relationship – that they don't want to give up. They want to remain in control. But notice who is really in control. Jesus says in v12, "The devil comes and takes away the word so they can't believe and be saved." In our sophisticated and scientific age, it might sound foolish to talk about the devil, but Jesus was convinced that a personal force of evil is at work in this world, seeking to discredit the word and close minds off to it. Perhaps he is at work in the life of someone you know and love. Keep sowing that seed. And keep praying.

(b) Shallow hearts (v13)

Others, Jesus says in v13, are like seed falling on rock. Underneath much of the soil in Israel is a thick shelf of limestone rock. Where the layer of soil on top of that rock is thin, the roots of a germinating seed can't go very far. The plants spring up quickly but under the blazing Mediterranean sun or the blast of a hot wind they wither and die for lack of moisture and nourishment. Some people are like this. They respond to the word with joy, but then circumstances change, the adrenalin subsides. Perhaps they begin to feel cheated: "I was told Christianity would make me feel happy. I don't feel any better." Maybe difficulties come, and quickly their faith withers. Who of us hasn't observed this? I remember the first time I ever spoke in church a young lady – someone special to me – came up to me afterwards, and said she wanted to become a Christian. For a while her faith seemed to shoot up. But six months later, she had fallen away. Fifteen years later she's still out of the kingdom. If you're new in your faith, this is a very critical time for you. You've got to put your roots down deep into the word. Join a home group. And make a mental note to do the *Alpha* course here when it starts in May.

(c) Crowded hearts (v14)

Looking out at that crowd, Jesus says that there are other people who resemble seed that falls among thorns. They don't renege on their commitment to Jesus altogether. They don't "fall away" in that sense. But as time goes on, Christ becomes less and less significant in their lives. They still call themselves Christians – they have a faith of sorts – but it's just a church-going habit, not a vital, personal relationship with God. Jesus says in v14: "they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature." For young people it might be an educational goal or sexual attraction. For those of us who are middle-aged, it might be financial objectives, family responsibilities, a career ambition. For those of you in your twilight years it might be a preoccupation with your health or your garden or your grandchildren. Whatever our stage in life, there are dozens of deadly distractions that will choke our faith and arrest our spiritual development, unless we weed them out.

Make no mistake about it. Jesus says that telling the good news of God's kingdom is full of discouragement. Many people will hear and never return. Others will rush to make a decision for Christ, only to disappear. Still others will sit in a pew week after week like passengers on a train but never display anything more than a nominal commitment. But in spite of this disappointment, he says, keep sowing. Keep speaking the word to that neighbour that colleague that friend of yours. Because there is cause for hope.

3. The importance of perseverance (v15)

In v15 Jesus says that the time will come when you will reap an enormous harvest. For there are those who "with a noble and good heart ... hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop." I was reading an intriguing article in the paper last weekend. It said the key to success is not usually talent but grit, perseverance. By way of example it talked about an inventor, Chester Carlson, who developed a new technology and tried to find a company that would invest in it. More than 20 companies rejected his idea. The US National Inventors Council rejected his work. Eventually, though, he managed to convince a company that his technology had potential. Carlson called his new process electrophotography. Today it's known as photocopying. Carlson persevered. Time and again you see that perseverance is the mark of successful people. Beethoven handled the violin awkwardly and his teacher called him hopeless as a composer. The parents of the opera singer Enrico Caruso wanted him to be an engineer – his teacher said he couldn't sing. Walt Disney was fired by a newspaper for lack of ideas and went bankrupt several times before he built Disneyland. Albert Einstein, it was said, didn't speak until he was four years old and he didn't read until he was seven. His teacher described him as mentally slow. Henry Ford went broke five times before he hit it big. The baseball player Babe Ruth, famous for setting the record for home runs, also holds the record for strikeouts.

Perseverance is the key to success in this world, and in God's kingdom. Every Christian faces setbacks. We all have times when the road is hard, the sun hot. Times when our faith seems dry, barren, fruitless. All that's required of us at those times is that we don't give up. The mark of a true follower of Jesus is simply perseverance. Those who refuse to give up. Who, Jesus says, "hear the word and retain it" – or, as some translations say, "cling to it" (NLT), "holding on no matter what" (Msg). I conducted an experiment last year. For my quiet time, my devotional time at the beginning of each day, I decided I wouldn't read from the Bible. I'd read other books – good books, theological books – but I'd take a break from reading the Bible. It was a mistake. I feel as if God has been saying to me over the last few weeks, "John, this year, commit yourself again to reading and reflecting on a passage of Scripture every day. Because if you want the kingdom of God to come in this world, it starts with you. Will you let me rule as king in your life? If so, the way to do that is to pay obedient attention to my word."

Questions

1. Read Luke 8:1-15, focusing especially on v 10. Why does Jesus say that he speaks in parables? What is the significance of this?
2. Jesus says in v 11 that the seed is the word of God. What is your attitude to the Word of God? See Ps 33:6; Isa 55:11; Isa 40:8; John 6:63; Matt 8:16; Heb 4:12.
3. What threatens to displace the word of God in the church today?
4. How and why do "life's worries, riches and pleasures" choke the word from our lives?
5. Run through the four types of soil. How many of these represent people who belong to the kingdom and have eternal life? See Matthew 7:21-23; John 15:6; Hebrews 6:8.
6. How would you describe the condition of the soil of your heart?
7. How do you squeeze God and his word into the cracks and crevices of your life? What could you do to better "retain" or cling to God's word?
8. How is God calling you to sow the seed of God's word into the lives of other people this year?