

READING Luke 8:4-15

SERMON

The Parable of the Sower

The parable of the sower. A very familiar parable told by Jesus, but one that is very appropriate for this time of year. It is about a farmer who needs to plant his crop and then to reap the crop that he is sown. When Sue and I were in Swavesey, Cambridgeshire, my office looked out over the fields. All the way through the winter I would see the farmer going up and down in this tractor tilling the soil time after time after time. Then it would stop after one more time going up and down the field. The farmer had sown his crop.

Then he would occasionally go up and down the field, spraying to help the plants grow and discourage weeds and animal infestations. Then I would see the combine harvest out and it was harvest time. The combine going up and down the field with the tractor and trailing pulling alongside from time to time to fill up with grain to take to the drying machine.

But between planting the reaping there were hazards, hazards that Jesus spoke about in his parable. These were hazards that he had to explain to the disciples. He told the parable, then the disciples ask, "What does the parable mean?" And Jesus graciously talks about the four hazards that will stop people finding the Word of God, the Bible and allowing it to take hold in their lives. For the seed in the Word of God, verse 11

"...The seed is the word of God." (Luke 8:11 NIV)

Next year, 2011 is the four hundredth anniversary of the publication of the King James Version of the Bible, one of the first translations that was universally accepted in the country. The Bible is important, but there are hazards along the way that prevent us from reading it and taking it in.

The first hazard is busyness (verse 12).

"Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved."
(Luke 8:12 NIV)

When God's word falls into a busy life, the devil can snatch it away. We are all busy and this stops us thinking. But some people like being busy. When we were on holiday recently I read a book entitled

Adrenaline and Stress

It was not because I felt stressed or anything, but one of my lecturers on the MA course raved about it and on holiday I like to read novels and some sort of academic book – I am sad that way! The author of the book said that it is the constant high levels of adrenaline the blood stream that causes the long term effect of stress and some people are adrenaline junkies and so work hard and long hours as this keeps up the adrenaline.

But if there is ‘traffic’ running over your life at that time, even good traffic, then the seed of the word stands no chance of survival. If you are too busy in life, then God’s Word does not get a look in. Even today you could be sitting there busy thinking about Sunday lunch; or perhaps, new shoes for the children; or maybe you are planning your week’s work, remembering the jobs you have to do, the appointments to keep; or you might be back on the beach, dreaming about a holiday you have just had; or that lovely evening meal you are looking forward to – then your life can be like a hardened path with no opportunity for the seed to take root.

If we are serious about God, then we must be serious about his word and not allow ourselves to be so busy that we cannot read it. Ask yourself – how much time do you give to reading the Bible from one Sunday to the next – or do you only hear the Bible being read on Sundays?

The second hazard is shallow thinking (verse 13).

“Those on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away.” (Luke 8:13 NIV)

We can be wonderfully enthusiastic about God’s word but then don’t allow time to think things through.

Jesus is the great questioner. He asks (people): “Do you want to be healed?”, (disciples): “Who do you say that I am?”, and (his followers): “Do you understand what I am saying?”

The word of God is intended to make us stop and think.

In the gospel of Matthew there are 27 references to Jesus and the animals. Animals such as: locusts, birds, pigs, foxes, snakes, doves, fish, camels, donkeys, goats and cockerels! Someone commented on this saying that

“Jesus says the birds of the air are the evangelists to the earth who sing the good news of God’s providence; if he feeds us, he will feed you”.

This is a wonderful harvest illustration of making space in our lives for the richness of God’s word to take root, of allowing the Holy Spirit to draw the connections between the world of Jesus and the world we live in. It is no good just having the head stuffed full of knowledge, but not thinking about it and applying it.

On my bookshelf there are books that I have read and read and read. I do this because when I read them they are read on a not to remember basis. Books for the MA I read to remember. It is too easy to read the Bible and then not remember what you have written because it means nothing and is not thought of again. Let us not be all enthusiasm to read, and keep the thinking shallow. But let us read to allow it to go in and stick, so we think about it during the day, during the week.

The third hazard is being overwhelmed by the needs of the world (verse 14).

“The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life’s worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature.” (Luke 8:14 NIV)

This is a picture of how the work of God's word can grind to a halt in our lives. The seed initially gets into the soil and is received well but then it can be choked by 'worries, riches and pleasures'. Jesus is not referring to distractions while we are listening to God's word; he is indicating, 'as we go on our way', that other things come in to stifle its impact.

We think that the Bible is too big, or the problems of the world are too large for me to solve, so I give up. The Bible gets choked out because the worries of the world – good worries to have, seem so big that I cannot help, so I'll stop reading my Bible, so I don't feel guilty about doing nothing.

Some people like to read book, biographies. Great men and women down the ages whose lives have been turning into books. I find the thought a bit depressing really. Reading about the life of great men and women because then I will get discouraged because I am not as good as them, I do not achieve as much as them, I am me, here, in this place. But that is where God calls me to be with the work he has given me to do. Do not worry if you haven't changed the world in a week, God will be wanting you to talk to the person who works next to you. Listen to their lives, with its joys and sorrows and see where God fits in, or could help them.

Just this week I was talking to a Christian counsellor who receives phone calls from people who are not necessarily Christians. Her first piece of advice is for the person to find a church to go to. Something simple. Too often we can be overwhelmed by the cares of the others and the very big picture of world poverty and famine and flood that we forget those around us, and we forget that the Bible is also for them, as well as to spur us to help and pray for others in great need.

Don't let the facts of life squeeze the vision out of mission! However great the odds, we can be partners with God in changing his world.

The fourth hazard is about persevering (verse 15).

“But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.” (Luke 8:15 NIV)

The seed which falls in good soil perseveres and eventually produces a harvest. When God speaks his word into our lives he expects to see fruitfulness and the key phrase here is: 'by persevering'.

The hazard to avoid is the temptation to give up. Perseverance has been termed the principle of 'keep on keeping on'. You cannot be intimately involved with God without experiencing bouts of compassion fatigue, cynicism at the broken promises of government leaders, and a chronic disappointment with the Church. But we need the sticking power to 'keep on keeping on'.

When the farmer plants his crop, he does not leave it. He nourishes it. If it is too dry, he waters it. When the time is right he goes up and down putting on the pesticides and herbicides to keep the plants healthy and vigorous. The farmer cannot expect to plant, then ignore until harvest.

We too cannot become Christians and then ignore the word of God. It has to be read regularly, it has to be thought about and thought through. This will include Bible study with others as well as on one's own. This means applying it in different situations and this is where Hot Potatoes comes in as we look at some ethical issues using the Bible as our guide.

We can all lose heart at times because of busyness, of shallow thinking, of being choked with too many problems, but that's when we need to persevere most, to read the Bible, to think about it, 'keep on keeping on'. Perseverance eventually overcomes all the hazards of the harvest. God will provide us with the staying power, which will produce fruit that will last