

Sermon – Luke 8:1-15, Leroy Coote 1st August 2021

One of the challenging aspects about communicating during COVID was working out how best to communicate with each and every person in the parish throughout lockdown. Luckily in our world today, we have a variety of means of communication that people use. These include: the telephone, the mobile phone – either by calling or texting, email, Zoom, Facebook, and the internet just to name a few. The key for effective communication was and still is – how to apply the most effective method of communication for each member of the congregation. For those I knew who had difficulty accessing email, I delivered pew sheets and sermons into their letterboxes so that I knew they knew what was happening in the life of the parish. In other words, aiming to make the communication I delivered to all in the parish the same and hopefully this was achieved.

In his ministry, Jesus used a number of methods of communication to get his message across. He preached to large crowds of people in terms of telling them what living a life pleasing to God is all about, which was in the Sermon on the Mount. He refuted wrong teaching in his robust discussions (or arguments) with the Pharisees. He also spoke with his disciples on their own to speak to them about the truth of the gospel which we see at the end of our second reading today. He also used another method. That method was the parable.

Over the next few months we are going to be looking at the parables of Jesus starting with the parable of the sower, which has also been called the parable of the four soils. Many of us will know the stories of the parables but do we really know their meaning and the effect they are intended to have on our lives? Throughout this series, I pray that we are not only reminded of the stories of the parables, but I also pray that with God's help, we can apply the meaning of each of these parables to our lives so that as a collective, we can be totally and truly a healthy church or a healthy segment of the Kingdom of God.

But before I start, let me define a parable. *A “parable” is an illustrative story, where a familiar idea is cast beside an unfamiliar idea in such a way that the comparison helps people to better understand the unfamiliar idea. The pattern is this: A simple story is told, certain features of which are parallel to the points or principles one wishes to drive home.*

With that in mind, I am going to look this parable under three headings: The setting for this parable in verses 1-3. The parable itself in verses 4-8 The function of a parable in verses 9-10 as explained by Jesus to his disciples. The meaning of this parable as spelt out by Jesus in verses 11-15. My hope and prayer is that by the end of today we see the place that the word of God should take in all of our lives. So let us start with my first point of four which is the setting of this parable and this is found in verses 1-3.

Verse 1 tells us that this story occurred after a previous event. That previous event was Jesus healing the Syrophenician woman at the end of Luke 7. After this, Jesus travelled from one town to another for a purpose. That purpose was to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God. This is consistent with the worldwide church's mission which all of us should be involved in and not just the vicar which is unfortunately what 'churchmanship' sometimes espouses. Jesus' ministry models this as in one passage of Scripture not long after this one, he sends out the 72 in Luke 10 to proclaim the good news as well. However, Jesus was not alone. At the end of verse 1, we are told that the twelve were with him. But not just the twelve but some women as well as mentioned in verses 2 and 3. These women appear to have been transformed by the ministry of

Jesus on earth up to this particular point in time. Some had been cured of evil spirits and one had demons come out of her. What they did was to support Jesus and the disciples in their ministry. What I also believe is important here is that Luke highlights the women in his gospel because it shows that the women here were involved with the ministry of Jesus and were not devalued by Jesus but shown as important which is in direct contrast to the way the society treated women back in Jesus' time. This again shows us that the way Jesus operated was opposite to the way the culture operated in the time this was written especially given that he and his disciples were supported by the women from their own means at the end of verse 3. This also shows how devoted they were to the ministry of Jesus. So the scene is set as Jesus travelled.

This now brings us to the parable itself which is told in front of a large crowd as mentioned in verse 4 and is my second point of 4. This crowd has come from town after town I suspect after hearing Jesus' proclamations about the kingdom of God. It is to the crowd that he told this well-known parable of the sower starting in verse 5. This is where the familiar idea of a parable is cast. That familiar idea is very agricultural because that is something that the people will be familiar with at the time. According to the start of the parable, it appears that we are at the seed planting time of the year and it appears that the farmer is sowing his seed in the field. However, it appears that some of the seed fell on the path. Often through the middle of the field there was a worn path that people walked through. As you can imagine, that ground was quite compact and hard. Occasionally, seed would land on that and subsequently not take root. The reason given in the parable for the seed not taking on the path was that it was visible to the hungry birds that were hovering in the sky and when they saw it they would swoop down and eat the seed lying on the path. The meaning of this will come to fruition when we look at Jesus' discussion of the parable with his disciples. So, some seed fell on the path.

But some seed from the parable fell on rocky ground. Rocky ground has some difficulty in holding moisture but there was potential for seed to grow. However, if the rocky ground is not able to hold moisture when the seed arrives, then the plant will end up withering and therefore not last as mentioned in verse 6.

However, it appears that wherever the farmer was scattering his seed, some of his seed fell amongst thorns or weeds. These thorny plants had the capacity to grow but they only let the scattered seed grow to a point and then the thorns choked the plants. Lastly, some of the seed fell on good soil. Good soil was what was mostly in Galilee. The result was that the seed flourished and yielded a crop which was 100 times more than was sown. Good soil, good crop. So it appears that when the seed fell on good soil, it flourished and multiplied. I wonder if this occurs in the meaning of the parable. At the end however, Jesus says these words, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear." This is a reference to how we are to hear and would normally be where the parable would finish. But what are we to hear and how are we to hear what we are to hear? Stay tuned for the answer.

But before that, Jesus talks to his disciples about the function of a parable which we find in verses 9-10 and is my third point. The disciples wanted to know what this parable meant as mentioned in verse 9. This is only one of two occasions where Jesus explains a parable to his disciples with the other being the time in Matthew 13 where he explains to them the parable of the weeds and wheat. Both times it was at the request of the disciples. After being asked about the meaning of the parable, Jesus replied to them by saying that to the disciples – *the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God has been given to you* in verse 10. This is an intriguing statement. What did Jesus mean by this? The answer to that question of what Jesus meant by the first part of verse 10

is this: it is related to Jesus himself because it is his teaching that is the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God that have been revealed to the disciples. So that means that God has revealed himself to his believers through the teachings of Jesus. However, Jesus also says he speaks to others in parables. As I said earlier, parables have a parallel meaning where a familiar idea is cast beside an unfamiliar idea but it appears that not everybody will get the unfamiliar idea. Listen to the quote that Jesus uses from Isaiah 6:10, *'though seeing, they may not see; though hearing, they may not understand.'* Jesus here suggests that some may see part but not all of his message especially the important part or they hear some of it but may not understand it all.

So we have two contrasting scenarios here. Those who hear the word of God – the disciples and those who don't quite get it – those he speaks in parables who hear but don't understand. I hope that we understand the meaning and application of the parables we look at as we go through this series. With that in mind, let us take this rare opportunity to look at the meaning of a parable from Jesus's perspective which is my fourth and final point.

At the start of this explanation, what we find is the identification of the main constant in the parable which is the seed. The seed symbolises the word of God. Agriculturally, for a seed to be effective as mentioned earlier, it needs to connect with soil that allows the seed to flourish. What then is the sort of soil that is needed for the seed to flourish? Well, it doesn't appear to be soil that is on a path which is hard and compacted. In fact, it doesn't get a chance to flourish because it doesn't take root as the devil (the bird) takes the seed away so that the person cannot become a believer. It appears for such a person, that the word of God hasn't taken any sort of root in their lives. This is spiritual warfare in a nutshell because Satan is always going to try and stop the word of God getting into the lives of people. This is a reality that we have always faced since the beginning of time. Satan will use whatever tactic he can to stop the word of God penetrating the hearts of people.

However, when God's word lands on rocky ground, it takes root to a point. They get excited and receive the word with joy at the start of their walk with God but don't get rooted properly into a relationship with God and as a result fall away after a time of testing. Another way of putting that is when the 'going gets tough' faith-wise, they 'get going' away from God. I hope you can see the key application that is coming.

The third type of soil stands for those who hear but get choked up by life's worries and do not mature. In other words, their growth in faith stops at a particular point. Worldly things diminish the growth of the word in the lives of this group. When you look at the three things mentioned here, there is a lack of focus on the things of the word. Worry is a lack of trust in God. Riches do not focus on the things of God, and pleasures focus on self-enjoyment. These three points of focus are dangerous because they stop the word of God being as effective as possible in one's life. In fact, you could say that the three things mentioned in verse 14 could count as idolatry and that is what stops the growth of the believer and in trying to serve part of God's word and their respective idol, the word of God doesn't flourish and they don't continue to mature in their faith. This I have seen a lot in my time in ministry even within churches and it stops churches from being fruitful. All of what happens in seed three happens when the word of God is not central to either the Christian or the life of the church. In other words, this is what happens when the word of God is put in second place.

But finally, here is what the word of God is to do – flourish. Let me read verse 15 to you *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. This soil is the one who has ears that have heard and understood. This seed is on good soil which has a noble and good heart which means that is someone who will hear and obey the word of God. This means that it takes root in their lives, stays in their lives and it is shared into the lives of others which therefore means a further crop is produced. And when we retain it and obey it, we encourage each other to meet together as church to encourage each other in our flourishing engagement of the word of God which I pray includes personal bible reading and group bible study. The fourth seed should be fundamental for every Christian in the world because: The word of God is deeply rooted in their lives. The word of God is growing in their lives and, the word of God is shining in their lives and affecting others 100 times more.

So what do we do as a result of this passage? We need to first and foremost let the word of God flourish in our lives. We need to grow not just in the knowledge of the word of God but also in the application of the word of God in our lives. We don't just need to study it – we need to study it and obey it. Not only that we need to keep obeying the word of God and spreading its effect until we leave this earth as that is central to being a Christian because it is the word of God that is central to our faith and it is the word of God that our church is built upon. Brothers and sisters in Christ – let me encourage you to join a bible study group so you can get into the practice of getting stuck into the word of God. Why? So that the seed of the word of God will not only be heard, it will also be retained and through persevering produce a crop that extends the kingdom of God with the help of God because that, my friends, is central to the church's way out of COVID. Not only that, let me encourage you to start bringing your bibles to church so you can follow the preaching of the passages that are preached upon so that you can see the word of God come to life in our life so you can flourish as a Christian with the word of God as your base.