

PARABLES

Mark 4:1-34

A sermon by Peter Budd

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At the University, we had exams in January.
It can be the most depressing time,
 marking an exam question on material you've taught.
When I prepare a course in chemistry,
 I try to make it relevant and interesting.
When I deliver a lecture,
 I try to inspire the students to learn about and understand the subject.
Then I see how they answer the exam question and ... oh dear, oh dear!

Some of them really don't seem to have engaged with the subject at all.
 It's as though whatever words I uttered have been whisked away by birds.
Some of them have picked up a few concepts, but their comprehension is limited.
 Their understanding doesn't go deep.
Some of them sort of know what it's all about.
 But what they write is based on misinformation from the past,
 rather than facts from the present.
But then there are those who have not only studied the material,
 they've thought it through, explored it further;
 they're helping to develop the subject.
And they're the ones who make it all worthwhile.

It takes effort and imagination to grasp new concepts.
 To develop a deep understanding of fresh ideas.
And if it's hard to teach aspects of chemistry to those who've chosen to study chemistry,
 how much harder it is to convey something about that which is beyond our experience.

When you have a message that is truly revolutionary...
 Good news, but in a totally unexpected way...
How do you get it across?
How do you make people stop, and think, and work things through?

When you're trying to describe something
 that isn't quite like anything they've ever known before...
How do you get it across?
You have to compare it with something, but what if nothing is truly comparable?

Even in chemistry, it's difficult enough.
Much of chemistry is about what electrons do.
But how do you describe an electron?
We can say it's like a tiny, tiny, tiny little particle.
 Except that it doesn't always behave
 like we'd expect a tiny, tiny, tiny little particle to behave.
We can say it's like a wave.
 Except sometimes it's simpler to think about it like a particle.
We can say it has wave-particle duality.

But at the end of the day, an electron is what an electron is.

If it's difficult to explain what an electron is like,
how much more difficult it is to explain things about God.
How do you explain something like "the kingdom of God"?
Well, the way Jesus did it, was through parables.
Not just one parable, but a collection of parables.
Because each parable focuses on an aspect of the kingdom.
We need to bring them together to get a clearer picture of the whole.
Just like with an electron.

Outwardly, a parable is a nice little story that everyone can appreciate.
But not everyone will delve under the surface; seek out its meaning.

In Mark 4 verse 12, Jesus quotes from Isaiah 6:9 to explain why he used parables.
"they may be ever seeing but never perceiving,
and ever hearing but never understanding;
otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!"

Now, I don't think Jesus is saying he's deliberately obfuscating the message.
On the contrary, he's recognising the reality that people simply won't take in the message,
unless they stop, and think, and work it through.
And for those who are willing to do that, he's giving an opportunity.
An opportunity to respond.
To turn and be forgiven.
There are those who'll miss out.
But for those who are willing to hear, to really hear – those who have ears to hear –
this is life-changing.

Of course, we need help in knowing how to approach parables.
Jesus helped his disciples to work them through.
As it says in Mark 4 verse 34.
"He did not say anything to them without using a parable.
But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything."

Mark chapter 4 begins with a relatively long parable,
for which a relatively full explanation is provided.
It's a worked example,
to get us into the right mind-set for approaching parables.
It's the parable of the sower,
or we may prefer to call it the parable of the four soils.
Most of us have probably heard it many times.
But have we really stopped, and thought about it, and worked it through?

The story conjures up a rural scene that would have been familiar
to the crowd gathered on the shore of Lake Galilee,
listening to Jesus teach from a boat. (*Mark 4:1*)
A farmer goes out to sow his seed. (*Mark 4:3-8*)
He scatters it, like farmers do at the time.
And what happens to it depends on where it lands.

Some along the path, where the hungry birds quickly peck it up.
Some on rocky places, in shallow soil where it starts to grow, but then withers.
Some amongst thorns, which choke the young plants.
But other seed in good soil, where it grows and grows and produces a crop.
Multiplied many times over.

So, what were the disciples to make of this.
Was this a lesson in good farming practice?

Should the farmer have been more careful where he scattered his seed?
Fortunately, Jesus explained the parable to them later. (*Mark 4:14-20*)

The seed represents something.

The word.

Luke's gospel calls it "the word of God" (*Luke 8:11*)

Mathew's gospel calls it "the message about the kingdom" (*Matthew 13:19*)

The parable is about how the word, the message, is received by different people.

And the different responses are very like the different responses I get
to my chemistry lectures.

This is realistic, down-to-earth, practical stuff, about communicating the message.

The message that isn't just about what we think or believe,
but about our whole being.

This is what it was like for Jesus.

And this is what it'll be like for us.

There are those who are hardly touched by the word.

No sooner does it fall on their ears, it's whisked away, forgotten.

There are those who take something in, and its wonderful.

But it doesn't fully take hold of their life.

They can't keep going, when troubles come.

There are those who take it in and sort of grow.

But they struggle.

They're overwhelmed by other stuff.

They're unproductive.

But then there are those who fully accept the word.

Allow it to work through them, to change them.

Who become fruitful, abundantly fruitful.

And they're the ones who make it all worthwhile.

And that's why, if we're to be fruitful,

we share the word, the message about the kingdom, wherever we can.

There's fertile soil out there.

Just waiting for the seed to fall.

And that's reinforced by what Mark records next.

We move from a bright outdoor scene of a farmer sowing seed,

to a dim indoor scene with a lamp, a bowl, a bed and a lampstand. (*Mark 4:21*)

Now I think that when Jesus talked about this,

those listening would have started chuckling, then laughed out loud.

Jesus gives a picture of something so absurd, so ridiculous, it's funny.

It's funny, and therefore memorable.

For us today, it's so easy to produce light.

We just flick a switch.

But then, it was much more of a palaver.

You have to make sure your little clay lamp is full of oil.

You have to make sure the wick is soaked in oil and pokes out of the spout.

You have to light it.

If you haven't got another light to light it from,

you have to mess around with a flint and steel.

So imagine doing all that and going in to a room.

You look around, you see a bowl, you put the lamp under it, plunging the room into darkness.

That's daft. That's ridiculous. That would raise a chuckle.

Or you see a bed, you put the lamp under it, where all it lights is dust and mouse droppings.

That's absurd. That's ludicrous. That's uproariously funny.

You wouldn't do that.

Not when there's a lampstand,

designed so the lamp lights as much of the room as possible.

The whole point of a lamp is to help you see. (*Mark 4:22*)

Light things up.

Reveal what is otherwise hidden.

The word, the message about the kingdom, sheds light.

If we're to be fruitful, we must let that light shine, not obscure it.

Let it shine clearly, not distort it.

Let it shine on us, and on all around us.

And that's really important.

If we have ears to hear, let us hear. (*Mark 4:23*)

It matters, what we hear. (*Mark 4:24,25*)

What we really hear, and respond to.

Put into practice.

The more the word is rooted in us,

the more our understanding will grow,

the more we'll change and the more fruit we'll see.

The more we allow Christ's light to shine on us,

the brighter and better our own lives will shine.

As Jesus says in Mark 4 verses 24 and 25

"With the measure you use, it will be measured to you – and even more.

Whoever has will be given more;

whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him."

We've had the farmer sowing his seed.

Mark then records two more parables about seed,

to help explain what the kingdom of God is like.

One of these is a parable that only Mark records.

Mathew's gospel has a different parable,

where a man sows good seed, but an enemy sows weeds. (*Matthew 13:24-30*)

Mark has a parable about seed sprouting and growing. (*Mark 4:26-29*)

The soil producing corn and yielding a harvest.

The thing is that once the seed is sown,
we can't tell exactly what's going on and what it will lead to.
God works, even though we may neither see it or understand it.
And the harvest will come.

The next seed parable is the parable of the mustard seed.
It's a parable that both Matthew (*Matthew 13:31,32*) and Luke (*Luke 13:18,19*) also include.
There's a tiny seed that grows into an enormous plant.
We don't need to worry about whether the mustard seed actually is the smallest seed,
or whether it would grow into quite such a big plant.
This is a parable, not a textbook of botany.
The thing is that something tiny can grow into something great.
And the kingdom of God is like that.
A handful of unpromising looking disciples,
were to grow into a worldwide church, that would include us.

That massive plant with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade.
That can be seen positively, or it can be seen negatively.
It can be seen as providing shelter for all kinds of people.
Gentiles and Jews.
Or it can be seen as harbouring bad things,
remembering that in the parable of the sower,
the birds who ate up the seed on the path, represent Satan.
But maybe, like with an electron, there's a duality here.
For both ways of thinking seem true of the worldwide church as it is today.

And that's a thing about parables.
There's some flexibility about them.
They can make sense to people in different contexts, through history.
They can speak to us.
So long as we're willing to stop, and think, and work them through.
And we may be surprised by what we learn.

So, we have a parable about seed falling in different soils.
Are we good soil? Productive? Fruitful?
We have a parable about seed growing.
Do we look forward with confidence to the harvest?
We have a parable about a tiny seed growing into an enormous plant.
Is our part in that something positive, or negative?
We have an image of a lamp on a lampstand.
Do we allow Christ's light to shine strongly on us,
so we shine brightly for him?
The measure we use, is it generous, overflowing with God's goodness?

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