



# Bristol Cathedral

**A Sermon preached at Evensong 9<sup>th</sup> June 2013  
By the Dean**

## **The Parable of the Seed (Mark 4:1-20)**

Managing the business of moving my parents from the Lake District to Oxford I have had a series of long car journeys recently. To pass the time I sometimes sing. If you sing like a walrus, it is only when you are alone in the car that it is appropriate for you to sing. I also listen to the radio, or to recordings, and I have got hooked all over again on *I am Sorry I Haven't a Clue*. Those of you who know the show will know there is a much repeated game, one song to the tune of another. There have been some famous examples Graeme Garden singing "Blame It on the Boogie" to the tune of *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*, or Rob Brydon singing "Killing Me Softly" to the tune of "The Bare Necessities of Life". I worked once with an organist who offered some similarly startling hymn settings which I never had the courage to try. It is all very silly, but there is something surprising about hearing what you thought of as familiar becoming strange. It is in that spirit that we need to approach one of the most famous and familiar of gospel stories.

*Listen! A sower went out to sow*

Familiar, but a challenge. There is a difficult passage in the midst of the story.

*those who were around him asked him about the parables. And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables... that 'they may... listen, but not understand*

Notice, the Parable of the Sower sets out to be opaque, people are supposed to hear it and be baffled. So there are two questions two answer this evening, 'Why would Jesus preach like that' and 'What is the parable all about?'

Let's start by remembering that Jesus was in Galilee, farming country. Telling a story *there* about a sower and seeds makes good sense; it is the common currency, what people know about. But there is something more, Galilee was occupied territory. Jewish land, it used to be called *Galilee of the Gentiles*, because it was dominated by foreign landlords. The people who heard Jesus preach were downtrodden and oppressed. They knew a much older story about how God had given the land to the Jews, a story about milk and honey. But that story had failed, the milk and honey was farmed for others.

So, when the Jews heard about the Sower and the seed they had a bit of an agenda. It was an agenda Jesus shared. Explaining the parable, Jesus notice, did not tell us who the Sower is, nor what the Sower was trying to do. He talked instead about the seed. He told us that the seed sown on rocky ground, are the ones who 'have no root, and endure only for a while'.

Jesus spoke about seed. And that sets off a very particular train of thought. The Jews who listened thought of all they knew about seed, and seed is a leading idea in the bible. Think back. Adam sinned and was told that *his seed* would bare the blame (Gen.3:15). The promise to Abraham was that *his seed* would inherit the land. Talk about seeds and we think about what you put in pots or in the ground. Jews didn't, they thought about inheritance, the future, generations to come. When Jesus spoke of seed in this *Parable of the Seed*, those who heard him thought 'this parable is about Adam and Abraham and the ancient promises of God'.

And they heard something else as well. One of the greatest of the prophets, Isaiah, had described the day

when Israel would be invaded. He had told the story that explained why Galilee belonged to the Gentiles and he described it as a great tree falling. Israel was felled and, Isaiah said, just a stump remained. But, said Isaiah, (and it was a strange thing to say) that stump would be 'holy seed' (6:12,13). Now, calling a stump 'seed' is just downright confusing if you are keen on biology, seeds don't come out of stumps. But Isaiah knew what he was doing. Seed remember, is the future, the generations to come, 'the seed of Abraham'. What Isaiah meant was that even in the stump there was the possibility of new life. Israel was broken but would be repaired, fallen but would rise. In one of the most stirring of all his prophecies Isaiah looked forward to the great day when Israel would be restored and when the kingdom, at long last, would come. And what would be the sign that the Kingdom was coming? The sign (Isaiah said) would be that God would give seed to the Sower "And then you shall go out in joy, and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands (55:10,12).

When Jesus got up to tell the *Parable of the Seed* that is what people heard. One song to the tune of another. 'It is seed for the Sower', they would have thought, he's talking about the day Isaiah promised. And *that* is why Jesus makes the apparently bizarre remark about people seeing and yet not understanding; because he was quoting Isaiah. What had Isaiah said? He had said 'lest they see with their eyes... and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.' Isaiah knew people would not believe him. When Jesus told Isaiah's story again he used Isaiah's words again.

In this simple parable there is a code; break it and you discover that Jesus is saying that all the promises of the past have been fulfilled. In a nation overrun by Romans, corrupted and forsaken in its national life, the promised harvest beckons. But before that can happen there will be further trials, the arrival of the Kingdom is a painful process and has opponents. Some will be devoured, some scorched, and the messenger of good news will be doubted and rejected.

The Parable of the Seed is not a nice story with a happy ending. There is drama and death, in the world as it really is. When evil in this Parable gets hold of the seeds it has the power to destroy, to devour, to scorch, to strangle.

You can read this parable and take note of the fact that there is a Sower in the story, whatever happens to some seeds there will be a harvest. There is a promise that will be fulfilled, but that is only reassurance of a sort. You can read the story and say something about the reality of suffering, but that is pretty cold comfort. Looking again at this passage I think the question it poses is simple and rather obvious. Seeds flourish in good soil, but it is easy, all too easy to scatter seed in the wrong place. Churches obsessed with structures, committees and action plans, a national debate hampered by an insistence on fighting battles with public opinion when public opinion moved on long ago and a systematic failure to notice, for example, the abiding and deepening injustice of the disparity of rich and poor are all signs that we are not paying attention to the gospel. Too often we are talking about the wrong things and doing the wrong things and the harvest is persistently postponed. I am not exempt from this criticism. I think I, and all of us, are supposed to notice that we are putting effort in the wrong direction.

One song to the tune of another is a bit of fun, amusing, diverting. This story of the seed, which turns out to be a re-telling of Israel is not amusing at all. I feel it not just as a challenge, but as a reproach. We have hard questions to answer, as Cathedral and as national church, where do we think the future harvest lies, where should our energies go? Hard questions; Christ said as much, but implies too that we have the information we need, we have the secret of the Kingdom. We must make more of that knowledge and opportunity.