



Matthew

13:10-17

Speaking in Parables

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Five Prayers

Teach me. "Lord, preach to me in order to preach through me."

Lead me. "Lead me in each moment of study. I need to sense your presence at every point in my preparation time."

Anoint me. "When I finally step into the pulpit, anoint the delivery of this message."

"When I stand up to preach, do what I can't. Bridge the gap. Fill what is lacking."

Prepare them. "Lord, prepare their hearts ... to hear your voice."

Change us. "Lord, change us together..."

AIM

to humble the sinner

to exalt the Saviour

to promote holiness;

Shai Linne: Whatever the text, faithfulness demands that we should hear the echoes of nails hitting his hands.

The Passage

Matthew 13

10 *The disciples came to him and asked, “Why do you speak to the people in parables?”*

11 *He replied, “Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. ¹² Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. ¹³ This is why I speak to them in parables:*

*“Though seeing, they do not see;
though hearing, they do not hear or understand.*

14 *In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah:*

*“You will be ever hearing but never understanding;
you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.*

15 *For this people’s heart has become calloused;*

*they hardly hear with their ears,
and they have closed their eyes.*

Otherwise they might see with their eyes,

*hear with their ears,
understand with their hearts*

and turn, and I would heal them.’

16 *But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. ¹⁷ For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.*

SERMON

Introduction

David story –

“There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him.

“Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him.”

If this story seems familiar it is because it come from the 12th chapter of 2 Samuel and is part of the story of King David.

The Scripture goes on ...

2 Samuel 12:5 *David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, “As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this must die! ⁶ He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity.”*

12:7 *Then Nathan said to David, “You are the man!*

Nathan had a very difficult message to deliver, he knew the King would not, to say the least, like it but he knew that a story would get David ‘in’; it would provide a platform to deliver an unpalatable truth.

We all love stories – a narrative - a tale. Whether they be tall tales, or true, from our legendary past...we all love stories

I went to a funeral yesterday of a dear friend and colleague; the

uplifting and encouraging part were the stories her children and friends and colleagues told which enlivened the assurance we have in Jesus.

We all love stories...

The News Media know it so they present the issues attached to personal stories of people involved.

The entertainment industry know it – witness the phenomenon of the long form stories of ‘The Lord of the Rings’ and ‘Game of Thrones’ in the movies/TV of recent times.

The kids and grandkids know it when they ask for a story.

Ex pupils of mine I meet acknowledge it when they say, “I remember you reading to us...”

God, our loving creator, knows it too and much of his revelation of himself in Scripture is in narrative form – the true stories of God’s working with humankind. We are told stories about God, not given a list of facts.

Jesus knew as well and so he told stories...which in the 9 verses before our passage this morning is exactly what Jesus has been doing – he told the story of the sower, the seeds and the soils and will continue to.

But Jesus’ stories, like Nathan’s in 2 Samuel 12, are not just entertainment, not just diversions, they are designed or intended to do much, much more. They are, to steal Klyne Snodgrass’ term, ‘Stories with Intent’.

And so we turn to our the passage: verses 10-17 of Matthew chapter 13...

Matthew 13:

So far - Jesus has told the story of the sower and the soils...just the story.

10 The disciples came to him and asked, “Why do you speak to the people in parables?”

So the disciples come to Jesus, whether it is a separate time apart or in a little huddle off to the side, and they have an enquiry – they are not admitting that they don’t understand but “what is it” with these stories.

They call them parables so they know there is something more to them. A parable has, as its basis, a Greek word with the idea of laying something aside (from it we get the word parallel) – it is essentially the same in Greek and English. So it can be applied to a simple metaphor or simile or to a shorter or longer story.

But why, they say to Jesus, use this technique and, to some extent, what are you on about?

11 He replied, “Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them.”

They are the ones in the know – the ones who seek the truth...the secrets...the mystery...the full revelation.

The mystery in the New Testament is not a who-dunnit but something that was hidden and is now fully revealed.

Carson: What is revealed is not who Jesus is, the nature of God, or the power of love (all of which have been suggested); rather, the “mystery of the Kingdom is the coming of the Kingdom into history in advance of its apocalyptic manifestation”.

Paul uses the term often of the full revelation of the Gospel.

Hence they have asked the question; they want to deepen their relationship with Jesus.

'In the New Testament it usually carries the further thought that that which people can never work out for themselves God has now made known to them.'

As we see they are 'good soil'.

¹² Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.

He speaks this another way: Those who seek to build up their relationship will have more and more. Those who do not, begin to wander away – to lose what interest and knowledge they have

¹³ This is why I speak to them in parables:

*"Though seeing, they do not see;
though hearing, they do not hear or understand."*

So his reason for speaking in parables is set out. Here it is not so that the simple stories make things clear, it is that they will obscure things – make them less clear. The surface meaning is clear; the depth, the hearing and understanding, is not.

At its baldest this is the 'path' or the 'rocky ground'.

In making this statement Jesus draws the disciples into the story of Isaiah...which he now makes quite plain.

¹⁴ In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah:

*" 'You will be ever hearing but never understanding;
you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.*

¹⁵ For this people's heart has become calloused;

*they hardly hear with their ears,
and they have closed their eyes.*

*Otherwise they might see with their eyes,
hear with their ears,*

*understand with their hearts
and turn, and I would heal them.'*

Jesus is quoting from Isaiah 6 which was read for us earlier. The 'story' is that, having given his opening prophecies, Isaiah now records the story of his calling, by God, to be a Prophet.

Without going into detail the story runs like this.

Isaiah 6:1 In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. ² Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. ³ And they were calling to one another:

*"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty;
the whole earth is full of his glory."*

Isaiah 6:4 At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

Isaiah finds himself in the throne room of God with all its power and wisdom and glory on display. It is not a comfortable place to be.

Isaiah 6:5 "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."

Isaiah recognises that he, a sinful person who is part of rebellious Israel, has no place here – it can only be a place of judgement.

Isaiah 6:6 Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. ⁷ With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for."

But he is cleansed – touched on the lips by a live coal – told his sin has been taken away and atoned for.

Isaiah 6:8 Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?”

And I said, “Here am I. Send me!”

Then he responds to the call. And so the paragraph we have quoted here:

Isaiah 6:9 He said, “Go and tell this people:

*“Be ever hearing, but never understanding;
be ever seeing, but never perceiving.’*

*10 Make the heart of this people calloused;
make their ears dull
and close their eyes.*

*Otherwise they might see with their eyes,
hear with their ears,
understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed.”*

This is a task of preaching to those who WILL not listen or respond.

Isaiah 6:11 Then I said, “For how long, Lord?”

And he answered:

*“Until the cities lie ruined
and without inhabitant,
until the houses are left deserted
and the fields ruined and ravaged,*

*12 until the LORD has sent everyone far away
and the land is utterly forsaken.*

13 *And though a tenth remains in the land,
it will again be laid waste.*

Isaiah asks for the timeline and is told, “Until their judgement is complete.”

*But as the terebinth and oak
leave stumps when they are cut down,
so the holy seed will be the stump in the land.”*

But this is not the end – there is hope – hope in the fact that a remnant remains. So Jesus applies this to the parables. Those who truly listen and seek to understand, will turn and live. Those who listen and seek simple aids to memory or entertaining stories will end up deaf, blind and dumb...and under God’s judgement.

The really troubling thing about this passage is that, now that the kingdom is appearing at last, it is bringing both judgment and mercy. And part of the judgment is that people will look and look and not see what God is doing. People will listen and listen to what Jesus is saying and they simply won’t be able to understand. Like tone-deaf people listening to a symphony, they will have no idea what it’s all about.

16 *But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear.*

The disciples and true disciples everywhere and in every time, do listen – do seek the truth – do hear what Jesus has to say, do seek understanding and so they are blessed.

17 *For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.*

And, Jesus says, there are many in the past who sought truly to understand, such as the remnant in Isaiah's time but, because the revelation, in full, was yet to come in Jesus (Emmanuel, God with us) they did not have the full story of God's action to remove the stain of sin and call people to himself.

Here their longings are fulfilled as they attach themselves to Jesus. And so ...

Matthew 13:18 *"Listen then to what the parable of the sower means:*

To sum up...

Parables as we come to them, as one writer says, are like looking at some foreign unfamiliar script. I personally find large scale Arabic script quite beautiful. And Japanese calligraphy is exquisite and evocative. But – unless I make the effort to know the way the script works and the language, it is somewhat impenetrable – I don't have the full picture.

So it is with Parables – they are just stories till we make the effort.

Conclusion

So, what do we take away this day from this enigmatic passage? Three things:

First, bring your ears to Church!

Among the things we come to church for each time is to 'hear the message of the kingdom'. And we need to HEAR it, to SEE it! So we need our gospel ears and eyes on.

We should come to hear and understand, to see and perceive, to grow in our understanding. When we come, distracted, hardened, wearied, judgmental, then it may be that the Word simply bounces off or gets caught up in the momentary moment then withers.

Of course, God can act to engage the distracted, to soften the hardened, to strengthen the wearied, to admonish the judgmental and make good soil out of them. But for us it is a matter of choice and attitude, and if we come bringing our ears, all the better.

Second, lean against these parables.

I like Aiden's idea, from a couple of weeks ago, of leaning against the parables.

Well... parables don't stop you from hearing the message of the kingdom; because the message is there, you just have to lean against it a bit more before you can get it. But also, for the people who look for it, Jesus spells out the parables.

Almost all of these stories have become so familiar that we can simply say, or think, I have heard this before; I know what it means and somewhat tune out.

But let me say, as I have grown through almost 60 years of being Christian, God still has new ways of revealing himself to me and indeed to you from these 'same old, same old' stories or whatever from the Bible. God has spoken and he is speaking to us in his Word. The message of the kingdom is indeed the 'old, old story' but it constantly speaks to us anew.

And often we need to lean 'against' it to hear what it has to say.

Wright: Are we ready for the unexpected? Are we...in danger of deciding so firmly what God ought to be doing in our lives, our churches, our world that we become blind and deaf to him when he tries to tell us that it's actually going to be rather different?

Third, actively, be good soil.

I sincerely believe that the parable of the sower speaks to us about every time we hear the gospel spoken, or we read or see

some presentation; we too are likely to have one of the four responses (in reality a spectrum I suspect) and thus we need to be alert to be good soil that hears, nurtures and grows. I am sure that both you and I can think of occasions when the sermon or talk we have heard has really just bounced off and of course others where it has buried deep and had a lasting effect and/or a whole range of responses in-between.

Snodgrass: "A good parable creates distance, provokes, and appeals. By creating distance it gives the hearer/reader space to reconsider; one has no sense of needing to defend one's turf. By provoking the parable requires new channels of thought, and by appealing the parable seeks decisions that bring behaviour into line with the tellers intent."

So as we look at 6 more parables and some narratives about Jesus in the next few weeks:

Bring your ears!

Lean against the text!

Be good soil!

May God help us to do these things.

