

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: Monday October 21st: Mark 4: 1-20: Some Notes

Content: Seaside teaching: parable of the sower; parable explained to disciples.

See also Matthew 13: 3-23 and Luke 8: 4-15. The Old Testament reference is to Isaiah 6: 9-10.

This is a single story session, and the parable is well-known (even to folk who have only had contact with it through “Jesus Christ, Super Star”). So you might approach the evening wondering how we are going to fill the time! But, pause. This is an intriguing passage, even once you have got past the oddity to the modern farmer/gardener of chucking seed up in the air hoping it might land in the right place... and apparently being quite unconcerned that much of it doesn't. Jesus tells all his listeners to think hard about what he has said. However, his disciples (apostles plus other) apparently haven't got the point; and Jesus seems to be saying that he didn't expect most of the listeners to get the point. So, on top of the farmer chucking the seed about with gay abandon, we have Jesus the teacher giving a lesson which he expects to leave 90% of the class no wiser than when he started teaching.. How weird can you get!

Pretend you haven't overheard Jesus' explanation to his inner circle. Imagine you have heard only the parable. What would you make of it? Remember that you would not have found the story odd. To the original listeners it would have been as familiar as a story told to us about “A certain bus driver set out on his journey, and immediately encountered red traffic lights.....” The original listeners knew about sowing seed, and would have understood that they were supposed to be searching for the underlying message. This isn't the only sowing seed reference in the Bible, and I suspect sowing and reaping were common expressions, then as now, to describe activities other than agriculture. The geography suggests that Jesus in the boat, and, maybe looking behind them, the crowd on the shore, could see the sower at work.

This has been described as the key parable, and Jesus himself in Mark's version seems to be saying “Please get hold of this one!” Parable literally means parallel stories, or an earthly tale with a heavenly meaning. But the term parable is used fairly flexibly in the New Testament. The basic idea is to earth religious teaching in ordinary life. It is a means of getting across high powered messages to very ordinary people. You get the story immediately – it relates to your ordinary everyday experience. You then have to think through the implications for yourself; and, because of that, you learn more and remember better. This is exactly the opposite of any understanding of the Isaiah quote as meaning that Jesus drew crowds by telling people things they couldn't possibly understand. Isaiah and the apostles had to live with people hearing what they said but not internalising the message because they were not in the right frame of mind. God/Jesus did not explain this deafness by saying that it was inevitable, still less by saying that God had made them deaf. Since some commentators have interpreted all this as predestination (God choosing who

will be saved and who won't), and since translators 200 years before Jesus were struggling with the Isaiah passage, it is worth labouring the points that (a) a god who invented hell and then determined in advance who was going to go to hell really wouldn't be worth bothering with... and wouldn't need the devil!; and (b) the whole salvation message (and specifically the Jesus message) is about God wanting all to be saved and not least "deaf sinners".

The Sower: God? Jesus? The Apostles? Each and every one of us. The Seed: Both word and deed, and preferably love in work and in action. The Soil (three aspects as in a number of the parables): yes types of listener, yes listeners in different circumstances, yes listeners with different histories. But perhaps most important is that the sower does not just look out for the most promising soil, he offers the seed to all. Parables were meant to be heard, not read, so don't fuss too much about the significance of the detail. However, if you want to follow through the logic of this parable: What about improving the soil? What about choosing the best time to sow? What about having a second, third and fourth attempt. St Augustine's mother spent thirty years sowing seed in the very unpromising soil of her badly behaved/ very deaf son. The White Fathers maintained their mission activities for a life-time with very little sign of conversions. Ignatius Loyola (I think 'twas he) said his life time's work would be justified if he could keep one sinner from sinning for one day. For someone in a very dark place, the response to the message "Jesus loves you" might quite understandably be "Please would he/you show it!"

For God and for mission, there are no hopeless cases.

P.S. I wonder what we could make of a modern parallel: a farmer has done a detailed soil analysis, looked at potential profit margins, taken into account environmental grants, and launched his satellite-controlled seed machine?