

Year A Proper 15, 12th July 2026

Isaiah 55: 10-13. Romans 8: 1-11. Matthew 13: 1-23

The Parable of the Four Types of Ground

Quite a few years ago, I used to go to the Church of the Sacred Heart in Lauriston Street, on a Tuesday evening for their led times of meditation, mainly following some of the World Community of Christian Meditation¹ practices and talks.

I had realised that my mind was particularly full of chatter and activity – more than my ‘normal’ that is – and I was finding it really hard to not only listen but also absorb and reflect on important aspects of my life.

And perhaps like me, you find that the ‘busier’ our lives and minds get, the harder it becomes to clear out some space for silence, for listening to God, for understanding what God is saying to us. And at that time of my life, it took a friend to spot this and gently suggest I do something about it. That is what true friendship is. Giving a message with love, as you have concern for another person, and don’t shy away from helping that person.

Why am I recounting this about a time in my life? Well, today’s gospel reading is all about the human condition, and our ability to truly listen, understand, reflect and process information, and make decisions about the way we want to live our lives.

This parable, which in many of our Bibles, or taught to us over the years, is normally known as the Parable of the Sower. But that gives completely the wrong focus to the text. The German’s have got it right; they call it “The Parable of the Four Types of Ground”. For it is the types of ground we need to pay attention to, not the hapless sower of the seed.

First off, let us place this text, chapter 13 in context. In the previous two chapters Matthew has described Jesus’ ministry in Galilee, and the varied responses he received. In this chapter Matthew tackles the question of why the responses were so mixed, and definitely not what you would expect from God-fearing Jews, God’s chosen people after all, hearing the teachings and witnessing the miracles of the long-awaited Messiah.

We are told that Jesus gets into a boat, in order to better talk to the gathered crowd. What we are not told, but can deduce, is that the disciples got into the boat with him, otherwise he could not have been able to teach them the meaning of the parable that follows on. Incidentally, it has taken until this 13th chapter for Matthew to use the word 'parable' for the first time! A parable does not carry its meaning on the surface; it demands thought and a level of perception. You therefore have to spend time thinking about what you have heard. The hearer needs to be willing to listen, to be open, and seek to understand. This is important and we will come back to this point later.

In the parable we have four types of ground. The first three are not productive:

- Hard soil, a path that was well-trodden and baked hard. The seed lies on the surface and is picked off by the grateful birds.
- Thin soil, with rock beneath. Initially, there is promising growth, but it can't be sustained, and in the heat of day, becomes parched.
- Competition from thorns. The soil is obviously fertile and good, for there is vigorous growth of thorns. However, there is no room for the seeds to grow, there is too much competition for nourishment and light for the seeds to take hold and develop.

The last one is productive:

- Falls on good ground. The seed produces a crop of varying abundance, or fruitfulness; thirty, sixty, one hundred-fold.

The final sentence of the parable is an exhortation, "If you have ears, hear!"

We then come to the second part of the reading where Jesus, still in the boat, explains the parable to his disciples. He starts by saying, "Hear then..." In the Greek the meaning is more emphatic, more like, "Grasp the meaning of what you have heard..." This is inviting us to consider and reflect on the meaning of the parable.

In this parable the ground is the listener, whilst the message is the seed.

- The hard soil, a path, well-trodden and baked hard. A total lack of understanding, the words 'bounce off' without penetrating at all. Maybe

the person is not really paying any attention to the speaker – a modern equivalent maybe looking on you mobile when someone is speaking.

- Thin soil, with rock beneath. A person who seems enthusiastic to listen and learn, who gets caught up with the energy in the crowd, and gets a real buzz following Jesus and is excited to be part of this motley caravan of folk travelling around Galilee. But, the moment the person steps away from the crowd, has to go back to their family or to their work, the buzz and excitement dissipates quickly, and there is nothing left. The person never really took in what was being said, and there was no reflection, and no inner work done.
- Competition from thorns. The listener has so many other interests and worldly attachments including wealth and their own self-interests and agenda, that there isn't room to make a commitment to something else. The priorities of the kingdom of heaven are smothered by these other things. Wealth in particular is deceitful, promising security when it can't deliver. Just think of the rich young man Jesus had pity for, who chose his wealth over the kingdom of God.
- Falls on good ground. The listener has been listening and has heard the message of good news that the Messiah has proclaimed. The kingdom of heaven is real to them, and they make a commitment, and they become fruitful, thirty, sixty or one hundred-fold.

What is interesting is that Jesus recognises that even amongst those who have heard, listened and what to commit to following His way, and will find the kingdom of heaven, the responses will result in different levels of fruitfulness. Jesus does not disparage the person whose fruitfulness measures thirty of sixty, compared to the 'perfect 100'. It appears to me that Jesus recognises that not everyone is able to be as fruitful as each other in that year. I don't think it means that in another season that person will remain at their previous level of fruitfulness. There are so many factors as to how fruitful each person may be in any given season of our lives.

And maybe in some seasons we are having the battle the thorns, or deepen the soil, or break open the hard exterior. This is part of our personal work, as people trying to follow the way of Christ. We seek to be the hearer who is willing to listen, to be open, and seek to understand.

To walk alongside others we also need to listen, not to reply, to defend or argue, but first, to understand the other person.

I wonder what soil you are just now, in this season of your life? You are here, or at least reading this, which I hope is a good sign. Do you wish to set an intention to change, and what will help you achieve that change?

And if you are good soil, I wonder whether you are fruitful in your yield, five, ten, twenty, thirty or whatever amount? Do you recognise that in different seasons your fruitfulness has varied? I would expect it to be so, and also how we are fruitful may change over time.

One way to reflect and consider how to change and become more fruitful soil is to write your own rule of life. Before I joined the Iona Community I wrote my own rule for life after reading David Runcorn's 'Spirituality Workbook'. A chapter in the book explores this very subject. I recommend it to you as a good spiritual discipline.

This parable of the four types of ground invites those who heard Jesus preach the good news, to listen, and become part of the fruitfulness of God's kingdom. How will you go about cultivating the soil in your life so it is productive of the fruits of the Spirit?

¹ wccm.org