

Mark 4:1-20

The Use of Parables and the Four Soils

Introduction

A week or so ago I was visiting Tim's farm and he was telling me that he was growing sorghum. Tim mentioned that sorghum is also known as milo and so I asked, with perhaps just a little too much enthusiasm, "It that what 'Milo' is really made out of?" Tim informed me that , "No, milo is not made from sorghum." I then confessed that when I was young my dad would drive past a field and point out the milo and I used to think, "What a shame we don't have any milk. We could stop and make a glass of Milo right now!" Yes, I'm sorry to say that your pastor really is that ignorant when it comes to farming matters. This makes things all the more awkward as we're looking at a story about farming today.

Today we start a new section of Mark's Gospel which focuses on Jesus' teaching and specifically Jesus using parables to teach. So, what is a parable? How would people describe them? [take answers]

A Parable has been described as an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. From two words, 'para' meaning 'beside' and 'bole' or 'boleo' meaning 'to throw' and so it is a throwing of a well known image beside a spiritual meaning which it also carries.

A fuller definition is provided by Vincent Taylor, who states, "A metaphor or story connected with the affairs of daily life is used as an illustration of moral and spiritual truths, on the assumption that what applies in one sphere is relevant also in the other."

What are some parables people know which aren't from the Bible? [take answers]
The Ugly Duckling; The Boy Who Cried Wolf, etc.

Today we're going to consider why Jesus used parables and look at the story of "The Sower" or, as it is also known, "The Four Soils".

Why Parables? - Get Past Intellectual Argument

So then, why did Jesus use parables (as well as stories in general)? The first reason is not explicitly expressed in the Gospels but is easily grasped from real life. That is, the use of parables and stories normally allows us to bypass, particular intellectual, arguments and debates and helps us to speak to people's hearts.

One of the best examples of this is actually found in the Old Testament, in 2 Samuel 12 when the prophet Nathan confronted David over his sin with Bathsheba and murdering her husband, Uriah the Hittite. Instead of Nathan lecturing David about how he should

behave as King of God's people. Nathan tells a story which results in David convicting himself. We're going to hear it now from 2 Samuel 12:1-6, [have Graham / Kerry read]

“The Lord sent Nathan to David. When he came to him, he said, ‘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 that 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 traveller 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 traveller 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.’

David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, ‘As surely as the Lord lives, the man who did this must die! He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity.’”

When David recognised his sin he was cut to the core and repented. David wrote some beautiful Psalms expressing his grief and sorrow over his sin and failure.

Now, before continuing, Nathan's use of story does bring out a couple of important points in understanding parables. First, we need to be careful not to over-read parables (Nathan is not talking about whether it's healthy for animals to drink from your own cup) and second, generally speaking we don't need to find significance in every aspect of a story or parable (the traveller in Nathan's story is unimportant). Normally there is just one primary meaning in a parable and that is why Parables are not normally described as allegories.

So, one reason Jesus used parables was to bypass intellectual arguments, and so engage with stories at a heart or emotional level. There is another reason identified in this passage from Mark's Gospel which is now going to be read to us. [Mary / Peter read Mark 4:1-20]

Why Parables? - Avoids Some Antagonism and Shows Jesus is Required for Understanding (4:10-12 and context of ch. 3)

We are told Jesus' reason for using parables in verses 10-12 of Mark 4 and, to be honest, these are not the easiest verses to read.

“When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. He told them, ‘The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on

the outside everything is said in parables so that, “they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!””

At first reading, these verses seem to mean that Jesus is deliberately using parables for the purpose of not being understood and so not giving people the chance to repent. This would indeed be a difficult reading. However, if we look at the broader picture and context of this reading much of our difficulty goes away.

The most important thing to note about this context is that the priority here falls on whether someone is close to Jesus (an insider) or someone doesn't put their trust in Jesus (an outsider). Only the insiders have the meaning of Jesus' parables explained to them. The insiders did indeed have the secrets of the kingdom of God given to them because they had Jesus, the One who brings the kingdom.

But, it may be asked, is it fair that Jesus seeks to guard himself from outsiders? Well, context again helps us here. Let's remember what we saw in the immediately preceding chapter, Mark 3. In Mark 3:6 we read, “Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.” In Mark 3:21 we find out, “When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, ‘He is out of his mind.’” And in Mark 3:22 we're told, “And the teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem said, ‘He is possessed by Beelzebul! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons.’”

So, we see that in leading up to this statement, people have made plans to kill Jesus and accused him of not being in his right mind and accused him of being demon possessed. People on the outside are not presented as neutral here, they are opposing Jesus.

This is not a case of Jesus being small minded or vindictive. Jesus is making clear that it is he himself who provides understanding of the Kingdom of God. If people have their interest piqued and want to know more and so come to Jesus then Jesus gives greater clarity but they have to move from being an outsider / an opponent, to a willing learner (an insider).

If people refuse to come to Jesus humbly and with a willingness to learn, then it is stating the obvious that this prophecy from Isaiah 6 will be fulfilled, “they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!”

The first reason that Jesus used parables was because they're interesting and they help bypass certain intellectual arguments and the second reason is that parables made clear that it was Jesus who was required for true understanding. Without coming to Jesus

(becoming an insider) then people would see and hear things but never really perceive and understand and so wouldn't find forgiveness. This message is as true today as it was in Jesus' time. If we read the Bible desiring to know Jesus better and follow him more closely then we are humbled by it and gain understanding but if we simply read the Bible as a history book or as an intellectual exercise then we miss the point of why we have this text in the first place.

Different Responses But The Importance of Sowing (4:1-12; 13-20)

We now come to the actual parable that we're looking at today, the story of the four soils, which is also known as the story of the sower.

As Jesus has already explained the meaning of the four soils (and I'd always trust his explanation over mine!), perhaps it would be better if we consider what may be some of the ways in which these characteristics of soils are seen?

First, Jesus says, "Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them." What are some ways in which Satan snatches the word away? [take answers] "Sorry, what were you saying, I wasn't listening." It could also be a family crisis when the person has been invited to an event where Jesus would be shared. I knew of someone who wouldn't interrupt their viewing habits of favourite tv programs for anything, etc.

Next, Jesus says, "Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away." We normally associate persecution as something which happens in other countries but what are ways in which people may experience rejection for a new faith here in Australia? [take answers] Snide remarks from friends at school or work, assumptions as to how you will now vote, that look that says, "Really, I thought you were actually smart." etc.

Third, Jesus says, "Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful." Some people have said to us, knowing that we lived in Indonesia for a number of years, that "it's just too easy to be a Christian in countries like Australia." However, this verse is one of the reasons why I don't think that is the case. There are simply so many worries, distractions and desires that can pull us away from God. What are some of those concerns? [take answers] Yes, I must apologise, I would have been better prepared for this sermon except that I had to go and take a motorbike for a

test ride yesterday. I'm just kidding but wanting to keep up with the latest equipment or gadgets is a major distraction. In Australia we also constantly reminded to worship faithfully our national idol of sport. How did the Brisbane Heat ladies team go yesterday?

Finally, Jesus states that, "Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop – some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown." This is my prayer for all of us here and indeed for Christians everywhere, may we produce a good crop for harvest. What kind of harvest may Jesus have in mind here? [take answers] The fruit of the spirit, care for others, valuing God's Kingdom and displaying its values and characteristics, sharing the message of the Kingdom of God, etc.

Now before we conclude, it should be asked of this parable if there is a particular over-arching theme or message? We ask this because pretty much all parables have a specific focus.

Well, I mentioned that this parable is known as either, the story of the sower, or the story of the four soils and indeed this parable may well have two specific messages for us (though some people may only focus on one and not the other) and the names of the parable point us to the meanings.

I think it is likely that this parable helped Jesus' disciples to understand why not everyone responded positively to Jesus' message and why some responded positively for a time but then didn't continue with them. People are like soils and as soils have different receptivity to seeds, so people have different receptivity to the message of the kingdom. This message obviously has implications for us. No, the implication isn't that we shouldn't expect at least (or only) 25% of people who hear the good news to respond and produce a harvest, but rather we shouldn't be disheartened or surprised when there is a mixture of responses.

While that explanation naturally leads this parable being titled, the story of the four soils, if we call the parable, the story of the sower, then we instead focus on the task of sowing and the generosity with which the sower sows his seed. No, we're not meant to think that the sower was careless by sowing near paths, and so on. Rather, the implication for us is to generously and faithfully share the good news of Jesus without prejudging how people may respond. We are unlikely to know if someone is shallow or thorny soil or good soil. We may be surprised by how people respond and the great harvest which does come about makes our generous sowing worthwhile.

Conclusion

So then, what applications will we make in conclusion? First, I would recommend that we grasp the importance of stories and suggest that some of us even try learning to use stories to communicate God's truths to people.

However, we must never forget that our ultimate goal is not for people to think how clever we are or how good our stories are, we ultimately want people to come to Jesus as it is Jesus who brings the kingdom of God and it is in him that all people can find understanding and life.

Second, we should pray for ourselves, our brothers and sisters here at church, and for all Christians that we would be good soil and so produce a harvest. Our prayers may emphasise enduring of persecution when we think about Christians in some countries or our prayers may emphasise resisting distractions and worries to accumulate things when we think about Christians in other countries.

Finally, we should also be generous in our sharing the good news to others but not be surprised if not everyone responds.

It is about these applications that I am now going to pray to close.

[pray to close]