

THE GOSPEL OF MARK  
Grounded in the Gospel  
viii. Authentic Listening (Mark 4:1-20)

A parable can be likened to an audiology test. Hearing, or better heeding, is the only way to understand the parables of Jesus. Parables are like stained glass windows; dull and opaque from the outside, brilliant and shining from within. Jesus in this instance speaks of a sower indiscriminately scattering seed which falls in turn on the pathway, rocky ground, among thorns and good soil. The farmer is excessive and almost wasteful. So intent is he on a harvest, that he sows in every corner of the field. Even so, typical of the austere farming conditions, rocks, thorns and adverse elements see three quarters of his labour lost. Hardly encouraging odds. But the parable does not end on a discouraging note. The good soil produces a breathtaking harvest with amazing results in spite of poor beginnings.

The parable is usually interpreted as a parable of soils with the hard ground, rocks, thorns and good soils as examples of wrong or right discipleship. But the parable is more than moralistic exhortation, a metaphor of human psychology and potential. It represents the inbreaking of God's Kingdom in Jesus, the sower of the gospel. The astounding harvest reminds us that the growth is not due to human activity but to God's generous grace. Discipleship is not what we can make of ourselves. Rather it is allowing the Sower and the seed, Jesus and his Word to produce a harvest of which we alone are quite incapable.

True to form Mark resorts to a typical Markan 'sandwich' in vv10-12 where Jesus explains his use of parables, "to those on the outside everything is said in parables" (v11b) whilst "the secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you" (v11a) i.e. "the Twelve and the others around him". As such it is one of the most important sections in the gospel and one of the most difficult to interpret. Knowledge of the mystery of the Kingdom is in the passive voice, a gift from God and not human achievement. Jesus is the fulfilment of the mystery but 'outsiders' do not see it. Only faith recognizes the Son of God in the lowly figure of Jesus of Nazareth. Demons also know it because they belong to the spiritual realm. Outsiders have ears but don't hear. Popular opinion regarded Pharisees, scribes, zealots and such like as 'insiders'. But lapsed Jews, common people and Gentiles were 'outsiders'.

However, Jesus separates people along quite different lines: those who listen and those who don't, those who hear and heed and those who don't. The difference between outsiders and insiders, between lost and fruitful seed depends on hearing in faith. The difference is not cast in stone. Some outsiders like Mary Magdalene and the Gadarene demoniac become insiders, whilst insiders like Judas Iscariot become outsiders. In quoting Isaiah 6:9,10, occurring six times in the N.T., Jesus is unwilling to relax the tension between God's sovereignty and human free will. Not just a tug of war between equal and opposite forces, Jesus' parables confirm the state of peoples' hearts. As such Jesus' parables are flexible rather than static. Discipleship, indeed our eternal destiny, hangs on hearing and heeding. The words of Jesus are in the imperative "Listen! Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear".

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