**Having ears to hear the gospel**

Text: Mark 4:1-20

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**Scriptures:** Isaiah 55:1-11; Mark 4:1-20

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] ‘Behold our God’, 119:41-48, 439, 371, ‘Facing a task unfinished’, 106

**Series:** The gospel of Mark (#8)

**Theme:** Jesus describes the coming of the Kingdom of God as being like seed that is broadly scattered by a sower then resulting in a variety of different outcomes depending on how people hear the gospel of God; the most amazing of which is to produce abundant fruit for those who have ears to hear.

**Proposition:**  If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear the gospel.

**Introduction**

We all have ears. I’ve never met anyone with more (or less) than two of them, although I know that it is possible to lose an ear through accident or disease. The outer ears are on the side of our heads – the ‘pinnas’ – are made of skin covered cartilage and are clearly visible. The parts we can’t see are in the inner ear – the small stirrup, anvil and hammer bones, the semi-circular canals, the cochlea and the eustachian tubes. These intricately designed structures evidence how fearfully and wonderfully we are made by our Creator. I’m particularly aware of the eustachian tubes myself at present as mine are somewhat inflamed and partially blocked. It feels like I’ve got cotton wool in my ears and I’m finding I need to ask people to repeat what they say to me at times because I cannot hear so well. I have a bit of a hearing problem at the moment.

Hearing and hearing problems are the central theme of our text this morning from Mark 4:1-24. Jesus was sitting in boat and taught a very large crowd who were gathered on the North West shore of the Sea of Galilee. He did not use technological amplification to enable His words to be heard by His listeners, but the water surface of the lake would have defected the sound of His voice very effectively to the people.

He begins His teaching session with the word ‘Listen!’. This is a command not only to hear His words as the sound waves travel into your ears, but to hear so that you understand and as a result to respond wisely to the message. We could call this active listening. This Biblical meaning of hearing is revealed in the Lord’s response to the plight of Israel in captivity in Egypt. “*God* ***heard*** *their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob*” (Ex 2:24). God heard, understood and acted wisely to save Israel.

The parable of the sower is all about hearing and hearing problems. This is one of the most familiar of all the parables of Jesus; together with the ‘prodigal son’ and ‘the good Samaritan’. You have likely already heard a sermon or a few on this parable of the sower. Christ concludes this parable with the words “*He who has ears to hear, let him hear!*”. Jesus calls for careful, attentive, listening as He tells a parable about a sower, some seed and the varied results that come after it is sown.

The Old Testament people of God had hearing problems – not due to difficulties with the physical structures of their ears – but to their rebellious hearts. For example, the prophet Jeremiah spoke to Israel saying: "*For 23 years, from the 13th year of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, to this day, the word of the LORD has come to me, and I have spoken persistently to you, but you have not listened. You have neither listened nor inclined your ears to hear, although the LORD persistently sent to you all his servants the prophets*” (Jer 25:3-4).

After speaking to His covenant people at many times and in many ways, God spoke through His Son, the Last Prophet (Heb 1:1-2). Jesus spoke of the secret, the mystery, of the Kingdom of God which He revealed through parables – ‘earthly stories with heavenly meanings’ alongside them. There is a divine veiling of the revelation of truth in His parables that Jesus teaches by quoting from the prophet Isaiah. Those outside the Kingdom of God ‘*may indeed hear but not understand*’ (Mark 4:12 quoting Isaiah 6:9).

As Jesus explains the parable of the sower, He reveals that this story is actually all about how the Word of God is heard. The phrases ‘when they hear’ or ‘hear the word’ are repeated for each of the four groups of people about whom the parable speaks. We are going to hear (!) the truths taught by Jesus this morning in three parts:

1. Jesus calls us to listen to His parable
2. Jesus explains the parable and His hearers
3. Jesus calls us to faith and fruitfulness
4. **Jesus calls us to listen to His parable (1-9)**

The world in which we live is obviously not the same as the one inhabited by those who first heard the parable of the sower from the mouth of Jesus. Back then they were familiar with the agricultural methods described in the parable of the sower, whereas now most of us are only vaguely aware of the details of primary food production. We mostly live in an urban environment and only see cultivated paddocks, crops reaching maturity and harvesting equipment when we travel out of the city. For almost everyone living in Bible times, they were closely involved with, and directly connected to, the sowing, tending and harvesting of the commonly grown crops of wheat and barley. They knew nothing of mechanised precision seed drilling equipment, but were very familiar with broadcast sowing in which a supply of grain was carried in a bag slung around the neck and shoulders. The order of ploughing and sowing seems to have varied. Sometimes the seed was sown first and then ploughed over, sometimes seed was scattered in pre-prepared furrows. In the parable there are four different scenarios:

1. Some seed fell along the path and the birds came and ate it up.
2. Some seed fell in rocky places where there was a thin covering of soil. In Israel this often occurs over underlying limestone which causes the upper layer of soil to heat up rapidly in the sun. In these conditions seeds germinate quickly, but because there is no depth of soil to sustain a sufficient root system they quickly wither in the sun and the plants die.
3. Some seed fell amongst thorns which then grew up and choked out the crop as it was deprived of sunlight and nutrients which are necessary to enable growth.
4. Some seed fell on good soil, grew well and yielded abundant crops where the grain was multiplied 30 times, 60 times and in some places 100 times.

Most fields in Palestine would have had all four types of soil present in different parts of the paddock. The imagery Jesus used in this parable would have been very familiar to His listeners. They would have connected to the story more easily than we do. Notice that nothing is said by Jesus about the necessity of rain or the hard work of ploughing the field. The focus is entirely on the seed and what happens to it once it is sown. The main emphasis comes at the end where the seed that lands on good soil results in a bumper crop. There were no genetically modified seeds back then. There were no manufactured herbicides, pesticides or chemical fertilisers. For us today yields of 30x, 60x or 100x probably don’t sound strange, but for those first hearing this parable these numbers would have been surprising, unrealistic and super-extraordinary.

It is very clear that the seed is of excellent quality. Look at the abundant harvest in the good, weed-free soil. The same good seed is sown everywhere. It is obvious that to produce a harvest, the seed must be sown. The crop will not grow in the sower’s bag! Valuable good seed is scattered randomly by the sower with the aim of producing a huge harvest. Yet, that crop will not grow in every place where the seed has landed.

It’s like sound waves travelling into your ear. Sometimes they produce a beneficial result in your life, and sometimes they don’t. Assuming that the message you hear is a good one, the outcome depends on whether you understand what you have heard and what you do about it. The Proverbs wisely teach “*listen to advice and accept instruction, that you may gain wisdom in the future*” (19:20). Have you ever had the experience of giving wise counsel to someone who asks you for advice, but they ignore it - with the result that things do not go well with them? I have. I have also ignored good advice myself in times past and suffered as a result.

Jesus was teaching a very large crowd about the coming extraordinary increase of the Kingdom of God in this, the first of three parables in which He reveals the growth that will come as the gospel is spread broadly. Of the more than forty passages of Scripture that are usually identified as parables, only two have detailed interpretations given: the parable of the wheat and tares and this, the story of the sower. Let’s look now at the in-depth explanation that Jesus gives.

1. **Jesus explains the parable and His hearers (14-20)**

A very large crowd was listening to Jesus teach, but they were not all like one another. We know that there were four types of people listening to Jesus tell the parable of the sower:

1. There were His opponents. We’ve already seen in Mark’s gospel so far that many Jewish leaders were hostile to Jesus. The Pharisees were already plotting to destroy Him (3:6).
2. There were the crowds who gathered to see and hear Jesus. We could broadly describe them as ‘superficial hangers on’. They were likely interested in the spectacle of the miracles, the experience of the healing that Jesus gave, and they found His teaching astonishing. Those in these crowds are sometimes called ‘disciples’ in Scripture because they followed Jesus for a while, but they then fell away, never to return (ref. 1 John 2:19).
3. There was Judas Iscariot – one of the ‘inner circle’ of twelve disciples. Judas followed Jesus almost all the way to the end of his life, but he ultimately betrayed Christ – likely because he believed that Jesus had failed to liberate Israel from oppressive Roman rule.
4. Then there were the remaining eleven disciples – with their flaws. Peter denied Jesus three times but later repented. All fled in the garden of Gethsemane. Yet through these ordinary, weak and defective men, a vast harvest of souls was gathered into the kingdom. The effect of their apostolic ministry is still evident today as the gospel continues to go out to the end of the earth.

Did Jesus have these four types of people in mind when He told the parable of the sower? We can’t say for sure, but it is certainly plausible that He did. In explaining the parable, Jesus also explains the hearts of those who hear His words. He explains you and He explains me. Whilst we are just about as far as it is possible to be geographically from a Palestinian paddock and we live in a very different agricultural setting, yet there are likely aspects of the way we listen to the gospel that at times fall into each of the four categories of soil types. So let’s listen to the interpretation of this parable that Jesus gave to His twelve disciples knowing that Jesus is explaining us to ourselves just as He was explaining them to themselves around 2,000 years ago.

The seed which the sower scatters is God’s word (v14). There are 3 ways in which the seed in the parable fails to result in a crop: These correspond to 3 kinds of people or 3 responses of people

1. **The seed along the path** – where there would be hard trodden-down dirt. This represents those who ‘*when they hear (the word), Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them*’. Satan is represented by predatory birds in the parable. There is a connection to the Old Testament where at times birds are represented as agents of evil (e.g. 1 Kings:3-4). The response here is one of “in one ear, out the other”, “water off a duck’s back”. The ears and mind are effectively closed either through indifference or hostility.
2. **The seed on rocky ground** represents those who immediately receive the word with joy. They have no root in themselves, enduring for a while, but then when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, they fall away. This describes those who lack conviction, courage, stability and perseverance. They could be described as being “fair-weather Christians”. It has been said that “*It’s not easy to be a Christian, but it is easy to start*” (Dr. J. Alexander Findlay). To be true faith, the Christian’s faith must be deeply rooted.
3. **Some seed among thorns**. ‘*They are the ones who hear the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word and it proves unfruitful*’ (v19). This category includes ‘Sunday Christians’ who live irreligious lives during the week filled with worldly interests that choke out spiritual growth. The true nature of those who appear to be saved, but are actually not is revealed by John when he writes *“They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us”.* (1 John 2:19)
4. **The seed falling on good soil** represents those who hear the word and accept it and thereby bear abundant, extraordinary fruit. In reality there is only one kind of true Christian – the fruitful one. We heard this truth earlier from John 15, where Jesus teaches “*By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples*” (John 15:8). It is also true that the quantity of fruitfulness varies between Christians, but Jesus teaches that it is always surprisingly large.

Brothers and sisters, never underestimate what the Lord is doing through you! Faithful proclamation of the gospel will never fail to bring forth fruit in those who truly hear the message of salvation. These fruits of the Spirit are seen now in the life of those who have ears to hear the gospel: “*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control*” (Gal 5:22-23). The fullness of the harvest is yet to be seen when the Kingdom of God comes in completeness in the New Heavens and New Earth (Rev 22:2). No matter how much seed appears to be ‘wasted’, in the end the huge harvest is sure. Back then, by the shore of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus was calling all who would hear to come to faith and thereby to be fruitful in Him. This brings us to our third point:

1. **Jesus calls us to faith and fruitfulness (10-13)**

If you only sow good seed, but parts of your paddock are inhabited by hungry birds, others are rocky, and some are weedy then you shouldn’t be surprised if you have a very variable crop. As we’ve seen, the only shock for the first listeners to this parable would have been the extraordinary fruitfulness of the seed that was received by the good soil. What is surprising about the growth of the Kingdom of God is that different people do not hear the gospel in the same way. People like you and me do not all understand the Word of God rightly and people do not all respond in faith that then results in God-given fruitfulness. Why is that?

The answer is complicated, mysterious and ultimately not fully comprehensible to us. Between the telling of the parable and the explanation, Jesus speaks to His twelve disciples about those who are ‘outside’ of God’s Kingdom, and He quotes from Isaiah 6:12-13 "*they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven*" (Mark 4:12). We’ve seen four different types of people revealed in Christ’s explanation of the parable of the sower, but in essence the first three groups are the same in that none bear fruit in the end. Some never respond to the gospel. Some respond enthusiastically but last only a short time. Some respond and grow, but worldliness chokes them spiritually. They are all outside the kingdom of God. They remain dead in their trespasses and sins, apart from God’s grace.

Fundamentally there are **only two groups** of people: those who grow to fruitful maturity and those who do not (ref. Matt 7:13-14). The saved and the unsaved. Those who are in the Kingdom of God and those who remain outside.

The good soil present in the hearts of God’s elect is a gift from the Lord, apart from which there is no growth that results in lasting life. Jesus said, *"No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day”* (John 6:44). God has graciously chosen some to be saved, but has passed over others, leaving them to the just consequences of their sins.

As Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah, He is teaching His disciples the Biblical doctrine of predestination. God sovereignly makes the ears of some people ‘heavy’ so that they cannot hear and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed (Isaiah 6:10). Scripture reveals an example of this with Pharaoh, whose heart was hardened by the Lord God (Ex 4:21). Yet it was also true that Pharaoh himself wilfully hardened His own heart (Ex 9:34). Jesus was explaining to His twelve disciples the secret, the mystery, of the kingdom of God whereby the same Word is savingly heard by some, but not by others. To some it is a fragrance from death to death, for others, a fragrance from life to life (2 Cor 2:16).

Biblical scholar Craig Blomberg has helpfully written *“Predestination is far better understood as a doctrine that helps us make sense of the responses we get to preaching the word after the fact rather than as a motive or guide for how to do ministry in advance”.* When we are scattering the ‘seed’ of the gospel we should not be trying to identify what the ‘soil condition’ is the hearts of those we speak to about Jesus. Only God knows the heart (Ps 44:21; Acts 15:8)

You may well know that the section headings in our English Bible translations are not part of the original manuscripts. They are therefore not themselves Scripture. For example just before Mark chapter 4 verse 1, your Bible probably has the words ‘The parable of the sower’, but these words are not found in the text itself in this gospel. However, this is the title is given by Jesus as recorded by Matthew (13:18). So this **is** the parable of the sower and yet the sower is only mentioned once in the story (‘A **sower** went out to sow’) and not at all in the explanation.

Yet this parable points beyond the seed, beyond the soils and beyond the extraordinary harvest to Christ, the Divine Sower. He is the One who came proclaiming the gospel of God and calling anyone who would hear Him to ‘*repent and believe the gospel*’ (Mark 1:15). He ‘scattered’ the gospel which is the power of God for salvation (Rom 1:16) very broadly as He travelled about in His earthly ministry. He is the One who appointed His disciples to be ‘sowers’ of the gospel as they bore witness about Him (Acts 1:8). He is the One who commissions people like us to sow the Word so that we can make disciples (Matt 28:19).

This parable of the sower is both a warning and an encouragement. It is a warning for us to examine our own variable hearts. At times we can receive the Word of God with hostility and unbelief when our sinfulness and hardness of heart is challenged through preaching, teaching or personal study of Scripture. The parts of the Bible that make you most uncomfortable are likely the ones you may resist so that you don’t have to change. At times we can respond with enthusiastic commitment, but this dwindles all too quickly when our old nature tempts us to revert to Satan’s ways at times when the going gets tough. Perseverance through difficulties is not easy, but it is spiritually productive. At times we are spiritually weakened by worldliness that distracts us and redirects our desires away from Christ and His kingdom. We would be fools to think that we are unaffected by worldliness, just because we follow Christ as His disciples..

There is warning here but also uplifting motivation. Jesus promises great fruitfulness in the lives of those who truly hear His Word. As the productive Vine, He guarantees spiritual productivity both in this life and in the life to come for all who abide in Him.

Jesus explains the variable response that occurs when we ourselves sow the seed of the gospel in the lives of others. The focus of the sower is on the harvest, not on the seed that does not result in lasting growth. We don’t know the full extent of the harvest as yet. Our calling is to be fruitful in sowing the seed of the gospel. ’*The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few*’ (Matt 9:37). AMEN.