

Some scholars have argued that certain crops of ancient times would have produced yields of between thirty and one hundredfold, but the arguments about this are by no means certain. I am sure you will see that if we accept this, then all the sense of amazement at the end of this parable would be lost, and our attempts to 'prove' Jesus literally correct in His understanding of grain yields only serves to water down the impact of the story!

It seems clear that Jesus expected people to be completely amazed at what He said, for He concluded, 'Those who have ears to hear should listen,' which was a powerful challenge. The reason we know this is because the last word Jesus said was 'listen', which was the same as the first word He said at the beginning of the parable (see verse 3). This word was of course a strong command, but it was more than that. The traditional sacred Jewish prayer which united God's people was called the 'shema' from the Hebrew word for the command 'hear' or 'listen', as found in Deuteronomy 'Listen, ('shema') O Israel; the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might ...' (Deuteronomy 6:4,5). To a Jewish crowd, the use of the word 'listen' in the way Jesus used it, was profoundly challenging.

### Application

There is more for us to explore in this parable tomorrow, but by looking at the end of it to understand its initial impact, we come face to face with an important truth. This is that where the Kingdom of God is sown and grown to harvest, the yields are more than significant. We live at a time in the Christian church when most Western churches do not see this kind of growth and 'yield' for the Kingdom. Many would love to see large numbers of people won for Jesus Christ and brought into the Kingdom and under His authority, and questions must be asked about whether we do not see the fruit because either our countries, our churches, or the people in them, are not good soil for the growth of a harvest for the Kingdom of God.

The only way to address this question is to accept firstly that the harvest for the Kingdom of God is far greater than can be measured from what we experience, and God's Kingdom is growing in our world, probably far faster than we imagine. Every church community that can rejoice in this is blessed. Nevertheless, a challenge remains for the church of God in any place to be fertile ground for the Kingdom; although we may sometimes be looking for limited physical results which cannot be properly evaluated. The enigma of the parable of the sower is that although we read it and think we understand it, there are many things about it that we do not; and it presents God's people with a powerful challenge. If the parable is Jesus' vision of the Kingdom, how do we measure up to it?

### Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. In your group, imagine that you are one of the crowd hearing the parable for the first time. Discuss your reactions.
2. Without reading Jesus' own interpretation of His parable (4:10-20), discuss what you think the different forms of failure stand for today.
3. If the parable comes as a strong command from Jesus, should we pay it more attention in the life of the church today? How can this parable help us now?

### Discipleship

Try writing down a list of all the good things that have happened as a direct consequence of your own faith. If you are like most people, you will find that if you try this, you will end up with a very long list. Consider whether the things you have listed could be considered as part of the 'fruit of the Kingdom of God' or the large 'yield' for the sower in today's parable. Look back over your list and ask yourself whether God has been the sower of the seed which has grown, or you? Does it matter which?

### Final Prayer

Holy Spirit, You have come to rest within my soul. Fill me with love and compassion; grace and truth; integrity and honesty; and a sincere desire for justice in Your Name: and as You bless me now, flow out from me to others according to Your gracious will. AMEN

### Prayer

We pray, Lord God, with joy and thanks. With joy because our hearts have been inspired by Your call and we know that with You, we cannot fail. With thanks because we know that our sins are forgiven and You love us with a passion which is everlasting. Keep us close to You throughout the ups and downs of everyday life, and may our joy and thanks brighten each part of this day: AMEN

### Other Prayer Suggestions

#### Weekly Theme: Missions

Pray today for all those who seek to gain access for Christian work in parts of the world where there is hostility towards the Church. Pray that kingdoms will fall before the power and authority of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, and that by the persistence of the Lord's servants, the work of mission will grow and be sustained for the good of all people.

### Meditation

*(a verse based on Psalm 86)*

Gladden the hearts of Your people, O Lord,  
So preserve our lives and our homes:  
You are God Almighty, You are gracious, O Lord,  
Each day You provide for our needs.

Gladden the souls of Your servants, O Lord,  
For we offer our worship to You:  
You are kind, forgiving, and generous, O Lord,  
Your unfailing love never ends.

Gladden the spirits of Your chosen, O Lord,  
Now, listen, we pray, to our tears:  
We call out to You when in trouble, O Lord,  
Your strength is sufficient for all.

Now, teach Your ways to Your people, O Lord,  
You do great and wondrous things:  
All nations will bow down before You, O Lord,  
When Your glory and truth are revealed.

### Bible Study - Mark 4:1-9

<sup>1</sup> He began to teach once more beside the sea, and such a very large crowd gathered around him that He got into a boat on the sea and sat down there. The whole crowd remained on land, along the seashore. <sup>2</sup> He began to teach them many things by means of parables, and in the course of His teaching He said to them: <sup>3</sup> Listen to this! A sower went out to sow. <sup>4</sup> And as he sowed, some seed fell along the pathway, and the birds came and ate it up. <sup>5</sup> Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it had little soil, so it shot up quickly because the soil was not deep; <sup>6</sup> and when the sun came up it was scorched, and it withered away because it had no root. <sup>7</sup> Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. <sup>8</sup> Other seed fell into good soil and produced ever increasing crops, yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.' <sup>9</sup> And He said, 'Those who have ears to hear should listen!'

### Review

This wonderful parable is the first great parable in Mark's Gospel and the beginning of a series of parables which together form a valuable block of Jesus' teaching. The parable of the sower is one of the most famous of Jesus' parables, but the danger is that we think we know all about it, especially because Jesus Himself provided an explanation of it later on (4:13-20). However,

between the parable itself and the explanation, Jesus made it clear that He saw parables as obscuring His message generally and their meaning was a gift of God to His followers (4:10-12). As we read the parable today and Jesus' explanation of it tomorrow, we will find that there are many aspects to this great story; these include what we already know and much more besides. It has a great deal to teach us which is surprising and not what we might expect.

The parable of the sower is an example of Jesus' amazing ability to take the observable facts of life around Him and use them as an explanation of what God was doing in the midst of people as He spoke. Rabbis of Jesus' day used parables, however, they used the technique as a way of explaining in simple terms the deeper theology they taught; in other words, they were like 'sermon illustrations'. Jesus' parables were never mere illustrations; they contained within them the truths of the Kingdom of God, and have been at the heart of Christian theology ever since.

To begin with it is worth putting aside a common misunderstanding about the parable of the sower, which is that the difference between the fruitless seed growth and the fruitful was the incompetence of the sower! Surely no competent sower could possibly expect a good harvest by scattering the seed so widely and inefficiently! Some critics of Christianity have picked up on this to ridicule the Faith. The truth is that in even the fertile regions of Israel, sowing was done before ploughing, and the act of ploughing effectively planted the seed in the soil just before seasonal rains were expected. What happened was this; across any field lay traditional pathways which were walked by local people irrespective of the crop, but it was impossible to negotiate these pathways when ploughing with oxen; the whole field had to be sown and ploughed. It was accepted that people would walk pathways across the fields according to tradition, rendering that particular soil and the seed useless. Next, it was not possible for a farmer to know exactly where limestone rock lay just beneath the surface of the soil, a common feature of the land making the fields less fertile in places. One can also imagine that in the act of ploughing, seed could become uncontrollably clumped together with the roots of perennial weeds consequently swamping the growth of the seed. What Jesus described was perfectly in order with farming practices of the day!

We will spend more time looking at the meaning of the parable when we see what Jesus had to say about it (see tomorrow's reading - 4:10-20), but in our initial look at the parable today it leads us to one obvious point which is entirely in keeping with Mark's Gospel. Whatever the setbacks, the work that Jesus had come to do as Messiah was active and set to grow; it was active like a field of growing corn and already producing a harvest which could be measured. Indeed, the harvest was far greater than imaginable, despite all setbacks. The yield of thirty-fold from a field of corn was almost unheard of, but Jesus mysteriously and purposefully described the yield as 'ever increasing' (4:8) to the point of an unbelievable 'hundredfold'. Despite what had happened recently in His ministry, nothing was going to stop God's work through His Messiah!

### Going Deeper

As the first major parable of Jesus in Mark, most people who write books about Mark pause at this point to discuss the significance of the parables as Jesus' teaching method. Whilst this is of some importance, we will stick to what this parable has to say to us in its place here in Mark's Gospel, and this is quite different from what it means where it is placed in Matthew or Luke.

#### ***The parable of the sower and its 'meaning'***

In preparing for this study, I have made a note of the many different 'meanings' ascribed to the parable of the sower in the books I have read. Most writers accept that it says something about the growth of God's work and its ultimate success, but in addition to this, a wide variety of other meanings are suggested, each of them placing emphases on different parts of the parable. As you read this list, you will probably find that there are other things you might wish to add to it which would reflect your own understanding of this great parable:

1. The miraculous superabundance of the yield of God's harvest.
2. The work of Jesus (and/or God) as sower of the seed.
3. The inevitability of God's successful harvest at the end times.
4. The nature of the soil and its effect on the harvest, together with a comparison with church life today.
5. The parable as an explanation of the reason why people do not always respond to the Gospel.
6. The parable as an explanation of the work of Satan to try and prevent God's harvest.

7. The parable as a source of encouragement to the disciples that their sacrifice would result in glory.

In past centuries, it was believed that the parables were all analogies, and each part of what Jesus said had a specific meaning which had to be found if you wanted to understand the whole of the parable. This idea was not helpful because it meant that the meaning of the parables came to be regarded as specialised, when in reality, Jesus' teaching was highly accessible to its first hearers even if it was multi-faceted. Clearly, this parable was well remembered because it now has a prominent position and role in Matthew, Mark and Luke, and this is what we will now explore from the point of view of Mark's Gospel.

#### ***The setting of the story***

Mark spends some time explaining the setting of this important parable, though we do not know how much time elapsed between this and Jesus' confrontation with the scribes and Pharisees (3:20-35). For the second time (which is implied by the Greek word for 'once more' in verse 1), Jesus taught by the seaside, this time getting into a boat (see 3:9) because of the large crowd. All the tension in the early days of Jesus' ministry (1:35f., 45, 2:2) had gone after Jesus' confrontation with the religious authorities, and Jesus seems content to minister to the crowds by teaching them. They, at least, were ready to listen.

Jesus is reported by Mark as teaching 'many things', and how we would love to know all of what He taught! We can only assume this was based on His declared preaching; 'the Kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe!' (1:15). However, it was the parable of the sower and the parables which followed that stayed in the minds of those who heard Jesus as He preached at the side of the sea.

The introduction of the parables brings new themes into Mark's Gospel which we will gradually see unfolding in the coming studies, and one of these will be an increasing doubt about whether the crowds who came to hear Jesus actually understood who He was and what He was doing. In the parable of the sower, we notice that there are three forms of failure to grow and reach a harvest, but in story of Mark's Gospel so far two groups of people have been identified as failing to respond to Jesus; His family (in general, though not including some like His mother Mary – see yesterday's study), and also the religious authorities. An early reader of Mark's Gospel may well have read the parable with its three forms of failure, and thought, 'who are the third group of people who fail?' The answer to this unfolds slowly throughout the Gospel as the people of Israel themselves prove to be fickle and unable to support Jesus throughout His ministry and especially at the end. We are then left with three groups of people who rejected Jesus in different ways and for different reasons; the religious authorities, Jesus' own extended family members, and (eventually) the people of Israel generally. Tomorrow we will see how this fits with Jesus' own explanation of how and why the seed does not grow (4:15f.).

In the mean time, we are left with Jesus preaching the parable of the sower to a crowd of people on the beach, many of whom were probably more interested in His healing power, and the newly formed group of twelve disciples, commissioned to be the twelve leaders of God's new people (3:13-19). The parable of the sower was clearly addressed to people at the level of a simple story because it was a scenario that was understood and commonly observed. But how much of what Jesus was saying through the parable would have been understood? I am not sure that those present would have been clear about the deeper spiritual meaning of the parable at all. We will have to see what Jesus says Himself about the meaning of the parable in tomorrow's reading to take this line of thought any further.

#### ***The harvest***

The one part of the parable that would have gained a response at its first telling is undoubtedly the ending, with its extraordinarily large harvest yields of thirty, sixty and one hundredfold. There is some subtlety to the passage because Jesus spoke of crops that increased year on year, which is the most obvious meaning of 'ever increasing crops' (4:8), a comment which is missing in both Matthew (13:1f.) and Luke (8:4f.). Now, if Jesus had been preaching generally on this occasion about the Kingdom of God, according to His manifesto (1:15), then the conclusion of the parable had the clear message that God's Kingdom would grow, year on year, and in a way that was quite beyond expectation! In truth, this was prophetically correct, for the growth of the early church after Jesus' Ascension to Glory and the coming of the Holy Spirit, was by all accounts phenomenal (see Acts 2:41, 4:4 etc.).