

Sunday June 6th 2021 – Mark 4:21-34 - More parables

²¹ He said to them, 'Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don't you put it on its stand?' ²² For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. ²³ If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear.'

²⁴ 'Consider carefully what you hear,' he continued. 'With the measure you use, it will be measured to you – and even more. ²⁵ Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.'

²⁶ He also said, 'This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. ²⁷ Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. ²⁸ All by itself the soil produces corn – first the stalk, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. ²⁹ As soon as the corn is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.'

³⁰ Again he said, 'What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it?' ³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. ³² Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.'

³³ With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. ³⁴ He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.

Last week Jonathan explained the parable of the sower as one where Jesus reveals to his disciples the real meaning of what he is saying. This only happens twice in Mark's Gospel.. the other occasion is in chapter 13 where Jesus speaks to his disciples on the Mount of Olives about the end times. Mark's Gospel is a fast-paced narrative of where Jesus went and what he did and said. These parables we are looking at today are not explained by Mark who cryptically says that Jesus explained what they really meant to his disciples, who presumably had the information needed to explain them to us... but did they?

Verse 21 – the lamp on the stand is repeated in Matthew 5:15 in the Sermon on the Mount; verse 22 about hidden things being disclosed is mentioned in Matthew 10:26; verse 24 the measure you use is in Matthew 7:12; verse 25 those who have will be given more is in Matthew 13:12 and 25:29; verse 30-32 the mustard seed parable is found in Matthew 13:31-32 and Luke 13:18-19.

It would seem that Jesus must have repeated these parables on several occasions as their places in the narratives of Matthew and Luke isn't the same as Mark. Let's look at them one at a time. Verse 21

²¹ He said to them, 'Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don't you put it on its stand?

Jesus asks two simple questions about light. On the surface this is obvious: to light a room with a lamp, you don't hide the lamp and cover it up, but put it somewhere where it will throw out its light.

What does Jesus mean? He is the light of the world (John 8:12) but in Matthew 5:15 Jesus says, "You are the light of the world". There is a double meaning, if not treble meaning:

1 Jesus is the Light of the World – John 8:12 *When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'*; and John 3:19 *This is the verdict: light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil;* and John 9:4-5 *As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. ⁵ While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.'* Jesus is saying that he is bringing light or revelation to mankind for all to see, but sadly men prefer that the light be hidden as they prefer darkness to accepting that Jesus is the Way, the Life and the Truth, and that no one comes to the Father except through Jesus (John 14:6).

2 Jesus is saying that the Gospel is the light in the darkness and that the disciples – which means all who believe Jesus is Lord – should not hide the Good News by covering up its light. The Truth is not meant to be concealed but seen. This may have consequences that cause us difficulties, being unpopular or being persecuted. Especially in today's culture where there is pressure from those who decide that "you can't say that" and want to punish people for saying what is true but unacceptable in the eyes of those who walk in the darkness and want everyone else to walk with them. For saying what the Bible says, people are being

arrested, being “cancelled” and losing their livelihoods. This is to be expected, so we must all be prepared to be bold and courageous when faced with such opposition.

3 God created light – in Genesis 1:3 God said, “Let there be light and there was light” This light came into being out of the darkness. Jesus said in Matthew 5:16 “*Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.*”

Moving on to verses 22&23

²² For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. ²³ If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear.

This parable says that Truth always triumphs over all who seek to deny it, who seek to hide it and who seek to alter it. Today we live in a time of unparalleled concealment of truth. Transparency is a buzz word that seems to mean that whatever is done, has to be done in the open. However, people who claim to advocate transparency usually seek to hide when it reveals their own failings. No one likes to have their inner thoughts, what they really think, exposed when it is negative about others. Luke 12:2-3 says *There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. ³ What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roof tops.*

Truth is not what you want to be true, but what is true. In 1616, the Roman Catholic Church condemned Galileo for claiming the earth went round the sun and not the other way around. Received wisdom or what everyone believes is not always Truth with a capital T. Pope Urban the Eighth was not interested in Truth, only his (and many others) own version of truth. We have many today who have their own “truth” based on their experiences or prejudices which aren’t true when checked against reality. Fake news is believed to be true until someone proves it to be fake. The opposite also applies: the real Truth can be believed to be fake until someone proves it to be true. What the parable means is that all deceptions will be exposed eventually. A fact is a fact even if no one believes it. We cannot be like Groucho Marx who cynically said *Those are my principles, and if you don't like them... well, I have others.* The Truth was what Christians believed and many were punished with death for refusing to worship Caesar who claimed to be a god. We all know no Roman emperor was ever divine, but many inscriptions and coins state this as true and to get on in the Roman world, it was expected that you agreed with this. Similarly, in the Communist world, the party line dictated what was acceptable and what was not acceptable, regardless of the truth of the matter. Today we live in the “you cannot say that” culture every bit as nonsensical as communist society where belief rides roughshod over factual reality and truth. However eventually the scales fall from the eyes of the people, and they see reality. Whatever and whoever seek to hide the Truth will know that hiding it cannot last forever. For a time God may hide the Truth as was mentioned earlier (in chapter 4:12 *they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven*). Until ears are opened, and understanding is received through the Spirit of God, the Gospel message is as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1: 17-25 foolishness rejected by many. *¹⁷ For Christ did not send me to baptise, but to preach the gospel – not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. ¹⁸ For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written: ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.’ ²⁰ Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. ²² Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.*

Moving on the verse 24

²⁴ *‘Consider carefully what you hear,’ he continued. ‘With the measure you use, it will be measured to you – and even more’.*

In life there is a balance: what you get is determined by what you put in or give. If you put in time to study you will be rewarded by increased knowledge and wisdom, especially studying the Word of God. God knows the size of scoop you use to dip into His Word so that you may learn and share it with others. He will use that same size of scoop to measure out His blessing to you.

The way we behave toward others will be reflected in the way others behave with us. If we wish others to love us, then we must love them first. If we wish to have friends, we must be friendly ourselves. If wish to be critical and unfriendly, the likelihood is that others will be critical and unfriendly towards us. The same goes for our response to the Word of God.

Charles Spurgeon said, *“The hearer of the gospel will get measure for measure, and the measure shall be his own measure.”* And it works out just this way. To the one with no interest in the gospel, the preaching of the gospel seems uninteresting. To the one who wants to find fault with the church or the preacher, they find plenty of faults. On the other hand – the more blessed hand – those who hunger find food, and those who want the solid truth receive something from any faithful ministry.

This parable is much like the verse from Matthew 7:1 *‘Do not judge, or you too will be judged. ²For in the same way as you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.’* My stance on this is that if you judge rightly, you have nothing to worry about. Sometimes we have to make judgments, and be careful... as Jesus says “consider carefully what you hear”

²⁵ *Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.*

This sounds to many as unfair. It goes against the humanist principles of equality and social justice. It is a truth which the world rejects. Let’s look at some examples.

1 Whoever seeks knowledge, the more s/he will know. If you want to know about German or French literature and poetry, you need first to learn the grammar and vocabulary of the language. Then you can appreciate the effort made by those who wrote the best in each language. As many of you know, my parents were Dutch, and they have a playwright called Vondel who is every bit as good as Shakespeare, but the English have never heard of him and claim Shakespeare is the world’s greatest playwright without knowing all the other playwrights who wrote in other languages. Only a blinkered ignoramus makes such a statement about world literature, yet many English speakers believe they are right about Shakespeare, when they aren’t! If you want to get a professional qualification, you have to study, and as you work using your knowledge, you gain more knowledge and experience to benefit not just yourself but your clients.

However, knowledge acquired needs to be increased and used as otherwise it may be forgotten and lost. I got an O level French, but without using what I learnt by either going to France or reading French books, slowly that knowledge seeps away. Having read the Bible from cover to cover once is not enough: it has to be read daily to prevent seepage, and to gain more insight into the ways of God.

2 Effort is needed. For example, with constant exercise, one becomes fitter. Without some exercise, fitness starts to diminish. None of us can do the works of service God expects of us if we have let ourselves go so much that we cannot do very much physically. What Jesus is saying is that the lazy, who God gave a strong body and mind, will end up with nothing if they make no effort to maintain their mind and body.

3 To make progress in any skill, we need to use the skill and have the desire to learn new skills. One of the wonderful gifts that God gives us is equipping us to do what we may have thought we were unable to achieve. If we get stuck in a rut, not being willing to learn new skills, we may end up losing the limited skills we have.

4 The more responsibility a man has, the more capable he is of taking on more responsibility. Indecisiveness and unwillingness to take responsibilities will result in us doing nothing to further the kingdom of God. **Jesus assumes that the reward for good work is to do more good work.** The reward for bad or no work is nothing. It is counter intuitive, but nonetheless true that the more a man wins or gains, the more he can win or gain, and that if he stops making any effort, what he may have won or gained in the past, will most likely be lost.

²⁶ He also said, 'This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. ²⁷ Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. ²⁸ All by itself the soil produces corn – first the stalk, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. ²⁹ As soon as the corn is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.'

This parable is unique to Mark's Gospel. A farmer plants seed, and it grows. When he sees the seed sprouted in the morning, he has just worked as a partner with God. Man has done what he could do – plant the seed; and God has done what only He can do: grow the seed.

This shows that the word of God works *invisibly* within us. God promised that His Word would accomplish the purpose for which He sends it (Isaiah 55:11). So, when you hear the Word, it works in you – even as you sleep. It works in you spiritually, in a way that is invisible to our eyes.

The secret of growth is in the seed, not in the soil nor in the weather nor in the cultivating. These all help, but the seed spontaneously works according to its own nature. How exactly the seed grows is a mystery. Though it grows by a process the farmer cannot see nor fully account for, he has faith in the growing process. The growing process for some seeds is slow, others faster, but Nature determines its speed and success untouched by human hands. So it is with the Kingdom of God: we work in partnership with God, yet the real work is left up to Him – we trust in a process we cannot see nor fully account for.

Jesus said that the Parable of the Soils or Sower was a key for understanding other parables, we can say that the seed He speaks of here represents the Word of God, as it did in the Parable of the Soils/Sower. Therefore, with this parable, Jesus shows the way the Word of God works with hidden and mysterious power, just like a seed. The Bible isn't just an instruction manual or a list of rules to follow. It lives and works its life into us. The idea that a preacher lends life to God's Word is wrong; the only thing a preacher has to give to the Word is a voice. Like a seed, the word of God has a hidden and mysterious power. Just as a field's crop may be unnoticed when first planted but can't be missed when the seeds sprout and mature, so also it is with the Kingdom of God. It has small beginnings and its root may be small, but when God develops the work, it cannot be missed. There will be a harvest. This is the glory of Jesus' work in us. It was prophetically said of Him, *a bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench* (Isaiah 42:3). From small beginnings of things that seem imperfect, insignificant and unworldly, Jesus uses to glorify himself. Jesus takes something as small and insignificant as a seed, buries it, and makes it rise up to something glorious. Therefore, we should never despise the day of small things; the sowing of seeds. Zechariah 4: 10 says ¹⁰ *'Who dares despise the day of small things, since the seven eyes of the LORD that range throughout the earth will rejoice when they see the chosen capstone/plumbline in the hand of Zerubbabel'*.

Turning to verses 30 to 32

³⁰ *Again he said, 'What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? ³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. ³² Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.'*

We don't have mustard that grows into small trees in Britain. Our oil seed rape which is related to mustard grows to about 3 or 4 feet in good soil, and barely 2 in thin soil. What it has in common with the mustard plant in Israel is its many small black seeds, which birds would feed from. In Israel they grew to the height of up to ten feet, a small tree.

The parable is about small beginnings, and every work has a beginning. Nothing emerges fully grown. The fully grown tree is the church, and the birds are the nations that shelter in it.

The church is a place for all kinds of different people and beliefs. John Welsey said "We think ourselves and we let men think. I have no more right to object to a man for holding a different opinion from mine, than I have to differ with a man because he wears a wig and I wear my own hair. It is good for a man to have the assurance that he is right, but that is no reason why he should have the conviction that everyone else is wrong." The church is the family of God, which began in Jerusalem, small as a mustard seed in one room

and has grown to make room for every nation in the world. There are no barriers in the Church of God – men make the barriers, while God in Christ tears them down.

The parable of the mustard seed repeats that great things can arise from very small beginnings.

Finally verses 33 to 34

³³ With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. ³⁴ He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.

Jesus suited his teaching to ability of the people to understand what they heard. It's no use speaking to children about the eschatological paradoxes to be found in the Bible as they won't understand the words eschatology (knowledge of the last things or end times) or paradox (seemingly contradictory or absurd statements which are actually well founded or true). Jesus was a wise teacher who didn't talk down to people. He wants them to learn from him, understand what he is saying and then act upon what he has revealed.

Today we don't have Jesus to explain what he meant – but we do have Holy Spirit. This promise was made by Jesus to his disciples: John 14: 15-23

¹⁵ "If you love me, keep my commands. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever— ¹⁷ the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. ¹⁸ I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. ¹⁹ Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. ²⁰ On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. ²¹ Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them."

Conclusion

These parables are guides for living as a disciple of Jesus. Be a light in the world; be careful what you say; be careful how you respond to people; be willing to gain knowledge and serve; allow the Word of God to speak into the hearts of others; sow the Word into people's lives; expect growth; give the glory to God for what is done and ask Holy Spirit for revelation and guidance.