

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 12 July 2020

Genesis 25:19-34, Matthew:13:1-9, 18-23

Lord God, may your Word be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Parables of the kingdom of God Part I

-The sower and the seeds

The parable of the sower is the first entry of a series of parables of the kingdom of God in Matthew 13. The first thing to understand is that the kingdom of God is about the reign of God on earth as well as in heaven. In this world, a king/ a queen's reign is limited by the land in that the monarch exercises her/his sovereignty. But God has no such a limit. For instance, in John 18:33-36, Pilate asks Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus answers, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." With this working knowledge, we'll think about this parable of the sower. We'll focus on the sower and the seeds first. Next, the seeds and the soil will be followed. These are for today. Next week, in part 2, we'll continue to talk about the abundant harvest with other parables. In doing so, we'll learn different aspects of the kingdom of God.

1. The sower and the seeds

In chapter 13, Matthew tells us seven or eight parables. Most of them begin with these words – 'the kingdom of heaven is like...' Chapter 13 begins with these words; 'That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea.' (v1). In preceding chapters, Jesus experienced rejection. For example, in 11:20, Jesus reproaches the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done, because they do not repent. In another occasion, Jesus invites the weary who are carrying heavy burdens to take his yoke as it is easy, and his burden is light. (v 11:28). Also, Jesus heals a man with a withered hand on the sabbath, which is accused by the Pharisees to name a few. Although many crowds, including the Pharisees, have seen and heard all his miracles and teachings, they don't believe. In 12:46-50, those who accept his yoke and become his true family are contrasted with those who reject him. Then, he begins to tell them the parable of the sower as a way of explanation of the unfaith.

In this parable, a sower is introduced who is either confident or careless. As he went out to sow, some seeds fall on places that may/may not the sower's intention. In one hand, the sower is confident. If all the areas described here is his field, it looks like the sower scatters the seeds liberally even before ploughing. He seems to know that a good many seeds will not reach maturity but confident nonetheless that there will be a good harvest. On the other hand, the sower seems careless as the seeds fall other places freely, such as on the path or the rocky ground. Either confident or careless, one common thing is that the sower has great faith in the seeds.

Here we can see two active motions – sowing and growing. There is only one verse that describes the sower. Yet his sowing and the effect/impact of the sowing continues till the harvest. In the case of the seeds, from verses 4 -7, Matthew reports that how these seeds are doing – some are consumed by the birds, or scorched, or choked while good soil can grow them and bring forth grain, 'some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.' In the first century context, scholars say that if a farmer sows ten bushels for every bushel of seed, an average return would be seven and a half. Here Jesus is not speaking of everyday experience but God's supernatural activity. This effect of sowing of the sower is part of the reign of God in God's kingdom. Now we turn to the soil with various conditions.

2. *The seed(s) and the soil*

In Matthew 13:18-23, Jesus explains the meaning of the parable. It is easy to understand as the different soil conditions are allegorically explained. The sower is presumably Jesus; the seeds are the word of God; the birds are the evil one; the rocky ground represents the one who lacks faith in the word and so forth. Whenever we hear this parable, we may ask what sort of soil we are.

When we observe the activity of the seeds, the nature of the reign of God becomes more evident. First, the seeds do not discriminate between different soil conditions. The only mission for them is to wait until they meet a favourable situation. In this sense, the seed never fails. Once a seed begins to grow, it begins to adapt to the environment. For them, being choked by thorns, or being dried up between rocks are part of adaptation. It's not a failure as other seeds that contain the same DNA may continue elsewhere. Although their bodies are many, they are from the one and only seed – Christ Jesus.

Then a question may arise. While seeds are working very hard in given situations, what about the sower, where is he? The sower is not idling either. The sower is also working hard to remove rocks and stones, thorns, expel the birds, and water the field. But the thing is that he is doing it selectively in his field. Without the sower's diligent work, he rocky ground or thorns bushes never become good soil.

We can see this selectivity or election of good soil in Genesis 25:19-34. Here we see an inversion of the traditional heirship is happening. Rebekah conceives twins, and even in the womb, they are competing with each other. In the end, Jacob is chosen to be an heir as he receives blessings from his father Isaac instead of Esau. It is a surprising outcome of this family drama which only shows that the reign of God, that is, grace is happening in all dimensions.

In our story time, we heard that the king who wants to find a true heir of his kingdom also scatters the seeds. The question was that what the role of the seeds was. The seeds are boiled before being handed out to people. Similar to the parable of the sower, the king in this story has faith in his seeds. That is, they will never grow as they are dead already. For the king, it is a way to obtain good soil by removing rocks, birds, and thorns. In the end, the king finds the one – the future heir of his kingdom. Through this parable, Jesus shows us what God is doing in God's Kingdom. The parable is about grace and the absolute sovereign power of God. That is, the action of sowing encompasses everything – the seeds, the soil, ploughing, weeding and the harvest.

In real life, we may experience all the conditions of soil that are described here. We may often realize that there are things – rocks, birds and thorns that we cannot remove no matter what we do. Then we pray to God as promised in Psalm 121:3-5 which read,

He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.
He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is your keeper;
the Lord is your shade at your right hand.

It is how the reign of God is operating in God's kingdom. We'll continue this discussion next week. May God help us contemplate the kingdom of God and understand it by experiencing the reign of God every day. Amen.