

**The Seed that grows**  
**Sermon preached by Rev. Laurel Barr on Sunday 13th July 2008**  
**at Roseville Uniting Church**

**Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23**

This sermon is largely based upon a reflection by Denis McBride, *Seasons of the Word*, Redemptionist Publications, 2003, pp.256-257\*

When people give us their word but don't deliver we are very disappointed - when they let us down repeatedly even on little things their word becomes worthless. And if we are honest about ourselves there is often a gap between what we say and what we actually do and a gap between who we say we are and how we actually behave even with the best will.

Human word can be very fragile but the word of God is a powerful thing. In the book of Isaiah the prophet we read these words in Chapter 55

*For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,  
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,  
making it bring forth and sprout,  
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,  
so shall my word that goes out from my mouth  
it shall not return to me empty  
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose  
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it."*

For God then to speak is one and the same thing as to do and to promise is the same thing as to fulfil. Remember the story of creation we find in Genesis: There God's word brings the world into being. 'God says "Let there be light" ... "Let there be creatures of every kind" .... And there it is!

God's word is not an empty word. As the rain waters the soil and makes things grow so the prophet says, God's word accomplishes what God intends for it to do. What God says and what God does are one and same. God's word is active and effective - it makes things happen.

In the New Testament, we see the same power and authority in Jesus' words. For example when he heals people he often "speaks them better" - Remember the Roman Centurion whose servant is ill. He says to Jesus: "Say but the word and my servant will be healed." Remember again how in a boat with his disciples in the midst of a wild storm, Jesus commands the wind and the waves and the effect is dramatic - they calm down immediately. Again and again when Jesus speaks people's lives are changed things happen. His words have power.

With all this in mind then when Jesus said "Listen!" his first hearers would have waited with suspense for what he would say and for what would happen next. In fact the word "listen" in the English language comes from an Anglo-Saxon word which literally means "waiting in suspense".

In Hugh Mackay's very helpful book about communication entitled *Why don't People Listen?*\*\* there's a dialogue between two characters that goes like this: "I don't want to know if your ears are working; I want to know whether your *brain* is working. Don't hear me - *listen*".

And today Jesus the Teacher begins his parable with the word "Listen!" - listen with an exclamation mark that is. Jesus commands our undivided attention. He asks us to engage with what he is about to say with our heart and our mind as well as with our ears - to wait in suspense for if we listen, Jesus words have the potency to change our lives.

The word of Jesus the Teacher is not only powerful then but it is offered to us and depends upon our response to be effective. And so I invite you to listen - even if you have heard the parable of the sower a hundred times before - to what Jesus says afresh to us today.

Listen as Jesus begins painting a picture very common in the daily experience of his first century rural audience: "A sower went out to sow..." And he tells a story in which God's word - the word of the kingdom of heaven - is like a seed that is sown by the sower, and just as a seed depends upon the condition of the ground in which it is sown for it to grow and bear fruit, so the word depends upon how the listener receives it for it to be effective.

Listening to this parable we may well think that it sounds incredibly wasteful to throw precious seed so indiscriminately on an unprepared field with dried-out weeds and worn stony paths before the area is ploughed burying the seed that fell on the main field into the furrows of deeper soil.

But if we listen to the interpretation Jesus offers to us in the second part of the reading, this parable uses that hit and miss first century agriculture to ask you and me some challenging questions concerning how we respond to the word of the kingdom of God: It is about the seed and the soil, word and our response. Let's reflect on the seed and the soils:

Firstly, Jesus says there are people who respond to God's word like seeds that fall on the packed hard soil of a path. These are people who hear God's word with their ears but it does not go deeper and take root in their hearts and their minds and when they hear other voices around them - it might be society itself, or the media or their peers - when they hear these voices opposing God's word and promoting contrary values, their attention is quickly turned and pulled this way and that. They have no resistance. They are as vulnerable to persuasion as a seed on a hard path is to a hungry bird and so they forget God's word and it is easily taken away from them.

Secondly Jesus says there are those who hear the word and it resonates with how they feel and with what they are experiencing at that time. We might say it hits the spot: It comforts them or inspires them or challenges them and they go away with the word ringing in their ears so that they respond with genuine enthusiasm until something happens that stops them in their tracks. Perhaps there is a tragedy - perhaps their friends tease "You don't believe in that mumbo-jumbo do you?" - perhaps they are offended by a person who calls themselves a Christian or perhaps as happened in Jesus time, they face real persecution that puts them in danger. Whatever it is, something happens to them that raises questions and difficulties.

I don't know about you but I know people like this and I have been there myself and sometimes life is very hard and faith difficult to sustain but rather than struggling with their faith issues or seeking help from others, these people simply drop their bundle. The seed of the word hadn't taken root in their hearts and minds and so in the face of difficulty they wither like a vulnerable plant who has no root system under the scorching sun.

Thirdly, there are those who hear God's word and recognize its authenticity and truth but when the rubber hits the road so to speak - when the bills come in and there are deadlines to meet and timetables clash and choices have to be made to fit everything into their lives, they allow their busyness and pressures and concerns and other priorities to smother the word in the same way as weeds and thistles choke a good

crop even after it has taken root. In their hectic lives, matters of the word and spirit is the first thing to drop off the edge and so gradually it is lost.

But finally there is the fourth group of hearers in Jesus parable. These are the ones who listen to God's word and understand it. They give it their full attention and let it take root in their hearts as they chew it over and wrestle with it in their minds. They are the ones who seek faith with understanding. This is the group Jesus sees as model disciples: They wait in suspense for God's word - the word of the kingdom of heaven - and they are open to what it may do in them for they see it as a fruitful living thing.

Listen! Jesus said, and we do when as Hugh Mackay describes in his book about the art of listening, we make Jesus important enough in our lives to put everything else aside to put him first as we entertain his ideas and engage with what he says to us.

Listen! Jesus says and we do when we are prepared to take the risk of coming out of our own way of thinking - our own "cage" as Mackay calls it - to see how things look from Jesus' point of view which is the kingdom of heaven. Listen! Jesus says, and we do when we let his word work in us to change us and we try to reflect back to God what his word asks of us in all we say and do -in other words when we bear fruit.

The first three groups of hearers didn't listen with their minds and their hearts as well as their ears. They stayed in their own cages and did not really try to understand what God's word was asking of them and so they simply got distracted or let it die or slip from their lives. But the fourth group made the effort to listen and respond and they bore the fruit of it in their lives.

So what about us? Today the word of God is still broadcast with the hope that it will take root in the soil of people's lives as they make it their own. And so as we have listened this morning to the parable of the sower - what about us?

How do we respond to Jesus the teacher?

- \* Do we listen so that the word takes root in us?
- \* Do we make serious efforts to understand and know what God's word is asking of us?
- \* Do we welcome it but then go our own way anyway?
- \* Do we hear the word and lose it amongst everything else in our lives?

These are questions that only we can answer for ourselves.

Let us pray:\*\*\*

God of abundance,  
you plant seeds within our hearts and minds -  
Thankyou for these gifts of faith and we pray that as we listen to the words of Jesus the Teacher, they will take root in our lives:  
Where compassion is planted, help us to bear good works and service.  
Where kindness has been planted,  
    help us to bear gentle thoughts and deeds.  
Where justice has been planted, help us to bear a striving for fairness.  
Where mercy has been planted, help us to bear forgiveness.  
Where joy has been planted, help us to bear spirit-filled laughter.

There are other seeds too that we have planted in each one of us and we pray for them to bear fruit in our lives....

Thirtyfold - sixty fold - even hundred fold!

O God, your word is never empty. It is powerful and effective to achieve your purposes in us and through us. This encourages us to pray that as "the seed grows in us so we will grow too until your word and our own word are one and the same. What a harvest that will be!" Amen.

References: \* see above

\*\* Hugh Mackay, *Why Don't People Listen? Solving the Communication Problem*, Pan Australia, 1994, pp.142ff,

\*\*\* *Congregational Life, Seasons of the Spirit, Pentecost 2 2008*, July 13

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