



feeding...gathering...carrying...leading. (Isiah 40:11)

Dear family,

To understand Jesus' teaching we must understand the parables but they present two main problems: they are too familiar in a Sunday school sense, but they are not familiar enough. We think we know what they are about but often we have as much idea as the disciples did at the time they were told. On Sunday, I suggested that Matthew 13, a concentrate of kingdom parables, was essential in order to understand what Jesus wants us to focus on, and I stressed the importance of this truth in times that are culturally challenging and confusing, like our present context. What sort of focus do we need if we are to see kingdom of God style transformation in our world? What are we meant to perceive when we look at what's out there, and when we see everything that opposes or blurs our vision? And what has this got to do with sowers and seeds, wheat and tares, mustard trees and yeast, treasure and pearls, dragnets and buckets.

The **Parable of the Sower and the Seed** (v3) is presented in all the gospels as the first parable, and the one we really need to listen to, if we're to understand what follows. "He who has ears to hear let him hear." So what is it about? Is it the parable of the sower, or the parable of the seed, or the parable of the soil? Does it make any difference? Sure, it's about the kingdom, and about people's response to the message of the kingdom, but what's the main point? You could preach a message out of it about all the kingdom's enemies under three main headings:

- the **distress** of self-oriented, life-consuming worries and anxieties;
- the **deceitfulness** of riches, of material opposition to the supernatural;
- the **distraction** of other desires, appetites, priorities, preoccupations, principles, preferences, other lovers and on and on.

The message would then be: O boy, you're in for a tough and rough time my friend and you'll be lucky if anything happens. But is that the main point, the focus?

But is it just about the enemies of the kingdom message: the hardness of unploughed hearts, the roadways of selfish, idolatrous life-styles, of business as usual, of commuting through life without ever communicating with God? Is it just about the shallowness of most people's responses to the glories of God and His presence? Is it just about initial enthusiasm that never matures into final endurance; about charismatic joy that withers and never matures into disciplined perseverance? Does this parable not say that the seed can be snatched, scorched, withered, and choked? Yes, you could say there is reason for sadness here because there is clearly a failure to bear fruit in some places.

All of these observations are valid and relevant but to focus on these is to totally miss the point. Of course, Jesus was a realist, and understood the hostility and enmity and resistance to the kingdom in Israel at that time, and in DC in ours. Matthew 12 that precedes this is about nothing but opposition to Jesus, including the inception of plans to kill him and silence the kingdom message forever. Someone may say that he was asking for trouble, just throwing that seed all over the place like that. Isn't that indiscriminate? Isn't that a waste of resources? Part of the problem is that people think that the seed that Jesus is talking about has to do with messages, and Bibles and tracts, and crusades and events. This isn't about planting these kinds of resources! So what is the seed? Who is the sower? The sower is none less than God the Father Himself! And the seed? The seed is the Word that is Jesus, the logos, who the Father has thrown into our world with a loving

abandon that defies the imagination. Did not Jesus say the field was the world? How wonderful is this parable! God is typically non-exclusive. He casts Jesus into the most provenly difficult of places where the kingdom is least likely to succeed according to the experts – like amongst the poor, like amongst the tax-collectors and the prostitutes. God seems to be oblivious of all that and throws Jesus in anyway! He isn't embarrassed by a small seed, by small beginnings, by it not looking much at first to a watching world. The Almighty God could not care less that His arrival does not look like much to some. Is He not the expert at being born in an outhouse, at riding donkeys in to cities? So, what is this parable about? It will give us the clue on how to interpret all the others in this chapter?

Jesus is telling us something crucial about what our focus and therefore our vision should be, what our perspective should be, on our communities, our cities, our nations. He is not asking us here to focus on the soils that range from the possibly hospitable to the downright hostile. **This is all about the seed. About the irrepressible, untameable, unstoppable power of the seed.** Even the birds of the air pass the devoured seed in their droppings, a manure package to help it grow well! How frustrating is that for the enemy of the seed. Even the attempt to devour it ends up fertilizing it, which is why the church grows in times of persecution. This is not about God blessing the seed of our efforts, our strategic plans, or even asking Him to perfect them and make them even better than we could do them. This is not about our version of the kingdom, but just a little more sanctified, but about His vision of the kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. This is about the nature of the kingdom which is Jesus Himself, no less. Every city, every community, every nation is looking for its foundation stone so it can be built right, and so its inhabitants can live right – and that stone is Jesus! Sure, like Jesus, mention the hindrances to fruitfulness, (stones, rocks, thorns) but the hindrances are just a set-up for the main presentation. When you've listed all the hindrances to kingdom work, to church growth, to church planting, and enumerated all the obstacles, and all the opposition, and all the disbelievers, and all the nay-sayers, and all the seed-catalogue experts, the bird-watchers, the rock analysts, the thorn-surgeons, you're in fact leading up to your main point which is – guess what? There's nothing any of that can do to stop the transforming breakthrough power of the seed. Don't limit the returns. There is a progression of return, and Jesus wouldn't say a hundred times more than we could have hoped for if He didn't know that was more than a possibility. God does not tempt us with the impossible. The unreachable is an invitation to go there. The unbelievable is an invitation to believe. The unthinkable is an invitation to think about it – all the time. Take stock of the terrain, sure. We're not to be ignorant of the battlefield. It's just not the main point here or even equal to the main point. **Don't focus on the difficulty of the terrain. Focus like Jesus on the seed-popping, blade-shooting, stalk-bending, kernel-cracking power of transformation, of the kingdom of God.**

You will have to listen to the message to get the application of the other parables but suffice it to say that the main point has been established. In the same way that the hostile kinds of soil could not prevent a harvest, the tares could do nothing about the presence of the wheat, and the tiny mustard seed was no indication of the size of the tree that the kingdom could grow, and the lumpy dough could do nothing to stop the effects of the yeast once it was in, and the pain of the search for treasure and pearls could do nothing about the joy of discovery. And when we think that our buckets are not full of the kind of fish that we want, or think qualify, the kingdom of God is like a massive dragnet that pulls in the range of people that we would never catch on our fishing rods. Thy kingdom come!

Pastorally yours,
Stuart