

# The Sower

*Readings: Isaiah chapter 55, verses 6 – 11; Mark chapter 4, verses 1–8*

## **An Unimaginable Harvest**

This parable is a word of huge encouragement to disheartened disciples. And given the fact that we live at a time when Christians are a decreasing minority in society today, it is a word of encouragement to us. “Take heart” says Jesus. “There will be a harvest, and, when it comes, it will be greater than you ever imagined”.

The parable was spoken against a background of disappointment and despair on the part of the disciples. The ministry of Jesus had got off to a great start in Galilee. Great crowds had flocked to hear Jesus preach. In the under-stated words of the Gospel “the common people heard him gladly”. The disciples were thrilled at this response. As far as they were concerned the bandwagon was rolling and they were happy to be on board.

But this euphoria didn't last for long. The religious hierarchy smelt a rat. Jesus' behaviour was thought to be inappropriate for a man of God. He consorted with the wrong type of people. What's more, Jesus' teaching threatened the traditional faith. So they ganged up against him and got the police and intelligence agencies involved. Gradually the crowds dwindled. The bandwagon lost momentum and the disciples became increasingly disheartened. Had they backed a loser?

To counter this despair Jesus points to a Palestinian farmer sowing his seed on a nearby hillside. Farmers sowed their seed “broadcast” in those days and it inevitably fell into a variety of soil types; rocky outcrops, well trodden paths as well as good soil. There was an inevitable wastage attached to this kind of sowing and the farmer knew in advance that if he got a 10% return he was doing well. Jesus says in the punch-line to this story that there would be a harvest “growing up and increasing and yielding thirty-fold and sixty-fold and a hundred-fold”. An unbelievable return!!

So Jesus encourages the disciples not to jump ship. Not to lose their nerve in the face of increasing hostility and apparent failure. There will be a harvest and when it comes it will be greater than they ever imagined.

You might call this wishful thinking. But history has shown otherwise. Who would have thought that, two thousand years later, millions all over the world would rally to his cause? There has already been an unimaginable harvest and the Church is still in its infancy!

In the early years of European settlement in Rhodesia the London Missionary Society began a mission to the Ndebele people in Matabeleland. They established a small mission station close to the “kraal” of Mzilikazi, the Zulu King. Week in and week out they preached the gospel and, at the end of five years, could count on a few women as converts. The men would have nothing to do with them. On one occasion Mzilikazi himself came to a service and stormed out in a fury. Faced with such minimal success it is no wonder that the LMS authorities thought their efforts might be better rewarded elsewhere. They proposed withdrawing the mission.

The missionaries on the ground refused to leave. They said in effect, ‘we are not called to be successful; we are called to be faithful’, and they stuck it out. Today you can go all over Matabeleland and you will come across congregations meeting under trees and in schoolrooms and in rough pole-and-dagga buildings. There has been a harvest and it is greater than anyone in London or in present day Zimbabwe could ever have imagined.

An unimaginable harvest! It is a word we need to hear again today. Christians in Britain might be forgiven for feeling as despondent as the disciples did. The Church is in decline and the pessimists say that the decline is terminal. Against this we hear again the Parable of the Sower and we ought

to take heart. The harvest is not our responsibility; it is God's. Our responsibility is to be faithful to the gospel and such faithfulness constitutes the 'good soil' in which the seed grows and yields an unimaginable harvest.

There is a challenge as well as a word of encouragement in this parable. It is all very well to say that the harvest is God's responsibility and to be assured of a great yield. That doesn't mean that we can sit back and do nothing and avoid all responsibility ourselves. The parable speaks of various qualities of soil in which the seed is planted and only that planted in good soil yields a harvest. So we are forced to ask of ourselves, "what kind of soil am I?" All too often we hear the Word of God and it is like water off a duck's back. At other times we hear the Word but our response is shallow; our emotions are touched but the Word never reaches our minds or our wallets and the shallowness of our response means that it shrivels and dies. And sometimes we hear the Word but never give it the priority it deserves and it is simply crowded out; choked out of existence by competing loyalties and interests.

What kind of soil am I? The parable forces us to ask this question of ourselves. Our responsibility for the harvest lies in facilitating the growth of the seed, and it is our faithfulness which constitutes the good soil out of which the harvest comes. The LMS missionaries got it right when they said that God does not require us to be successful but to be faithful. Part of our problem today is that we live in a society which believes that success is everything and that the worst possible thing that can happen is that we fail. We apply this across to our Christian Faith and we become demoralised at our lack of success. At which point we cease being faithful.

So we hear the good news of this parable. "Courage" says Jesus. "Have faith and be faithful". In spite of much wastage and great disappointment there will be a harvest. And that harvest, when it comes, will be greater than we could ever have hoped for. "Some thirty-fold; some sixty-fold, even a hundred-fold"!