

**Isaiah 55:10-13**  
**Psalm 65**  
**Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23**

### **The parable of the sower**

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The parable of the sower, the seeds and the soils is one very familiar to most of us.

Familiar also – perhaps even “standard” – is the interpretation of the parable in terms of the response it seems to demand of us. The sower casts the seed on a number of different surfaces, only one of which provides the conditions for the seeds to germinate and the grain to flourish and give an abundant yield. The lesson of the parable, or the question it asks of us, would seem to be this: What type of soil are you? A hard path, stony ground, full also of weeds, or “just right”? The required response to the parable then becomes the imperative, *be good soil*. Accordingly, not a few commentators today insist that this is properly not the “parable of the sower” but the “parable of the soils.”

The problem with this interpretation is this: if you *are* a hard path, *how* can you become good, productive soil? If you *are* filled with weeds, how can you weed yourself? That is, if all we take from the parable is the *imperative* to make ourselves open to the Word of God, we declare that the capacity of God’s Word to work in the world is limited by our willingness or ability to receive it. Not to put too fine a point on it – God can do nothing, unless we are the right people with whom God can work. This is not a thought far from us in the Uniting Church; it is a principal motivation towards strategic reviews and sustainability goals – becoming people God can work with.

Whatever this conclusion is – that God needs the “right” people in order to do his stuff – it is not *good* news. There is no hope to be had here if our situation is dire and our survival is dependent on *our* capacity to realise a hope. To put it in the stark terms of the New Testament: to read the parable in this way is to assert that the dead can raise themselves.

But this does not happen. Ever.

To read the parable as being fundamentally about the soils is to read it as a moral imperative. Moral imperatives have to do with human possibilities: you *can* do this, so *do* it. Moral tales require no resurrections because the actors aren’t actually dead yet; it is assumed that they still have enough life to stand up again and keep going. It is not coincidental that, with their particular focus on moral exhortation, liberal and progressive theologies are sceptical about the language of resurrection. It is here not merely that God *doesn’t* raise the dead because such things must be impossible but also that God *doesn’t need* to. It looks like doctrinal modesty but it is really hubris and delusion. The moralism of the simple call to follow in the way of Jesus is a declaration that we can raise ourselves, here and now.

But to read the parable as the parable of the sower is to hear it in a wholly different way which has nothing to do with the goodness of our actions.

Jesus’ parables are peepholes into the operation of God’s kingdom: “the kingdom of heaven is like *this*”. They have to do with how God *reigns* – how God *is* God among us.

In this God-space – which is the same space as the world filled with us and our different soil qualities – it is indeed the case that the seed falls and is variously received, rejected, fruitful and wasted. Yet, as the sphere of God's reign, these losses are not the main issue. The kingdom of God is not a sphere of scarcity and loss. What matters is not the soils, but the yield given at the end – what finally comes of the sower's work. Many commentators note that the yields suggested by Jesus border on the extraordinary for grain production in that time. The point is that within God's kingdom the yield from the work of God's Word on these faithful ones is enough to cover what seems to be lost from all the seed which fell on the other areas. The extraordinary, superabundant yield is enough for the purposes of the sower.

The gospel is that *with this sower*, there is *enough*. To push this gospel to its core: it is enough that only *one small square* of soil be good soil – even Jesus himself.

In our reading from Isaiah we heard God declare:

*...my word that goes out from my mouth will not return to me empty, but shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. Then you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace.*

To live in the kingdom of God is to hold that there is enough – that God will triumph in joy-bringing and peace-making, that God's promises will not return empty, regardless of the quality of most of the soil in which they are planted.

Our hope lies not in our ability to become more fruitful; this leads in the end only to the kind of moralist recriminations which arise when we are made responsible for realising our own hopes:

*"We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn." (Matthew 11.17)*

Hope lies in the conviction that God *is* at work in the world – working *at* us, to be sure, but this only as he works *for* us. The “necessary” work of being good – by itself – brings only the anxious, Am I good *enough*?, or the self-righteous, Of course I am! The “unnecessary” work of trusting God *as we work* brings freedom and peace, and these bring joy, because now the promise of *God's own fruitfulness* becomes the heart of our vision and hope, which our work can only ever approximate.

Our doctrine, our worship and our service are oriented toward reminding us of just this: in our efforts as individuals, or as the people of God in this place, what finally matters is *not* what we yield. The full yield is given already in Jesus himself, who is the table spread before us, the cup which runs over.

What *does* matter is the word which sets us free from hard labour under the heavy burdens of anxiety and fear: take *my* yoke upon you – my cross, and its death to death – and you will find rest for your souls.

Our confidence is in *God's* confidence, that his word will not return to him empty, but will accomplish what he intends: that we *shall* go out in joy and be led back in peace.

By the grace of God, may this peace and joy be found ever more increasingly among those who call on him. Amen.

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