

Mark 4:1-20 – The Secret of the Kingdom of God

1. Secret Shibboleths in our Society

I'm going to start today with a question – can anyone tell me what Shibboleth means?

A follow up question - Can anyone tell me the original purpose of Shibboleth? (Judges 12:6)

C.S Lewis writes of modern day Shibboleth's in his essay called "The Inner Ring". << Ppt – 2 slides >>

And sadly, in the church, what may have had the intention of defining identifying features
Becomes the differentiation between "inner circle" and those on the outer.

Churches are full of inner circles and those on the outer – for right or wrong, better or worse.

The language that we use can also divide, completely unintentionally,

"The second week in Lent" – what does that mean to someone who has never come to church?

Is it some kind of borrowing scheme that occurs inside the church? So it's 2nd week of repayments?

On the flip side, there are completely intentional divides in language that we use.

The Apostle's creed is a purposefully divisive statement of faith.

"We believe in One God" – not many Gods, not zero Gods – but one God.

"We believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord" – not Jesus as a moral teacher only,

- Not Jesus as human only, not divine.
- Not Jesus as Saviour but not Lord.

The point is that language can be used to divide,

intentionally, or unintentionally, from good motive or from ill.

And so, as we turn to Mark Chapter 4, Jesus uses a specific form a language,
a specific type of rhetorical device to intentionally divide.

What is the rhetorical device? What is the specific form of language?

The simple story, or as it has become known as, the parable.

In fact, Jesus uses a simple story, to explain why he uses stories.

That is, Jesus uses a parable, to unlock the meaning of the parables that he uses.

2. The Setting: Sermon beside the sea (vv. 1-2)

Before we delve into Jesus' mastery of story telling, first let's recap where we're up to in Mark's gospel. << vv. 1-2 >>

This is the fourth time that Jesus has been 'beside the sea'.

In chapter 1, he called Simon and Andrew to follow him beside the sea. 1:16

In chapter 2, after healing the paralytic Jesus went out beside the sea to teach the crowd. 2:13

Chapter 3, after healing the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath – he taught the crowd, beside the sea - 3:7.

So this pattern of teaching beside the sea, was established.

More it was this pattern of teaching the crowds that had followed him.

And so now we have the first glimpse into the actual content of the teaching.

We have the first recorded sermon of Jesus – the majestic Parable of the Sower.

3. The Story: A sower went out to sow (vv. 3-9)

Many here would know this story very well, but imagine that you're in the crowd hearing it for the first time, with this new teacher, who was performing these miraculous deeds << vv. 3-9 –2 slides>>

Now, our first thought would be – that's a very inefficient system of sowing seed.

Farmers today have amazing technology

- so that the seeds are placed at the right depth in the soil
- so that the soil has the correct properties – salt levels, trace minerals, moisture, ...
- so that there is minimal waste and maximal crop output.

And so we're drawn into the story, just as Jesus audience would have been.

For although they didn't have the same level of technology,
Farmers still farmed, crops still grew, and hard work went into working the land.

So, Jesus tells the story, almost like a Jeffrey Robinson Hypothetical – drawing in the audience.

Four soils, and four outcomes for the seed.

Outcome one – soil on the path (lit. 'the way') – bird food.

Outcome two - rocky ground – rapid growth (lit. 'immediately'),
but shallow roots means it withers – exactly like the withered hand of the man back in Ch. 3.

Outcome three – choking thorns – that deprive the plant of producing a crop.

Outcome four – good ground – producing a crop 30, 60, 100 times.

Four highly likely scenarios that you'd find in Better Homes and Gardens.

Three failed soil types, and one success. 25% success rate – not crash hot...

Now, at this point we should think – well, what's the point?

Where's the story going, Jesus?

But did you notice how Jesus finishes the story –

There's no fantastic one liner, there's no brilliant twist in the tale.

Nope. Jesus ends the story with – “Let anyone with ears to hear listen!”

Ok... so... yes.. we're using our ears... the crowd was using their ears... so... umm...

4. The Secret: of the Kingdom of God (vv. 10-12 c.f. Isaiah 6)

So what is going on here? How does this parable make sense?

The key to this parable, and all parables, in fact, the key to understanding the kingdom of God

This key comes when Jesus addresses his twelve newly formed followers. << vv. 10-12 – 1 slide >>

Jesus answers two vitally important questions here.

First – to whom is the secret of the kingdom of God revealed?

And second – why is the secret of the kingdom of God not revealed to ‘those outside’?

The first question is the easier one – the k of God is revealed to the disciples, and those around him.

They are the ones who have the inner knowledge.

They are the ones who have the meaning revealed.

- And not because they’re inherently worthy of having or keeping the secret.
- Remember – Jesus plucked them out of obscurity to follow him.

The second question is the harder one – why is the secret not revealed to those outside?

To answer that question – there’s a vital piece of the puzzle that comes from the prophet Isaiah.

Jesus quotes Isaiah, specifically the commissioning of Isaiah,

Where God tells Isaiah ...

The state of Israel is such that they can have a prophet in their midst,

They can have God speaking loudly and clearly,

They can have the voice of God broadcast from the loud-hailer of Isaiah,

And yet, they refuse to listen, and yet, they refuse to perceive.

And so, here, the purpose of the parable is to separate and divide.

For those who want to find out, will seek understanding

For those who don’t just want to hear a good story, but find out the meaning – they will.

But for those, who have just come to hear a good yarn from Jesus

– well, they go away worse off than before.

5. The Source: of understanding (vv. 13-20)

So, at this point, the crowd has dissipated, and the disciples are the ones who find out...
Jesus explains to them the understanding of the parable. << vv. 13-20 – 2 slides>>

Now, before we jump to our own situation and hearing the words of Jesus,
First let's apply this parable to Jesus situation in Mark's gospel.

Jesus is the sower of the word.

Jesus preaches the good news 'the kingdom of God is near' to all and sundry.

And as Jesus travels throughout Galilee, we see this parable played out in real life.

The types of soil are found as Jesus preaches to the people.

So, which characters springs to mind when you hear of the word falling on the path?

- Judas jumps out to me as the path -he willing rejects not just the word but the speaker.
- Peter jumps out as the rocky ground – when Jesus is persecuted he flees.
- The rich young man is the seed in the thorns – for the lure of wealth is too strong...
- And the good soil – how about the syro-phonician woman – whose daughter is healed...

Here – we have the secret to understanding every character in Mark's gospel.

For as we continue through Mark's gospel, we should be thinking

- what kind of soil is this character?
- Or, to de-parabolize, how does this character respond to Jesus and his message?

For whilst it might appear that Jesus is on trial, and that Jesus is being tested,

Particularly that Jesus being scrutinized to as to his kingly status, his messianic claims,

At the same time, Jesus' audience is being examined, tested and scrutinized.

Jesus himself is conducting his own spiritual examination,

as he proclaims the message "the kingdom of God is near"

there will be the four different types of soil in response.

6. The Sober Warning & the Soil Production for us

Now, whilst we can follow along, and witness Jesus' examination of the characters in the story,
At the same time, we, ourselves are being examined in our attitude to Jesus, and his word.

For, sure, we all are sitting here listening to the story,
But are we hearing and perceiving, are we understanding and discerning?

For Jesus' message is not simply for "out there", "or way back then" in the characters in the story,
Jesus' message is for "in here", in our hearts, in our minds, in our lives.

And yet, just as familiarity bred contempt for Jesus own family,
And just as familiarity bred contempt for God's chosen people, Israel in hearing Jesus,
We face a similar danger – the danger of familiarity breeding contempt of God's word in us.

The sober reminder for us is – "every time we hear God's voice – do not harden our hearts"

And so, in contrast – we need to "hear God's voice" every time we hear God's word read.
More specifically, there is a direct connection between
hearing Jesus' words and being productive in the Christian life.

The more profound grasp we have of Jesus, as our Lord and Saviour,
The more profound action we will take in our lives as we serve our Lord.
The deeper our understanding of God's word,
The greater our lives will be shaped, and lived out for God's glory.

However, this is more than an intellectual exercise, more than an a discipline of memorising
Scripture, which is a great thing to do,
This is actually a spiritual activity.
This is the actually the work of God's spirit, as he takes the words of Jesus,
And applies them to our hearts, minds, wills and lives.

So let's turn to God in prayer now, and ask that his Spirit would indeed convict us,
And help us to be the good soil.

Let's pray.