

# Sowing and growing

## Luke 8:1-15

What is Jesus up to in the world? And why do people all respond to it in such different ways? Those are the two questions we find answered in Luke 8:1-15.

First, we'll look at vv.1-3, where Luke reminds us about what Jesus' mission was. To 'proclaim good news' is to broadcast far and wide, loud and clear, some circumstances that are changing in a really good way. And the great transformation that's taking place that Jesus wants people to know about is 'The Kingdom of God.'

Let's remind ourselves what we've learned already in Luke about what that is. The Kingdom of God is where God is King. Where God is the first and most important thing, His promises are trusted and His commands are obeyed. Where discovering that life and relationships and society lived God's way means fullness, healing, justice, peace and wholeness.

A Kingdom is distinct from other territories, where someone else is in charge. So to be in the Kingdom of God means changing sides, changing identities, belonging to God *instead*.

Jesus claimed that the Kingdom of God arrived in the world when He came, and it will keep being built until it's completed when He returns. Jesus mission is to show and tell people that life in this Kingdom is all bound up with knowing and walking with Him.

And as people started to do that, they became part of the Kingdom, and part of the team that was building the Kingdom with Jesus. So Luke tells us in v.1 that 'the twelve' were with Jesus - the first mention of 'the twelve' since Jesus called these leaders out from amongst all His followers for a particular task in the team.

And then Luke tells us about three women in vv.2-3. Mary, Joanna, and Susanna. Mary Magdalene may or may not be the same woman who was weeping into Jesus' feet with love in the last chapter. But it's generally understood that she was a prostitute made new.

Then there's Joanna. She's the wife of a high-ranking official in the royal palace. Then we've got Susanna, about whom we know nothing more than

her name - although the fact that Luke doesn't write 'the wife of' or 'the mother of' probably suggests she's a single lady.

The team of Kingdom builders joining Jesus in His mission includes a spread of all sorts. Men and women. The lowest of society to the highest of society. Married and single. All of them giving up the life they had before because they prefer to be joining in with Jesus.

What we read about these women tells us what being a disciple of Jesus involves. They, like the twelve, are 'with Him.' They are personally involved in being with Jesus and engaged in the ministry He is engaged in. And in v.3 we read that they are 'helping to support them out of their own means.'

They're giving their money to support Jesus and His team in His Kingdom building work. Not because they feel they should pay a membership fee. But because they have had their lives transformed by Jesus and His ministry, they *want* to give from what they have to help others be transformed by all this too.

It's interesting to think about where that money came from. The money that Mary had came from her former life as a prostitute. The significant money that Joanna had came from her husband's employment in a corrupt administration whose wealth was built on the violent extortion of the poor. There was a lot of dirty money here. Being redeemed; used now for the building of the Kingdom of God.

But they are not sitting at home saying 'all the best', or throwing such money at others to go and do the Kingdom building work of conversation and action. They rolled their sleeves up and joined in. They got up and walked with Jesus, in full view of everybody, without caring what people thought. I wonder if women are better at this than men, actually.

One of the most common things that comes out when men are really honest about why they're not becoming part of a church is that they're worried about what other guys will think of them. Frankly, for all the bravado that men want to show, I think they're just too chicken to walk with Jesus in view of everyone.

What about you? Are you a disciple of Jesus? Are you joining in the Kingdom building mission? Are you 'with Jesus' - rolling up the sleeves, joining in with practical love and with conversations about the good news with

other people? And are you giving from your own means, whatever those may be, to enable the whole team to build God's Kingdom all the more?

*What holds us back from being involved with the Kingdom mission the way that these women were?*

So if that's a little reminder of what the message of Jesus' mission in this world is, vv.4-15 look at the question of why people respond to it in such different ways. In these verses, Jesus tells His famous parable of the sower.

Jesus talks about four different kinds of soil that a 1st century Palestinian farmer sowed his seed on as he scattered it, and explains what each soil represents in vv.11-15. Each soil describes a different influence that determines that life. And each one describes a different stage of growth in the message about Jesus planted in a life.

And that's the key thing in this parable - the message about Jesus. The word of God. That's what Jesus says the seed is, in v.11. This whole thing is about what you do with that when that's sown in your life. Every one of the kinds of people represented by the soil *hear* the word. But they all 'hear it, *and...*' Hear God's word *and* what? *That's* the question.

First of all, we read about the people of the path. They *hear* the word, *and...* the devil takes it away from their *hearts* before they can believe it and be saved by it. The Hebrew concept of the 'heart' that Jesus was working with is bigger than our modern western idea of the emotions. The 'heart' was the seat of the emotions, mind and will. What we would call 'head and heart.'

This kind of person is someone who listens to the message about Jesus and the Kingdom of God, and it falls not so much on a deaf ear as a deaf heart. They hear the words, and they might even find them a little bit inspiring or moving, but the words don't *settle*. Such people don't *think* about the message they've heard, they don't *feel* anything about it, and their will is not *affected* by the message in any way.

The influence that determines these people's lives is the invisible spiritual one that most people don't even believe is there. The Devil. Jesus says that it is this enemy of God and humanity who doesn't want the word of God to sit long enough in the minds and hearts of human beings for them to have their lives saved by it.

And the stage of growth and transformation we see in these people's lives as they encounter Jesus and His message is - none at all. If we're going to take Jesus seriously - and I suggest we do - we need to pray for Him to overcome the influence of the enemy who doesn't want people to have Jesus' truth take root in their hearts.

Then we read about the people of the rocky soil. They *hear* the word, *and...* believe it! But only, unfortunately, for a little while. They're full of joy when they hear the message about Jesus, and they seem like something new and life-giving is growing in them.

But that all falls apart when a particular influence in life comes to bear on them: trauma. What Jesus calls, 'a time of testing.' The things that are far from everyday life that come up and challenge us.

What Jesus has most in mind here is likely persecution. The testing of faith in Jesus that comes from people harassing, mocking, intimidating, ditching or badmouthing you (or in other societies, torturing or killing you) because of the thing growing in your life from accepting Jesus' message.

But the 'time of testing' also describes other 'tests' of faith. The physical, mental and emotional traumas that come to us in a lifetime, and present a real crossroads of whether we're going to trust God and believe in His goodness from then on.

And the stage of growth we see in the rocky soil people's lives as they square their trauma with Jesus' message is - withering. They were being changed by Jesus. But what He had planted in their life withered to nothing when they fell away on account of their trauma.

How do you *not* wither - in life and in faith - when trauma happens to you? Well, if all your time and attention and energy is spent on your trauma, you will wither. If you let the defining influence in your life be the pain you feel, the blogs and books and websites you scour about the issue you face, the single-issue focus of your conversations and relationships, that'll happen.

Jesus says that rocky soil people 'have no root.' If the word of God is rooted in your life, like a habit you can't shake, you *won't* wither.. So yes, you're still in pain. Yes, you still check out those websites and books. Yes, you still talk about it. That's healthy. As long as none of it has replaced letting God speak to you.

Of how much He loves you. Of how Jesus died for you. Of how God is making all things new and whole, and He wants you to experience it, and He wants you to show and tell others. When these truths stay larger than the trauma, you will not be found on rocky soil.

Then there's the people of the thorny soil. They *hear* the word, *and...* they choke. They hear and believe the message about Jesus and the Kingdom, and something new and life-giving is growing in them. But it stops growing when other things suck up all the nutrients of their time, attention and energy.

The influence that determines these people's lives is almost the opposite to the rocky soil one. 'Worries, riches and pleasures,' Jesus says. The good stuff and the bad stuff of *everyday* life. The pursuit of things to make life comfortable. The to do list on the desk. The needs of the people we live with and amongst.

Daily temptations. Daily demands. Finding security and identity in things other than God. Looking for approval. Replying to that text, that message, that email, that phone call. Avoiding rejection. Relationships. Stuff. Homework. Housework. How to pay the bills this month. Kicking back with some TV. Buying a wee treat to keep you going this week.

All that daily stuff. Some of it good, some of it bad, much of it hard, all of it apparently all-consuming. It saps every possible ounce of the time, attention and energy we have, so that there really is none for the life-giving word of God to be nourished to grow within us. It is a reality that most of us can relate to, more so than even the crowd that first listened to Jesus tell this parable.

And the stage of growth we see in the thorny soil people's lives is - stunted. They have stopped growing; stopped being continually transformed by the message of Jesus and the Kingdom of God He is building. Something had started in their lives. But it's stopped. And Jesus' parable doesn't picture that as a second best Christian life that's kind of okay. He paints it as a tragedy.

How do you *not* choke - in life and in faith - with all the everyday worries and pleasures? I think this is the biggest question we face from this passage in our church and community. And because it's a live question for me as for so many of us, I've found this a difficult one to answer!

But here's some thoughts. There are some things we really do need to do. We need to pick the kids up at this time. We need to do the washing and the

shopping. We need to exercise, need some downtime with the telly or some music or the computer.

But how many of the things we *need* to do, do we *really need* to do? Do we *need* to spend half an hour on Facebook liking and commenting on everyone else - or would five minutes do it, after reading our Bibles? Do we *need* to switch the TV on as soon as all the other jobs are done - or could we take ten minutes with our Bibles first?

Do we *need* to write lists of pros and cons for decisions we have to make more than we need to let God speak to us about His will? Do we *need* to spend those half-hours or more expressing worries somehow - in combing through bank statements or reading up an internet diagnosis about our health or sitting quietly in a room? Might we not be better picking our Bibles up first, or maybe better, instead?

Do we *need* to spend those hours scanning a shop or looking online for that we treat that we've decided will keep us going? Do we need weekends away more often than we need to walk alongside our fellow disciples of Jesus in gathering together to worship and listen to Him like this morning or in our Life Groups?

Patiently holding to the word of God - that's the beating heart, the continual rhythm, that you find woven through the everyday lives of people that aren't stuck on thorny soil. Whatever space you find in your everyday life to make that happen - and it will be different for each of us - we need to find and prioritise that space, and make it the thing that shapes our circumstances, rather than our circumstances shaping it.

Finally, there's the people of the good soil. They *hear* the word, *and...* they *retain* it, Jesus says. They *persevere* with it. They *are* the people who patiently hold to the word of God. They consistently, persistently, keep the message about Jesus and His Kingdom building in their sight, in their hearing. Chewing it over in their minds. Letting it move them in their hearts. Having it change them in their wills.

The influence that determines these people's lives is - the word of God. That's the point. They are the *only* people who can say that. Everyone else's life is ultimately determined by something else - the Devil's schemes, the onset of trauma, the everyday busyness and chaos of things. But these people who patiently retain and hold to the word of God are the ones who keep living in and growing in Jesus.

And the stage of growth that we see in the good soil people's live is - continual, *fruitful* growth. Growing in a way that people can see. Growing not just to become fuller of life themselves, but so as to produce a crop of fruit. That is, they are living in a way that is bringing Jesus' life-giving mission to others. Living like the men and women walking with Jesus. Sowing the seed amongst other people, too.

This is the only kind of soil that Jesus commends as meeting the goal for which the seed was planted. 'Am I still saved if I'm on rocky or thorny soil?' is not the point. The point is, God wants us to keep His word, His truth about Jesus, as the constantly defining thing about our lives, so that we keep growing, and we're fruitful in Kingdom building work with Him. Is that you or not?

Probably the most common and obvious question that comes from reading this passage is, 'what kind of soil are you?' And I am going to ask you that question. But here's the thing. People tend to think about what they're like today or this week when they answer that question. But this parable is all about the long, slow growth of plants. It takes time to grow and to be fruitful.

So don't look back over the week. Look back over all the time since you received the message about Jesus - whether that's months or years. Look back over that 'career' of discipleship. What does that look like?

Did the message ever take root in your life at all? What about when you faced trauma - did you fall away from the word of God, never to pick it back up? Or, one way or another, did you come through that trauma with a greater dependence on Jesus defining you instead of your pain defining you?

How about the everyday thorns - the good stuff and the bad stuff? Do you see where you choked? Do you see the times you stopped growing because you let go of God's word in the midst of that? Did you start growing again when you took up Jesus' message once more? Or is there a point in your life where your growth was stunted, and you've never gone on from there?

Are you still growing? Is your life bearing fruit for building the Kingdom of God along with Jesus who planted all of this life-giving stuff in you?

*What kind of soil are you? How do you know?*

We've thought a lot about the word sown *in* you. Let me finish with something for those who would live in good soil to realise about the word sown *by* you.

Jesus is talking to a huge crowd, but only some of them get it. His story talks about four kinds of soil, and only one of those bears fruit. All of this encourages us to realise that only a small proportion of those you point to Jesus will follow Him with you.

What if only a quarter of people respond to what you share with them? What if only one does in a lifetime of telling dozens of people? What if everybody else hates you, laughs at you, or joins in with you for a bit then gives it up? Is that failure? No, it's the reality of what Kingdom Building growth is like.

Just as the farmer sows the seed indiscriminately in the story, so should we. We shouldn't judge beforehand who will or won't listen to what we've got to share about Jesus' life-changing message. We should, like Jesus and His disciples in this passage, share as much as we can with people in as many frontlines as we're engaged with; see who gathers round Jesus in response, and then expect that *some* of them might get their lives changed by Him, too.

Why share the word of God and the message about Jesus? Because Jesus is building a Kingdom, and it's a great thing He's building. Because life in Jesus is infinitely better than life apart from Him.

Because Jesus' mission continues through the disciples who are walking with Him, giving their involvement and their resources to it. And because some lives will flourish and endure forever because we planted a seed in them that was first planted in us.