

Thoughts on the way

Ephesians 3:16-18.

As I heard this being read out in church recently I found myself thinking back to the story Jesus told about a farmer who went out to sow (Matt 13:3-9 & 18-23)

Seed landed where he intended it in the good soil of the field. However some seed fell into the margins around the field edge.

Seed that landed on the path, was quickly eaten by birds. Seed that fell among rocks grew but withered. Seed that fell among the thorns could not grow well because of the competing weeds.

It's the imagery of seed on the path that gets my attention mainly. We think of paths that are made up tarmac pavements. Instead, think of a footpath out in the country alongside a field. All roadways and paths were like that in Jesus time except the main roads built by the Romans that had proper foundations and surfacing stones.



The path

The dirt paths along the sides of fields in Jesus' time just as in our country here and now, are only paths because they are walked on. The soil in the path is no less fertile than the soil in the middle of the field but the action of feet going back and forth presses down and hardens the surface so that there are no crevices deep enough for a seed to fall in and be hidden from the birds, and

the soil is too compacted for a germinating seed to take root.

Jesus explained that in his story, the seed represented the word of the Kingdom. That is the message of God's love, of salvation, of redemption, of hope and an eternal future. He said that in the story this seed was taken away because it was not understood.

I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he [Christ] will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit. Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him.

Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong. And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is.

Ephesians 3:16-18

There's two directions into which this can lead our thoughts:

It's my responsibility to work out what is meant when someone tells me about God and his Kingdom.

It's my responsibility to communicate the word of the Kingdom in way that people will understand.

I need to understand

The greatest commandment that we have to obey is to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your mind" Matthew 22:37 Christians are not spoon fed a list of do's and don'ts to follow. God does not write a script of special words for us to say. There is no short cut to loving God and there are no half measures.

God requires us to put him first in our emotional life, in our spiritual life and in our thought life. We have to think about it, we have to work it out and consider what the scriptures mean for our lives. Our minds must be alert and focussed on the things of God rather than the things of the world around us. Colossians 3:2, 1 Peter 1:13

Even more challenging, we should have the mind, the way of thinking, the attitude and priorities that Jesus himself has in putting God's requirements first, serving others and not looking for reward or recognition or glory. Philippians 2:5ff & 1 Corinthians 2:16

So then how can I gain this understanding? We need to think back to the story of the farmer and his field. The soil in the centre of the field that yielded a great crop, had been cleared, weeded and ploughed.

In our lives we need to root out the hard lumps of obstinacy and habit that get in the way of thinking God's way. My mind and the way I think is affected by all sorts of rubbish that I've looked at, read and listened to in the past. I like some of them; these ideas I have about other people, of fantasies, dreams of avarice and what I'd do if I had my way; but the vast majority of them run contrary to the gospel. They are based on other standards and other desires.

My mind is affected by prejudice and stereotypes. I make judgements about people and situations that put me first, put them down and rule God out. I must take charge of these hard rocks of ways of thinking and stop giving them room in my head.

I need to think about the things I believe in. There's a word 'apologetics' which is nothing to do with saying sorry and everything to do with understanding why what we believe makes sense. I need to study the reliability of scripture, the historical accuracy of the story of Jesus.



My mind needs to understand that my faith makes sense and is not just blind faith based on what someone else told me and that I'm just desperately trying to remember. Then, when people question my faith; when they try to ridicule the truth of the scriptures; when they say it's just a fairy story; when I'm told that the Bible has been so badly edited and copied I shouldn't trust it, I'm ready to explain, clearly why I believe what I know to be true.

This involves reading, listening to good, reliable teaching, getting to grips with the Bible for myself. This is like clearing the rocks from the edge of the field that prevent deep roots growing to give a robust faith that withstands the heat of persecution and challenge.



So what about the weeds? These, according to Jesus are the worries of the world and the deceitfulness of riches.

I really dislike adverts on the TV and radio. They break up the flow and spoil a good film or event. They're there because they work. Adverts

are extremely expensive and if they didn't do what the advertiser wanted they wouldn't spend all that money. Have you ever thought about what is being sold? It's your brainspace. ITV, Sky, Dave, whoever, are selling L'Oreal, BMW, Kellogs and all the others, a bit of space inside the heads of thousands of people, you and me. We all get conned at some stage by the deceitful messages that tell us life would be so much better with the right colour hair, a faster, bigger, safer car, the lifestyle that goes with a better cereal.

These messages compete with the word of the Kingdom that requires God first and then sacrificial service to others. Adverts are just an example of ways in which our thoughts can be lead away from trusting in God's care for

us, so we concern ourselves so much about how to look after ourselves and those we love, that we forget to take our concerns to God first.

Between our ears there is a space that is available for all sorts of thoughts and we have a responsibility to set our minds on Christ and let the mind of Christ rule in us.

I need to be understood

The other responsibility we have as individuals and as a church is to communicate the word of the Kingdom in ways that people will understand.

This is difficult to do if we've not got to grips with understanding the gospel for ourselves. So that comes first. Then we look for how we reach out to others.

In my life I have not had many occasions where I have, as we sometimes say, led a person to the Lord. For years I worked as a church youth worker in Derby and in Walsall. I spent hours, days, months carefully working out how to make Jesus real to young people. All sorts of events, meetings, groups, were held successfully and disastrously. I gave myself to the work and opened our home and my life.

And then. We'd take some young people to an event, a meeting, a weekend away where someone stood up and spoke about Jesus in a way that seemed OK to me but not amazingly different from the way I'd been speaking.

And then. This person would invite anyone who wanted to commit their lives to Jesus to walk to the front or stand or raise a hand.

And there they were. Young people in 'my' youth group responding to the sorts of things I'd being telling them for ages.

It's not that I had been ineffectual as a communicator. It's that the understanding of what was being said was developing. Different ways of showing the truth of the love of God, the person of Jesus had begun to break open the hard ground so that in the end a sowing of that seed did find space to sink deep enough to germinate.

Some of the people we worked with, not all but definitely some, were really on the margins. Their hearts were hard and impenetrable like the path only because they had been walked on. Their minds had been fed rubbish ideas of false values and false hopes. These obstacles to the gospel needed to be eased out, the ground needed to be broken and prepared. That took time and commitment it cost not just money but time and reputation.

That stone clearing, ground breaking work is as vital as the call to the front. Your conversation that helps someone understand a little bit more about our faith and our Lord is preparing the ground for the seed that will one day take root.

One of the passages that has been given to us as a church over and over again is Isaiah 40. Verse 3-5 have a particular resonance for what we're thinking about here.

We invite people to find their way to Jesus. Yet for many people what has been done to them, things that have been said to them, times when they have been sidelined and passed over, have, as it were, created mountains or great valleys that are obstacles to coming to Jesus. False hopes and ideas act like rocks making the way rugged.

Our vision statement expresses that we believe God has called us to be a church who are welcoming all sorts of people into an encounter with Jesus and to do life well. We are called to serve others in ways that really address their needs with honesty.

In those ways we will be part of a process that levels out those mountains and bridges the deep valleys between where people are and where they can really understand who Jesus is and what he offers and requires.

That will require us to understand people well enough so that we can speak and act in ways that enable them to understand who Jesus is. There's not

**A voice of one calling:
“In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low;
the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.
And the glory of the LORD will be revealed,
and all people will see it together.
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”**

one among us who can speak and act in ways that will reach everyone. We really need to be a community that empowers and trusts each other to do those things that God puts in front of each of us to do.

The call, then, is to understand for ourselves. To engage our minds and develop our own understanding of God and his word and his ways. To choose to allow the Holy Spirit to develop in us the mind of Christ and to put God first in our thinking as well as in our giving and our worship.

From there we will be better able to be understood. We will, together, more fully and more accurately communicate the love and salvation that God offers to all and everyone. In other words, the prayer of Paul for the church in Ephesus will become more and more true for us. We will have hearts and minds that are not at all path like but ploughed, cleared, weeded and bearing fruit as we understand the fullness of God's love for us and communicate that clearly to others.

Let's pray this for one another:

I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources Christ will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit. Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him.

Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong.

And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is.

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