

LUKE 8:4-15
HOW TO LISTEN?

Do you ever people-watch? I find myself at times sitting in Starbucks, just watching the world go by over a cup of coffee! There is nothing sinister in it, I'm just fascinated by the enormous variety that makes up the population of Edinburgh. You try to imagine who or what people are just by their appearance and you can't do it, but it can be fascinating. You can watch the crowd as it walks along Princes St and ask yourself 'what do these people believe?' Of course, you can't answer the question unless you were to stop them and ask, but in every crowd there will be a great variety of people and a great variety of answers to that question: some will be indifferent to faith, faith is not something that they have ever given serious consideration to and can't be bothered; some will once have believed, but they have lost their faith for whatever reason, it was only a short-lived thing; some will be looking for faith, but be preoccupied with all the other things of life, family, work, mortgage etc and questions of faith have been pushed to one side, a luxury perhaps to be considered when time permits; some will be committed Christians, who live by faith and seek to make that faith stronger day by day; you will perhaps find all of these in every crowd; perhaps we are these people.

Some years ago, I heard a TV interview with the American evangelist Billy Graham, who spent his life travelling world telling people about Jesus; he would visit a great stadium like Murrayfield and crowds would gather to hear him preach. The obvious question was about the success of his ministry, and the style of his mission and preaching; how would he evaluate success? He quoted the parable of the sower; he said that in all of his audiences there were some who didn't listen or didn't hear, there were some who thought he was wonderful at the time, in the emotion of the occasion they were caught up in it, but in the cold light of day or when they went home, they forgot all about his message; others began well and seemed interested for a time, but other things got in way and their new-found faith seemed to wither on the vine; others made professions of faith and 40 or 50 years on are still in churches, believing, serving all these years later, and some are here. This was how his ministry worked, he said; his job was simply to sow the seed by telling people about Jesus.

The parable of the sower was first parable Jesus told; it marks the beginning of a change in emphasis in Luke; there are going to be more parables later and he is beginning to change the emphasis to more teaching and fewer action stories; we'll see how that works as we go on. Parables are odd stories in some ways; on the one hand they are good stories, the kind of stories that good storytellers will use to capture people's imaginations. Jesus does that; many of His stories are memorable: the Sower, the Good Samaritan, the lost sheep, the lost coin, the prodigal son - stories that when people hear them they remember them. But these are not just stories for the sake of good stories; Jesus uses the parables to teach people things; there is a point to every parable and most of time there is one point to the parable; not every part of the story means something. The Sower is the first parable.

The parable of the sower is all about listening! Later, Jesus will say: “*Consider...*” (8:18) That’s what the parable is about as well; it is about the way in which people listen to Jesus as preacher, or to those of us who preach the good news about Jesus. “It is as near as Jesus *ever* comes to “explaining” Himself and His mission... Jesus sees His mission as a way of speaking and acting which will give people the greatest opportunity to respond to the word of God.” (Tinsley) How do people react? We’ve described that to some extent already; Luke has already shown us the different ways in which people reacted to Jesus, some very positive, some more lukewarm, some quite antagonistic! The point of the parable is to challenge people to listen well, to listen in the right kind of way, in a way that will bear fruit in people’s hearts and bring in the kingdom of God.

Was Jesus sitting on the hillside, looking over into the field nearby? Was he watching the sower on the hillside, walking up and down through the field sowing seed? It is quite likely. This is not the neat and precise seed-sowing that you and I might do in our garden where every seed has its own place and is precisely sown in a seed-drill. Rather, this is the farmer walking up and down in the field, broadcasting the seed; taking handfuls of seed from the bag over his shoulder and throwing it around the field; so he has no control over the places in which the seed lands; it is taken by the wind, it bounces off the ground, it ends up in all sorts of places and either grows or doesn’t as the case may be.

The sower sows the seed and the seed lands in 4 places:

1)every field has a path round it or across it; the path is as hard as concrete; any seed falling there just sits on surface and the birds come and eat it up and it does nothing;

2)every field has a pile of stones in the corner; where do these stones come from? A farmer can clear a field of stones one year and the next there are as many as ever; he will pile them in the corner and a little soil with them and some seed fell there and started to grow in the shallow soil, but when the sun got really hot, the new plant withered because it had no depth to its root.

3)every field has its weed-patch and Sod’s law of nature says that weeds always grow more strongly than plants; have you noticed that? The seed fell among the weeds, but the weeds grew more strongly and choked out the plants and they died;

4)the good soil, in the middle of the field; the best place to be and the seed that fell there grew well and produced fruit and as seed does, it multiplied up to 100x over.

So what does the parable mean? It is all about the way in which people hear the word of God that Jesus preached or that is preached in Church week by week; “*Consider...*” (8:18):

“*Those along...*” (8:12) There were people who heard Jesus preach and His words made absolutely no impact on them whatsoever; the congregation in Nazareth was a bit like that in chapter 4; they wanted to throw Him off a cliff in the end because He challenged their prejudices too much. Jesus’ words made no good impact, no good impression; the people are not listening. When I was a student, 5 of us shared a flat in 47 Forrest Rd, and we took turns at cooking

the meals and on one Sunday my friend had created something for lunch, put it in the oven and then gone to Church and as he stood up to sing the first hymn, he remembered that he had forgotten to switch on the oven and he spent the rest of the Church service trying to work out how he would explain this to his hungry flat-mates! He heard nothing of the sermon; it made no impression on him because he wasn't listening! If you get up to leave now, I'll know why!

"Those on..." (8:13) Some people are impulsive; they respond in a spur-of-the-moment kind of way and tell you that what you've said is wonderful and they want to be life-long committed Christians on Sunday; by Tuesday, either the emotion has worn off, or other people have made life so hard for them and they've given up their Christian commitment. Faith has not had chance to develop any depth and so when faith is questioned or challenged, there is nothing substantial to give it strength, so it gives way under pressure. Live in culture in which that goes on; people are laughed at for their faith, or even worse; there are many people out there, young and old, I suspect, who would love the chance, who would value the opportunity to consider what faith is about, what Jesus stands for, but they are frightened to come here in case their friends or family find out, so they stay away. Some listen, but when their new-found faith is put under pressure, they give up.

"The seed..." (8:14) What makes up your life? There's family, maybe children or grand-children to look after, to take them here and there to all kinds of activities; or you are looking after aged parents and that takes up a great deal of time and energy; there's work and for many people that becomes more and more demanding; there's paying off the mortgage and other bills and we need to work to do that; there's time to do the shopping and time to relax and enjoy life. We could add more and more to that list, pressures that we are under in our society today. Where do people find time for faith? Where do people find time to discover faith or to have that faith grow? It is very difficult. The danger is that in midst of all these other things, faith gets choked out. Faith that is not nurtured will become at least stunted and may well wither away.

"But the..." (8:15) A Roman centurion, Levi the tax-collector, an unnamed woman with a bottle of perfume, 12 disciples, a group of women who were following Jesus from place to place and supporting him out of their money – these are all people who heard Jesus preach and who responded positively to Him and His message. They heard and they believed! They were people of 'noble and good heart' where faith was given the time and space to grow. Their lives were changed by what they heard Jesus say; a little bit at a time perhaps, but the seed that Jesus planted in their hearts began to grow and grow and become stronger and their faith began to grow and grow and develop; they began to understand more and more of what He said; it fitted into place; they began to put more and more of it into practice; their faith grew and bore fruit in their lives. Listen to the sermon, check it out with the Bible to make sure that I'm telling you what is right, then let the Bible shape what you believe about God and Jesus; live it out in the kind of person that you are; so the seed of faith that is planted in your heart will grow and bear fruit.

How do you listen? How are you listening? Are you listening at all or have you been thinking about lunch for last 20 minutes and so have taken nothing in? You can't even tell me what the sermon has been about! Or we listen with enthusiasm but when faith is under pressure it all will get forgotten about and you won't be back? Or we listen well, but next week has too many things that will make you worried and anxious and there will be no place for you to nurture faith and so find it hard to be back here next week? Or you have taken in what has been said and you go away determined to read the bible and go back over what we've been saying; perhaps you print out the sermon and read it again so that you can learn from it; you commit to read the bible regularly and learn from it about what Christians believe and how Christians behave and live, and then be determined to put that into practice and be that kind of person? All of these are options; all of us are like all of these at some time. How have you listened? Have you listened well? How will you respond to word of God? With no response, or 'with a noble and good heart' and be the kind of person that Jesus wants us to be?