

**Mark 13:1-23**  
**Gardening for Beginners I**  
**Christ Church Liverpool**  
**Andrew Evans**  
**June 2007**

It's amazing how quickly people can become cynical about things. Take, for example, this week's disastrous launch of the logo for the London Olympics in 2012. When London won the bid to host the games on 6<sup>th</sup> July 2005 lots of people were genuinely delighted, even euphoric, at the prospect of the greatest sporting event in the world coming to London.

But, two years later, the revelation that the organising committee have spent £400,000 on a logo that many think is either a) incomprehensible or b) looks like a Nazi SS badge (which, I realised for the first time this week is, itself a clever design derivative of the Swastika – Hitler clearly employed better designers than the Olympic committee!) or c) both has brought scorn and derision.

It seems there is something in human nature that can move us very quickly from delight to cynicism, from excitement to criticism.

Perhaps that is especially true about our experience of the Christian life. I meet all sorts of people who have known periods of great excitement in their lives about church and Christian things. People who have been living actively as Christians in their communities over many years. But who, sometimes quite rapidly, become disappointed, disinterested and even hardened and cynical about religion in general and Jesus in particular.

I'm sure many of us have experienced initial interest from people on their finding out that we are a Christian which rapidly degenerates into total lack of response or, sometimes worse, outright hostility. I'm sure most of us know people who have made professions of Christian faith but are, today, wandering far from any interest in spiritual matters. And there are probably some people here this morning who feel yourselves to be, more or less, in a place of disillusionment or, perhaps even more likely, a place where you just feel pretty tired of the whole thing but, because you know that a radical departure from church and a voicing of the thoughts you are really thinking would raise lots of questions from your Christian friends you are plodding along because it's less hassle than leaving.

You can see this process of people's rapid transition from joy to anger in a most striking way in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ himself.

Matthew can record in chapter 7, at the end of the first extended teaching of Jesus that he records, that "the crowds were amazed at his teaching." But by the end of chapter 12 the religious and political authorities are plotting to kill Jesus and were beginning to have success in stirring up the crowd to believe that his stunning powers, exercised only for good, were works of the devil. And his family, believing him to be mad, have come to try and deal with him.

The next event that will be recorded in this gospel is at the beginning of chapter 14 – the beheading of John the Baptist killed, it is worth noting, not for his belief in God as such but because he insisted that the moral implications of the truth about God extended even to the king of the nation. John was beheaded because he insisted that adultery by marrying a divorced woman was wrong even for a ruler. We can only speculate what might have happened if those meant to stand up for God's standards in our nation had taken the same attitude to the recent marriage of our future king to a divorcee.

But what is it, finally, that lies behind this rising tide of opposition and rejection of Jesus and those, like John, who point others to him? What leads people to so quickly and brutally turn against Jesus so that they will, in a very short space of time, be buying for his execution by the most brutal means known to the hardened torturers of Rome?

The answer, according to Jesus lies in the impact that his teachings themselves have in the lives of those who hear him. Matthew has deliberately situated this chapter right at the heart of his gospel, the third of five main lots of teaching from Jesus.

In these parables Jesus both explains WHY he has the effect that he does on people AND he demonstrates the dramatic impact of his words, for good or ill, on those who hear them.

So let's get into this famous parable of the sower and see what light it sheds, both on why Jesus is so dramatically rejected by most of the people of his day and why we too find it so easy to struggle with cynicism about Christ.

### **I        Jesus' parables filter his family (v1-9)**

The crowd that gathered for England's cricket match against the west Indies this week looked

pretty impressive. On Thursday morning there they all were at Old Trafford. A bunch of older men in their Lancashire Cricket Club shirts and ties. And a ,much larger crowd of “regular” people in their sponsored replica shirts and T-shirts. Lots of England flags and a real appearance of unity.

But then Michael Vaughan, England captain and alleged critic of Lancashire cricket hero Freddie Flintoff walked out to bat. And the crowd divided. Applause and cheers from some. Hands in pockets and boos from others. The crowd looked united – but as events unfolded it showed that the unity was merely superficial.

At this point the crowds following Jesus are still huge – so many gather onto the beach, one of a number of such inlets in the sea of Galilee, that Jesus is forced to put out from the shire in a boat and use the acoustics of the bay as a natural amphitheatre to address everyone.

It all looks impressive. But Jesus is about to show that all these people who have taken to following him for the moment, are not necessarily his family. They are not, it turns out, all people who do “the will of my Father in heaven.”

The idea of a parable, a fictional story with some element of simile, metaphor or allegory designed to make a moral or spiritual point, would have been familiar to all the Jewish people Jesus was talking to. It was a common type of literature in the ancient world and, indeed, a device that Jesus has already used in his teaching.

The start of this parable must have been extremely encouraging to the Jewish audience. They knew that the farmer, the owner of a piece of land, must be God. He was the one who owned all the lands and, especially, the nation of Israel which he had given to them. They knew from their history that the prophets had promised a great harvest in the future – a harvest of judgment on the wicked nations around and a great crop of righteousness for God’s own people.

They had suspected that Jesus was claiming to be the Christ, the anointed king who would bring these promises to fruition. But as the story unfolds this is not the great triumphant victory of God that the audience might have been expecting. In fact even the closest of Jesus’ disciples must have found it pretty disheartening. Three quarters of the seed seems to be wasted, falling on places which, in the end, produce nothing useful.

That doesn’t sound like the kind of wonderful future for God’s people that they might have expected.

But it’s not all gloom and doom. Because the final emphasis of the parable is on the astonishing fruitfulness of the seeds that do grow up in good soil. Whether 30, 60 or 100 fold was good yield for Palestinian wheat farmers at the time seems to be along running and pointless debate in the commentaries on Matthew 13. But what is certain is that even if lots of the seed doesn’t grow there is incredible fruitfulness in the end.

Worry about the apparent waste? Rejoicing at the eventual fruitfulness? And even as they are thinking these thoughts Jesus ends, abruptly and moves on to the next parable: “He who has ears let him hear.” Hang on. What is happening here? Isn’t that profoundly arrogant? It seems as if Jesus is saying that the definition of being good soil, of being fruitful in life, is all to do with listening to him. Who does he think he is this young preacher?

Some people, no doubt, decided that this was all too much like hard work. After all who wants to listen to some son of a local carpenter who is younger than you telling you how you need to listen to him. Why stand at the edge of a large lake on a hot sunny day and listen to that? They quietly slipped out of the back of the crowd and headed for home. Others were probably fascinated, pressing closer to hear more of what was said more clearly.

And in that process, and on through the rest of the gospel as Jesus moves on from place to place, as he challenges and rebukes and warns, the band of followers is whittled down. Those who are fascinated and intrigued stay for more. Those who are offended by the message of the parables walk away.

The family that Jesus is creating; those who do God’s will by listening to his words, is, in a sense, self-selecting. Those who long to hear more choose to stay.

## **2 Jesus' parables deliberately filter his family (v10-17)**

One of the things people are often saying in books about preaching is that preachers should tell more stories. People, we are told, don’t want to hear propositions and doctrine and ideas. They want to be told about stories. That is the means of communication that will really connect with audiences in a postmodern world.

After all, the reasoning goes, Jesus used lots of stories that people could relate to and they had a huge impact on people. So we too should help people to understand the gospel by telling stories.

It's certainly true that Jesus is a master storyteller. He gets right in there behind people's defence and WHAM. Like a cruise missile he explodes his truth right under their noses.

Jesus used parables because they were bright, vivid images that people could relate to. He used them because they helped people to understand. But that isn't the only reason Jesus used parables. And the reason he gives in Matthew 13 is, in a way, quite disturbing.

The disciples themselves recognise that Jesus telling stories is a strange thing for him to do. After all his straightforward ethical teaching in the sermon on the mount has amazed the people. His miracles of power have astonished them. And here he is, sitting in a boat, telling stories that some people just don't really get. What is he doing?

The disciples come to him and ask "Why do you speak to the people in parables?"

Jesus answer is strikingly clear. "Because", he says (the NIV misses that out), Because parables bring about precisely the division in response to Jesus that he intends to happen.

*"Whoever has will be given more. Whoever does not have even what he has will be taken from him."*

This isn't talking about money or family or health. Jesus is talking about insight into Jesus and his kingdom. At the beginning of his ministry it is possible to be kind of neutral about Jesus. To see what he does and be not quite sure about his claims.

But as time goes on you have to come down on one side of the fence or the other. That is what is happening in Matthew's gospel. People are becoming divided into those who follow Jesus, the disciples, and those who oppose him – the Pharisees, other religious authorities and their friends.

Those who have insight into Jesus real identity as the Christ, God's anointed king for Israel and the world, are being given more. Every time Jesus says or does something they are coming to understand more and more about who he is.

And those who reject Jesus are having even what they do know taken away from them. They see the same miracles and hear the same teaching. The same seed, if you like, is scattered to them. But each additional miracle or word makes them more and more hostile to Jesus. It convinces them more and more that he is a threat, an imposter or a messenger of the evil one.

It's just the same today, of course, when you run a Christianity Explored course.

People can start off being neutral to Jesus because, often, they don't really know anything about him.

But the experience of hearing Jesus' teaching week by week, of seeing the miracles he did recorded in the gospels and of looking at the Bible's claims about the cross and resurrection always means you have to become less neutral. The more you know the less you can sit on the fence. In the end you have to decide whether this man is the king of the universe or just another religious charlatan.

That's why people often find doing courses like CE an extremely uncomfortable process – because studied neutrality is an easy and comfortable position that is widely admired in our society.

But it's not a sustainable position once you actually know anything about Jesus.

Your insight into the truth about Jesus will either grow under his influence or it will be diminished.

And Jesus wants us to be clear that when that happens it's not just a "natural" process. Because the division of people into those who truly hear him and follow him and those who reject and, ultimately, kill him, is something he deliberately and intentionally brings about.

*This is why I speak to them in parables... In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: "You will be ever hearing but never understanding, you will be ever seeing but never perceiving."*

Jesus speaks in parables SO THAT people will not understand.

That does not mean that Jesus' aim is to be deliberately obtuse or obscure. He isn't going to make people not understand by speaking in Swedish or something. After all if that was his intention he might as well just not bother preaching to anyone at all.

What Jesus is saying is that, just like Isaiah 600 years before him, he is going to proclaim the truth really clearly in a way that everybody CAN understand. But that his stories will have the effect, for many people, of hardening their hearts against him.

Jesus is saying that there will be people who will see the meaning that lies beneath the parables but who will find that message unacceptable and turn away.

The lack of understanding isn't going to be a failure of people's Aramaic comprehension. It is going to be a moral failure. The people who turn away from Jesus following the parable of the sower aren't going to be asking "so what was that all about then?"

They are going to turn away because they don't accept that the only way to be good soil is to listen to Jesus. They, like the people in the synagogue at Capernaum at the end of chapter 13 are going to "take offence at Jesus."

That, Jesus says, is exactly what he intends to happen, just as it was precisely what God intended to happen 600 years earlier in Isaiah's day.

The crowds of Jews, in their pride, think that they deserve a Messiah because they are so special. They think that their superiority as a nation, a superiority that led them to despise people from all other nations as "dogs", means that God will send them a saviour who will kick the foreigners out and make the nations their slaves.

But that is not the kind of Messiah Jesus has come to be. Jesus has already announced that he has come for the sick, the wicked and the excluded. He has come for those who are profoundly aware of their inadequacy and who throw themselves upon him for mercy.

He is not going to show mercy to those who do not think they need mercy. He is not going to forgive people who think that their role is to stand in judgment over Jesus and ask whether the evidence is good enough.

Don't be deceived into thinking that the parables are simply nice stories that make things about Jesus clear. They are, but they pack such a punch that for some people every time they hear one it will turn them further away from Jesus.

And, in fact, hearing about Jesus turns every single person, by nature, away from him. For we are all, in our hearts, those who think we can be good enough to save ourselves. We are all, deep down, people who think we don't really need a rescuer from sin and death.

So if it weren't for God at work making people understand and accept the truth about Jesus nobody would believe. Which is exactly the point Jesus goes on to make to his disciples.

The fact that others hear Jesus parables and reject him shouldn't make them proud. It should make them thankful: "Blessed are your eyes because they see and your ears because they hear."

The disciples are not there because they are clever. They are there because they are blessed – because God has been very kind to them.

Those who understand Jesus' parables, those who see who Jesus is, are not to praise our own insight; but to give thanks to the God who makes blind people see.

### **3 So listen to Jesus and expect to be fruitful (v18-23)**

Some people get evicted by their housemates. Others are thrown out for making racist comments. Occasionally there is actually a public vote to get rid of someone. There are all sorts of ways of being removed from the Big Brother house. But in the end all of them amount to the same thing. Deprivation of the £100,000 prize for winning the show and the inevitable deals for TV shows, newspaper columns and perfume that follow.

Jesus makes much the same point to his disciples as he explains the parable of the sower to them.

Although the ability to hear and see, as Jesus has just said, is a gift, that doesn't mean that the disciples can just sit back and relax.

"Listen then", Jesus says. He is about to give them a serious warning of things that could place them in real danger. So they need to pay attention.

Some fail to follow Jesus because they never really understand what it is that Jesus is really offering. The kind of person who comes to church and hears a series of talks about grace and the gospel being for sinners and who leaves saying "I just don't think I'm good enough to be a Christian."

Others say yes initially to following Jesus. And then something difficult, or even terrible, happens to them. Suddenly being a Christian doesn't seem like such an attractive option any more. They become conditional disciples – I'll come back to you Jesus, if you do this for me. The trouble is that Jesus isn't a cheap teacher hawking round for anyone who will follow him and doing whatever they want just to increase numbers.

Jesus is a mighty king. And king's don't perform for conditions.

Other people last a while longer. King Jesus seems like a real king for their lives. But he isn't. He is just a filler. A god to fill a gap until something else comes along.

The worries of this life or the deceitfulness of money come along and prove more powerful than the message of the kingdom.

For such people Jesus is like a photo in an old photo album from your first year in halls at university. You flick through the album occasionally, when there's nothing better to do or you're feeling nostalgic, and look at the faces of the guys from your corridor. Doing the cooking. Dressed up for a night out. In the bar. And if you were asked you would still say that these people were your friends.

But the truth is that although they are listed as a friend on Facebook you haven't actually been in touch with them for ages. You've exchanged Happy Birthday messages. But you don't really know what they are doing. You spend weeks paddling along in your life without being at all concerned about them. They are a friend in name only.

Perhaps for some here this morning that is the way your friendship with Jesus Christ is going. You still call yourself a Christian. But other concerns are filling your horizon.

Jesus' speaks to his disciples not to make them feel hopeless in the face of the many ways in which we can walk away from Jesus.

No he pleads with them to listen so that they can bend all their minds and wills to being good soil. So that they will in turn ask him in his kindness to make them fruitful disciples.

Jesus' message in this parable is not at all one designed to beat us up and make us feel guilty this morning.

Rather it's a passionate warning from someone who loves us not to become cynical and hard hearted towards him.

And it is a wonderful promise that those who stick with Jesus, who simply listen to him and follow him, will be amazingly fruitful.

For the last category of person, the Christian, is a person who lives a fruitful life. At the end of the parable Jesus wants us to know that really following him is something that is both visible and wonderful.

It is visible in the same way that the ears on a crop of wheat are visible. You can't hide them. The transformed life of a Christian cannot be hidden. And I want to testify to that this morning. As I look around our church I see people whose lives I have observed to have been transformed by the message about Jesus. People who have become more stable, more considerate, more patient, more joyful, more

loving. People who are not only growing in their own understanding of the message about Jesus but who are determined to share that message with others. Fruitful people.

The crop is visible. And it is a great blessing. I know that being a Christian, for all of us, can seem really difficult and hard. But Jesus, in this parable, asks us to look back over the course of your Christian life and see the fruit.

Think of the ways in which you have changed since you became a Christian. And ask yourself, would I really want to go back on those things? Of course you wouldn't.

So don't become cynical. Go onwards. Anticipate a fruitful life where what you have seen so far as a result of Jesus' kindness is just the beginning of all the fruitfulness he has for you, both now and in eternity.