

Matthew 13:1-23 Sermon

In the first half of today's well-known Gospel reading we are members of the big crowd gathered on the shore hearing Jesus talk of a farmer sowing his seed, the second half is Jesus's explanation of the story to his closer circle of followers. Many of us will have heard the parable many times, perhaps even sitting through lots of sermons on it! – so today, I want you, if you hear nothing else, to reflect for yourself honestly about the kind of soil you are when you hear God's word, and what you plan to do about it. There's also an encouragement to keep sowing the seed of God's Kingdom, even when it feels like it isn't getting anywhere.

The first type of soil, therefore is the path – the dry, crusted ground where the seed lies dormant until it is quickly snatched up by the birds. Jesus acknowledges that some people do reject him quickly. Perhaps that is the total rejection of faith, or perhaps we have grown crusted up with years of 'unexpectant' Christianity. Maybe we've decided to believe and come to church, but if we are honest, it's a case of God getting this far and no further. Anything else from God simply sits on the surface until we forget it. God isn't allowed a look in to our relationships, our interests, our TV viewing habits, our finances, or the rest of the week since he's had his hour on a Sunday. Any seeds that fall from God will be snatched away, since we have grown naturally resistant to giving over any more of ourselves to God than we already have.

The second type of soil is the stony, shallow ground. It's the place of initial religious fervour but then slow death when the sun beats down. Perhaps it's the scorching sun of our friends and family pouring scorn over our faith. Maybe it's the intense searing of tragic life circumstances which has shrivelled our roots in God. Perhaps it's just simple boredom that faith isn't as exciting as we had hoped it would be. Maybe your faith only works for you when you are in trouble, and then once you're back on an even keel, you tend to forget about it.

The third soil is the thorny, weedy ground. If I'm honest, my guess is that this is where so many of us lose our way. Imagine actually finding time in our busy lives to pray or read our Bible? Imagine actually finding time to genuinely investigate the things in our faith which we find difficult, rather than just burying them in the dark depths of our brains? Imagine not running around so quickly that you actually get chance to stop and thank God for the view, or for a flower, or just to appreciate God's presence with us? Imagine managing to make our faith a priority? I know that this is the real difficulty for me – and for many vicars – but I'm guessing clergy aren't the only ones. My diary has been insane recently and it has been so, so hard to try to carve out time to pray. And yet, that's the road to madness, because it is the prayer that sustains us all! But it is so hard, because praying feels like unproductive time, and in any case so many parts of life just don't wait or can't wait for prayer to have happened.

Then, there's the good soil where Jesus's message grows and flourishes and produces fruit; a changed life, a different way of seeing the world, a new commitment to living to please God and loving neighbour. This is the soil we all tend to want to be, but probably feel like we never get there.

So which soil type are you? Maybe take a moment and chat to the person next to you about it...

It's hard to be open and honest together about all this.

<Survey of soil types>

What this shows is that if we are all honest, we all struggle, perhaps in different ways – so take heart, we can all help each other.

As you must all know by now, I play football, and used to play at quite a high amateur standard. That involves being fit, spending time on it, and being willing to improve, slowly over time. I have come to realise that there are lots of parallels between sport and our discipleship, so let me illustrate what I'm going to suggest in terms of football.

To be a great footballer, you need to train. But training is often boring and hard – we think of footballers just playing football all day, but it just isn't true. The levels of fitness training, stretching, and muscle work is massive. No-one enjoys it! My old coach used to say you weren't trying if you hadn't thrown up in the bushes yet! Football is a team sport, but some of the training is individual and some is corporate, but those of us who would struggle with the mid-week individual runs, for example, would band together to make sure we did it. Even now, I like football because I do it with people and it forces me to get out of the house when I don't feel like it because I've committed to it.

The point for us today is that, those of us who are like the hard path soil are like those who want to be great footballers but actually don't want to do any of the work or listen to the coach. It just isn't going to happen. The shallow, rocky footballers are the ones who play in a game, find it tough, and then walk away. The weedy ground footballers, are those who are too busy to train.

For me, a coach is a really valuable person – this person who helps me focus on what needs to change in my game, and a person who will keep reminding me of what I'm not doing. Yes, it can be brutal, but if I'm serious, a coach is a game-changer. So it might be with our faith. I have something called a Spiritual Director, who basically coaches my faith. You could have one too. Or, if that's a bit scary, perhaps you could just agree with a friend to check up on how faith is going, on whether you are doing your praying and Bible reading in order to work those faith muscles.

For me, the doing of the individual fitness work with teammates was invaluable. It's a sacrifice to put the time in, but if I'm serious about playing well and growing in my ability, then it's a must. Similarly, joining with our teammates in faith is hugely useful. Come to church, join a small group and help each other explore faith together, come to the evening service at 6pm to try a different kind of way to meet God together, get together over coffee to pray for each other and share your problems and celebrations. It means we all train together!

Finally, if one member of the football team is carrying an injury, the others are an encouragement back to training. If one of us is struggling with our faith, let's be open about our struggles and share together. Let's be a team or a family who pray for each other, and help each other. I once broke a toe and had to learn to kick with my left foot – something which has been really useful ever since – but it was the assistance of my teammates which got me through. We are all Jesus's family, so let's look out for each other.

These are just a few thoughts, and you'll have others. The thing is, Jesus took the time to talk through with his disciples, all the details of the story – why did he do that if it wasn't to reassure them in their times of rejection and also so they could support each other when they struggle in their faith. He inspires them to, together, become good soil – soil where growth can happen, not just as individuals but as a group. But this good soil doesn't just happen. Let us all train together to be good soil, individually and collectively. Amen.