

The passage tells us.. <sup>3</sup> *Then he told them many things in parables.*

I have witnessed many conversations, debates and even arguments in the Church about whether certain passages should be taken literally. When Jesus was being tried by Pilate, Pilate asked 'What is truth?' Good question.

Some people take the view that everything that we read in the Bible must be taken on face value and then discussion centres on which bit can be interpreted and which has to be proved historically. People, therefore, search for evidence of the Flood or try to explain how it could be that the Red Sea parted and how Jesus was actually walking on a sand bank in the Sea of Galilee. The explanations become quite elaborate and intricate.

Truth in the Bible is something else for me. It is that which gives a foundation, a sure ground for hope and confidence in the person of Jesus and his saving grace for all who will respond, in faith, to his gracious invitation.

As quoted above, Jesus told many things by using parables. Did the thing described actually happen? Does it matter if it did or didn't?

For me, what Jesus is using is an observational style of illustration using every day events and experiences. Much as when we start a sentence; have you ever noticed? Or, Imagine the scene.. Or, Just supposing.. Jesus talks about the birds of the air or the lilies in the valleys and uses these pictures to reveal something about the Creator and God's providence for all of his creatures, great small or human.

To me, it doesn't matter whether there was a man walking down the road to Jericho who was pounced upon by thieves. Why? Because it did happen, it happened a lot and so the story has that ring of truth which would have been understood by his hearers. In the same way as people would recognise characters they had met, in those who crossed over the street to avoid getting involved. Those whose religion was worthless and who paid mere lip service.

Does it matter if a farmer had one hundred sheep or if a man had two sons? Not in the sense that unless Jesus could name these people, then the story was invalid.

My point is that we can learn from stories even if they are not historically accurate. Indeed, we learn from works of pure fiction so we can certainly learn from the Bible which contains stories, some of which are historical while others are myth and legend. We have all learned from the works of great writers like William Shakespeare who described parting from those we love as 'such sweet sorrow' in one of his plays.

In recent days I have been thinking about George Orwell's book *1984*. It is a work of fiction and yet it speaks into our lives today. If we think for a moment about how we are being manipulated by the media, it is straight out of Orwell's book where Big Brother is watching us. Back when he wrote the book, and he envisaged surveillance devices in every room of our houses, little could he imagine how prophetic he was being. Now we carry devices around with us or wear them on our wrists that track our every movement and even tell us when we haven't done enough exercise.

I remember someone once saying that history is written by the victors which is why we should always be careful about reading things without assessing how true or impartial something might be.

This is addressed in *1984*;

*Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past.*

We now live in a world where leaders describe anything they don't like as 'fake news' or a hoax. In this kind of situation, how can any of us be sure of what we mean by objective 'truth'?

Turning to this parable in Matthew's Gospel, you will notice I have changed the title from the Parable of the Sower, to that of the Soil Type. Why? Because, it's the soil type which makes the difference.

The farmer sows the same seed and it grows depending on where it lands and what then happens to it. I'm sure you can tell by now that I don't mind so much whether Jesus can name the farmer. Rather, the truth is in the experience we all share as humans.

Some of us are like the hard earth. We are impervious to anything coming into our lives that might make any difference to us. Solid earth won't allow the seed to germinate and grow and so the seed gets blown away or eaten by the birds. Hearts that are hard, can't be reached.

Some of us are like the rocky ground. There is some soil but only a thin layer. A bit like our back garden which has about an inch of soil and then you're soon down to the sand. After all, we are just a stone's throw from the beach at Port Soif. Those of us who are like this can get quite excited about something in the moment but we literally have no depth. Roots cannot grow and so when the wind blows, as it will, our faith or our commitment is blown away.

Some soil contains weeds. We're back to our manse garden again. Why is it that flowers struggle to take proper root whereas weeds grow like billyoh? In the parable, this stands for people who accept the good news but find that all kinds of worries and distractions get in the way and choke our faith as it starts to grow and deepen.

Then, there is the good soil. We can't all be the good soil but like the soil we have in our gardens, it can be improved. The message I take from all this is that many of us need to have our soil improved to the point where we are receptive - open - to receiving the good news. Maybe we need to mix in some potting compost or have some stones or boulders removed. Perhaps there are a lot of weeds growing which we have ignored for far too long. Weeds that must be uprooted.

Elsewhere, Jesus describes our heavenly Father as the gardener, while we are the branches. We must trust God to be the gardener and allow ourselves to be improved so that our faith can germinate, grow and come to fruition as God intends.

If you're not already the good soil in the parable, what can you do? Like me, you may need lots of TLC. Spend time with God in silence and prayer. Read God's word in company and in your own quiet times. Allow God to work his miracle of transformation in your life.