

The sower

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 January 2000

Preacher: Rev Fergus A.J.Macdonald

[0 : 00] Shall we turn now to the passage which we read from the New Testament, the Gospel of Luke, chapter 8, and verse 11.

The opening words of our Lord's interpretation of his best-known parable, the parable of the sower. The parable is this, the seed is the word of God.

The seed is the word of God. This parable, like all other parables, is a parable of the kingdom of God.

The word kingdom has for us in English a rather static sense which it did not have in the teaching of Jesus. And it might be more helpful for us to think of what Jesus said in terms of the kingship of God rather than the kingdom of God.

Because Jesus was speaking of the kingdom of God in the sense of men and women submitting themselves to the kingship of Almighty God.

[1 : 15] And Jesus says in this parable that the seed of that kingship, in other words the dynamic through which God establishes his kingdom or his kingship in the hearts of men and women and in the lives of communities, is through the word, through the message of the gospel.

And wherever the word of God has been distributed and proclaimed, the kingdom of God has come in the hearts of men and women, yes, and in the life of communities.

We see that if we look back through history. We see that if we look out in the world in which we live today. God's word distributed leads to God's kingship being acknowledged.

The kingdom of God has been acknowledged more in some nations than in others. If we look back in the history of our own land, we realize that we come in a great tradition of the word of God.

This land of Scotland was once known as the land of the book. And the Bible undoubtedly has exercised a quite extraordinary influence in creating our national heritage.

[2 : 40] We do not know for sure who the first Christians were who took the gospel to Scotland. Some believe they may have been officers in the Roman army who patrolled the Antonine Wall and who extended the frontiers of the empire farther north in our land.

It's interesting that the son-in-law of Sergius Paulus, the deputy of Cyprus, in whose court Paul witnessed, was one of the leaders of the army in Scotland.

And it may be that his wife had told him the message that Saul of Tarsus had preached to our father. But that, of course, is speculation.

But we do know that the word of God was brought across the sea from Ireland by Celtic missionaries who established a base in Iona and Columba and his fellow Celtic monks.

Reached out throughout the whole of the West with this word. And the word of God was placed and proclaimed in every church.

[4 : 01] And from the very beginning of the organization of the church in the Celtic church in Scotland, the word of God had a central place. The word of God was placed in each church.

And there it was read. And there it was expounded. And then at the Reformation, we see the word of God being rediscovered in an explosive way. We find the word of God not in the language, the classical language of the church and of the elite.

But the word of God in the language of the people reaching out into every corner of the land. And then we see later in the...

At the end of the 18th century, in the beginning of the 19th century, the scriptures being translated into the Gaelic language. And the scriptures going out from here in Edinburgh and from Inverness into the farthest corners of the highlands and islands and making an extraordinary impact.

Whole communities being transformed. Religious revival breaking out. Because hitherto, the highlands had been neglected.

[5 : 15] The main reason being that the scriptures were not... Had not been translated into the mother tongue of the people. But as the word of God went out, as the seed was sown, the kingdom of God came in the hearts of men and women.

And so, we live in a society and are citizens of a country which is a great biblical tradition. The Bible is an important part of our Scottish heritage.

But I believe that the Bible is a book not only of the past, but also a book for the future. And that we, as we come near the last decade of this century and indeed of this millennium, need more than ever before to rediscover the message of this book.

This is true not only of Scotland, it is true of Western civilization. It is true indeed of civilization generally. But particularly here in Western Europe, we have come to a crossroads.

And the problem is that there are no signposts. Or the signposts that are there have been turned around. And we cannot rely upon them.

[6 : 31] We have come to a critical point in our history as a nation and as a continent. And the word of God offers light, offers guidance to us at this particular time in our history.

We believe that the Bible is the key to the future. We believe that as we move into the next century, by the grace of God, we need to rediscover the scriptures.

I heard someone say recently that Western civilization is the only aberrant culture in the world today. The only culture which is denying its religious roots.

And we need to rediscover these roots in the word of God. The scriptures have a message for today.

The word of God abides forever, therefore it is always relevant. And it is relevant to the fundamental questions which people are asking today.

[7 : 38] And I would like for a few moments this morning to look at some of these fundamental questions that people are asking more acutely and more urgently than they have been for many years. And to see how the word of God has a message for us.

One of the big questions that people are asking today is what is real? Or what is reality? Now the view of the secular society or the view of the secularist is that reality is something which is exclusively material.

That beyond what you can see and what you can touch there is no reality. Whatever is unverifiable by science cannot be said to be real. That is a very popular view.

One comes across it frequently in the media. One meets it often in education. And yet, although this view prevails, there are many signs that people cannot live with a view of reality which is exclusively materialistic.

We have seen in the last ten years an extraordinary resurgence of superstition in our society. We have seen Satanism arising.

[8 : 58] We have seen various aspects of the occult. We have seen this extraordinary New Age phenomenon where people are gathering together to seek some reality beyond the materialistic.

We have seen an extraordinary increase in drug taking. And much, or part at least, of the high incidence of drug taking is a manifestation of a search for a non-material reality.

Perhaps the great interest in science fiction also is an expression of this difficulty of coming to terms with a view of reality which is exclusively materialistic.

I remember when I was a student here in Edinburgh reading a book which had been written at that time by the minister of St. George's West Church, Murder Ewan MacDonald.

It was called The Vitality of Faith, I think, a book of sermons. And one of these sermons, I remember, I never forget what I read. He said, Our age, and this was way back in the 50s, Our age is more superstitious than scientific.

[10 : 18] Now these words have been proved to be true in this decade where we've seen a resurgence of superstition in our society because people cannot live with a purely materialistic view of life.

There is something in us. We are made in the image of God, we as Christians believe. And that image of God cannot be satisfied with the things which science can prove.

These things, of course, are important and they're part of God's creation. But there's more to life than what one can see or touch. Now the Bible speaks to us of a spiritual reality.

It tells us, yes, that there is a physical reality and that this physical reality is good. That the world is, the world, the created world is good. It is not evil. It is good because it comes from the hand of God.

Although sin may be at work in human society and the creation may be under a curse, the creation is inherently good. And that beyond the creation there is the creator and who has also created a spiritual reality.

[11 : 31] Paul wrote to the Colossians and he reminded them that the reality was Christ. And Christ is the ultimate reality. It is through him that the world has been created.

And if we see simply the created world and we don't see Christ, we're only seeing part of reality. You remember what the writer to the Hebrews said about faith? He said, Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

And through faith we lay hold upon that spiritual reality that is revealed to us in the scriptures. And so that question, what is reality, is one which the Bible has a very real answer to.

Another question that preoccupies people today is what is freedom? A question which has preoccupied China and the students of China very much in recent weeks. And even in our Western societies, which traditionally are free, the whole question of what is freedom is a relevant question that people are asking today.

Freedom is something that everybody believes in, but there seems to be little consensus about what it means. It is promised by anarchists, by dictators as well as by Democrats. Let us heed the warning that Alexander Solzhenitsyn has given to us here in the West when he told us a decade ago that the seeds of totalitarianism are already here in our rejection of belief in the supreme being and the acceptance of people's needs and desires and even weaknesses as the supreme imperative of the universe.

[13 : 14] And he said, once you make people's desires the ultimate, criterion, you are on the road to totalitarianism, he tells us. Freedom is at risk. There's a great deal of discussion about how free the press should be, how free the church should be for that matter, how free our society should be.

The word of God speaks to us also about freedom. It points us to Christ as the one who is able to set men and women free.

He is the one who is able to deliver us and to establish us in freedom. If you obey my teaching, he says, you are really my disciples.

You will know the truth and the truth will set you free. Again, he says, if the sun sets you free, then you are truly free. The psalmist in Psalm 119, verse 45 says, I will live in perfect freedom because I try to obey your commandments.

And we know freedom, true freedom always is under law. And true freedom is always under authority. And the ultimate authority is Christ.

[14 : 38] And he is the one who comes to us in his word and offers us that authority under which we may know freedom. Calvin, the great reformer of Geneva, used to call the scriptures the scepter of Christ.

And it is as we submit to the scriptures that we discover the service of Christ and the freedom that Christ gives. And so the word of God has a great deal to say about freedom because it points us to an ultimate standard which guarantees freedom.

Because once we lose that ultimate standard, then freedom is at risk. The question, the third question that is being asked today is what is justice?

There's a great deal of talk again about justice. Justice is, there's a great deal of talk about freedom. And the view that many people hold is that justice is what the majority of people want.

Now, of course, all of us acknowledge that a just system will receive support of the majority.

[15 : 51] majority. But majority support does not in and of itself guarantee justice. Especially if we bear in mind the enormous powers of manipulation which are available to governments today.

Last summer, when I was on holiday, I read a book about the American presidency. And there was a great deal of talk in that book about what the Americans call perception management.

of how the president's assistants seek to control the media in order to present the most favorable, to present the president in the most favorable way.

We're living in a society in which perception is more important than truth. And where the media itself, although it can be a great corrective to the abuse of freedom and can reveal injustices, nevertheless itself can be used to manipulate men and women.

The Bible tells us that true justice comes from the divine norm. That God has given us his commandments.

[17 : 15] He has shown you, O man, what is good, said the prophet Micah. He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?

He has shown you. And we have that revelation in the word of God which gives us an objective, ultimate standard by which all justice can flow.

The psalmist said in Psalm 119 in his prayer, You are righteous, O Lord, and your laws are just. And again he says, I will sing about your law because your commandments are just.

And they're just because they come from him who is just. He is just in himself. And so this question, what is justice, is one which is a very relevant one today.

And the scriptures tell us the source of justice. It is God himself. It is important, of course, to recognize that the Bible does not provide us with a set of answers to every question.

[18 : 27] The Bible is not an encyclopedia. The Bible rather gives us guidelines. There are, after all, only ten commandments. And we have to be careful that we do not have a legalistic, develop a legalistic approach.

But God has given us in the scriptures these basic fundamental principles upon which we are to seek to establish our society and our individual lives and the lives of our families.

we need that wisdom which God gives. God gives us wisdom through his word. He has promised that his word will lead us into wisdom. And again, to quote the psalmist, when he says in Psalm 119, verse 4, I get wisdom, he says, from your laws.

And God has given us his word to be this handbook which enables us to live day by day. The word of God is not primarily a theological textbook, although of course it is that.

This is not primarily a book given to professors and ministers. This is a book, as Calvin said, for ordinary people. This is the people's book. And it's a book which will enable us to live day by day.

[19 : 43] And we give God thanks that in many countries around the world people are discovering in this book the secret of living and the impact that the Galic scriptures made on the highlands 200 years ago or a little less.

That similar kind of impact has been made in many African societies today, for example. Tremendous rejoicing, tremendous revival as the scriptures are received for the first time in their mother tongue.

People are discovering that in this book they find wisdom. It is a handbook for living. They live their lives out of the scriptures as God speaks to them and guides them day by day.

There's a fourth question which I believe the Bible provides answers to and that is what is life? What is life about? Why are we here where are we going?

And Jesus tells us that he has come that we might have life and have it more abundantly. He tells us that he has come in order that men and women might live to the full.

[21 : 01] And the popular idea that the teaching of Jesus is restrictive is false. Jesus has come that men and women might have life. Not that they might do as they like.

We all know that when we do as we like we ultimately don't enjoy ourselves. Happiness if it's sought as an end product is always always evades us.

Happiness enjoyment comes as a byproduct of doing something else. And the Bible tells us that happiness or joy comes as a byproduct of living for the glory of God.

Man's chief end says the catechism is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. It is as we glorify God that we have enjoyment. It is as we serve him that we find happiness.

I have come said Jesus that you might have life and life in all its fullness because as we serve him and through in his name serve others we discover life.

[22 : 14] That life is not the sum total of the things that we possess and the status symbols that we can acquire and the positions that we may achieve in society.

That life is living for God and living for others and as a result receiving that deep sense of joy and of happiness in our hearts which comes from glorifying God and enjoying him.

And so it is as we seek to live for Christ and live under the authority of his word that we discover the meaning of life. One translation of the 24th verse of Psalm 119 goes like this your instructions are my advisors.

God's word is a word which advises us. We receive advice, we receive counsel day by day and it's quite extraordinary quite extraordinary how relevant the word of God can be.

I never forget at one meeting I was invited to go to in Cumbernauld in a different church from our own where I didn't expect to experience this kind of thing a lady standing up in the meeting and saying how she found the Bible helped her to deal with a difficult neighbor who was using the telephone and not paying for it.

[23 : 46] Now there's nothing about telephones in the scriptures there's a lot about neighbors but she found strength through reading the scriptures to stand up for herself and for her rights against someone who was exploiting her and she was speaking about the relevance of the Bible God's word is a word for today and so the Bible tells us that life has a purpose it tells us that that purpose is to glorify God and to serve others it tells us that as we discover that purpose we experience joy and happiness not as ends in themselves but as byproducts the Bible tells us that beyond what we see and what we can touch there is a spiritual reality it tells us that beyond time there is eternity it tells us that here life here our pilgrimage here is only a tiny part of our human destiny it invites us to see a vast universe in which God has a place for us and it also reminds us that here and now we have the opportunity which will determine our eternal destiny here and now we live as it were in a phase in which things are pliable and plastic and things have not been set and in which the opportunity to choose life is given to us the Bible tells us that once we cross the frontier of time into eternity that opportunity will have gone and so this life is a life of opportunity a life in which we are challenged through the gospel to believe and to commit our lives to

Christ and discover the purpose that God has not only for us as individuals but also for the world and for the human race Jesus said the seed is the word of God the seed of the kingdom of God is the word of God and so the word of God has got this dynamic role to play and it is as we receive and as we follow the word of God as the scepter of Jesus Christ that we will enter into the kingdom of God and discover it as a reality in our own lives and so as we submit to his kingship that we will know his kingdom coming in our hearts God's word has had an extraordinary impact upon our heritage in the past

I wonder what impact will it have upon our future the answer to that question may well lie humanly speaking with this generation because we have the opportunity to pass on that heritage but we also have the opportunity to drop it and let it go what are we going to do with our heritage the story is told of a youngster who was playing rather carelessly in the living room of his house and knocked over a family heirloom a very precious vase and smashed to smithereens and of course his parents were very upset and very annoyed and they spoke to him and they said this vase has been with our family for generations and it has been preserved it's been kept the teenage son looked at his parents and he said well he said this generation has dropped it is that what our generation is going to say concerning our

Christian heritage or are we going to carry it into the future for future generations the answer to that question must be made by each one of us and the Bible the word of God is the means by which we have the opportunity to affirm our heritage and to pass it on to future generations if we let it drop it may never be recovered so the opportunity is ours today may God grant that each one of us as individuals and as families and as a congregation and as a denomination and as a wider Christian community in Scotland may not let the word of God drop that we would affirm it for ourselves and share it with others that this word of God which has been a lamp and a light to past generations may guide this and the coming generations into the future purposes of God let us pray our gracious

Lord and God we give thanks for this word around which we have gathered today a word through which you still speak to men and women today a word which although given so many centuries ago is a word which comes alive as we read it and grant O Lord that the Holy Spirit may be present with us to make it alive in our experience and grant O Lord that we may respond to it and that we may turn away from our rebellious spirit and submit to the scepter of Christ we give thanks for our Christian heritage forgive us O Lord if we so easily assume that it will automatically go on to coming generations help us to realize O Lord that any church is only one generation away from extinction grant O Lord that we may affirm our faith and that we may seek to share it with this and with coming generations we give thanks for the privilege of free access to the word of

[30 : 41] God and again we think of societies like China and others in danger of being deprived of this freedom grant O Lord that we may affirm the freedom that we have by submitting to the word of God and sharing it with the world hear this our prayer O Lord bless us as we sing another portion from this word help us in the words of the psalmist to respond to your word to us grant us the grace of submission and of faith and of obedience as we sing our parting song of praise and enable us O Lord our God to be not only hearers but also doers of the word we ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord Amen