

What's going on beneath the surface?

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What's Going on Beneath the Surface

Mark 4:1-20

Live Stream - 15th Nov 2020

Welcome by Roger

Blessed Assurance

VIDEO - Prayers by Mark & Jane

Roger introduces... VIDEO x 2 - Community Kids slot by Laura

part 1 - the seeds game

part 2 - Laura's explanation

Celebrations - Roger

Sunday 15th - Robin Attwater, Joy White (Jonny's mum)

Thursday 19th - Tim Ramsall & Friday 20th - Lyn > both 40...!! Both thanks to Church for prayers & support

over the birth of baby Reggie 5 weeks old.

Message - part 1 by David Herring

Our subject today is in the form of a question - what's going on beneath the surface?

I guess we have all asked that question from time to time. Maybe after a significant or unusual conversation with a work colleague, friend or family member. Maybe you heard a child say something 'un child like' and wondered - what's behind that comment - what's going on beneath the surface.

Many people will ask the question as a part of their professional life. Next week Tabitha is going to be speaking - She's a GP and I imagine that after many patients tell her about their problems she will ask the question - what's going on beneath the surface?

Sometimes our friends might wonder the same about us. Very occasionally someone might raise the courage to actually ask us - what's going on beneath the surface?

But whether or not they do actually ask the question the best they can ever do is listen and guess. Most of us are very good at presenting the world with the version of us we want people to see. We want people to think of us in a particular way so we act and speak in a way that portrays that likeness. If we do actually let people know what is going on in our lives it is very often a version of events that we have tailored to suit our purpose.

There are only ever two people who can actually answer the question truthfully - ourselves and God. But do we ever actually ask the question - or do we shy away from it.

The bible tells us it is vital that we take a deep and honest look within ourselves - even though that is often painful.

Today we are going to hear a story that Jesus told about looking beneath the surface...

VIDEO of the Reading by Eve of Mark 4: 1-20

Song - Good soil

Song - Thrive

Message - part 2 by David Herring

1) Introduction and background context.

Marks Gospel is all about action. Where the other Gospel accounts record much of what Jesus said Mark records an action packed account of Jesus.

It is not so much a record of what Jesus said as what Jesus did. Mark doesn't linger but moves quickly from one story to the next. It seems that one of his favourite words is straightaway or 'immediately'. In fact he uses it forty one times throughout his short account. This is no lengthy discourse like Luke (one of the longest books of the NT) or full of counterpoint and juxtaposition like John but is a whistlestop tour of Jesus life and ministry.

The question that runs through the whole Gospel is 'having seen what Jesus did what do you now believe about him?'

Mark is the shortest Gospel which asks big questions about faith. What or Who are you going to have faith in?

In order to help us look at this story and ask 'what is going on beneath the surface' I want us to look at four important words that appear.

2) The CROWD that gathered round him

Our reading today comes just four chapters into Marks Gospel. A quick scan of the previous three chapters shows us that the story so far revolves around three groups of people.

First of all there are the disciples. Just 14 verses into the first chapter Jesus calls his disciples. They hear what he has to say and immediately leave everything they have behind and follow Jesus.

Secondly there are the religious leaders of the day. These are sometimes referred to as the Teachers of the Law, sometimes as the Pharisees and sometimes simply 'those in the Synagogue'. They came in various flavours but whatever their precise description they show us an interesting insight into the spiritual state of the religious leaders of Jesus day.

These were the people who were most familiar with the OT scriptures. They knew the Law inside out and were familiar with all the teachings of the prophets. The whole of the OT, which they used as a pretext for their entire lives and was their constant justification for subjugating everyone around them, had one message - God is sending you a Messiah, be prepared for Him.

In short these were the people who should have been watching out for signs of the long awaited Messiah and watching Jesus with special interest and asking themselves some deep searching questions. These are the people who should have been helping Jesus to spread his message of the Good News of the Kingdom of Heaven and yet these were the very people who stood against Jesus. Every interaction we read of between Jesus and the religious leaders is one of animosity. Not on the part of Jesus but on the part of the religious leaders who saw him as a threat who needed to be brought down and destroyed.

So there were two diametrically opposed groups - on the one hand the disciples who had given up everything to follow Jesus and on the other hand the religious leaders who would stop at nothing to bring Jesus down.

And then there was the crowd - maybe the first century equivalent of the floating voter.

The crowd seemed to follow Jesus around wherever he went. Although we cannot know for sure what any of them thought about Jesus they probably weren't any different to crowds now.

They weren't really signed up to anything that Jesus said otherwise they would have been disciples but neither were they against Jesus. Most likely Jesus put on a good show and they wanted to see for themselves what these so called 'miracles' were all about.

Crowds like that have existed all through the ages - always up for a bit of entertainment to lighten a dull day however bizzare or macabre. Think of all the people who would turn out to the roman games, or public executions or any other sort of grotesque diversion.

But there are other sorts of crowds. People who are just looking for something to nail their colours to in a non-comital sense. Something or someone who can offer a modicum of hope in their desperate lives full of the worries of life.

Or maybe people who have heard half a story about someone and want to see for themselves if it's true... well apparently the bloke got up and walked away...apparently he'd been blind all his life...apparently he was a leper...apparently...if I could only get a bit closer to the front of the crowd and

see the action I would know for sure...I'm pretty sure it's all a con but I'd like to know for certain. You know the sort of thing.

21st century crowds do much the same thing on YouTube, Facebook or TicToc. I'm just curious to know if it's really true or just a load of rubbish...and we all know if it's on the internet it must be true!!!!

So the crowd followed and watched and enjoyed the spectacle of this strange carpenter's son from the north and wondered... And heard...

3) LISTEN –the word to the crowd

The Parable of the Sower as recorded by Mark is the first of the parables that Jesus tells to the crowd at large. It is true that Jesus did tell a parable about casting out demons in chapter three but that was to a specific group of people in response to a specific criticism.

This time Jesus wants to challenge the crowd at large – and so he tells a story.

Like all parables the theme of the story was familiar – a farmer sows seed in a field. What is not obvious is the implied meaning. The key to the crowd understanding the parable is in the first word Jesus says 'listen'. What else were they going to do? Hadn't they been listening all along?

Maybe but maybe not. I think Jesus wanted them to distinguish between the passive act of hearing (all I could hear was that dreadful music/baby crying/noisy engine) and the active act of listening.

Any of you who have worked with children will at some time have said something along the lines of 'are you listening to me'. Often children can hear you but it doesn't mean to say they are listening. Then they hear the words but have no idea what you've actually said and have no way of acting on your instructions.

I think that the same was true of the crowd Jesus was talking to. They could hear the words but were they listening to understand them? Sometimes there needs to be a 'can do' attitude to go along with listening and understanding – I will understand this.

But sometimes there needs to be more of a 'want to' attitude – 'I don't understand this but I really want to'. And I think that was what Jesus was encouraging in the crowd. If you really want to know what I am all about then don't just hear me but listen to me...

The story is simple enough – some of the seed falls on the path and gets eaten by the birds. Some falls onto shallow soil and though it may germinate quickly dies through lack of water or nutrition. Some falls into the weeds. This may well germinate but is instantly competing with the weeds for water, nutrition and sunlight. Needless to say that quickly dies too.

But some of the seed falls onto good soil. Jesus tells us that this seed germinated quickly and produced good crops and because of this the seed was multiplied thirty, sixty or even a hundred times.

So that seems simply enough – a parable that even a child can understand. But Jesus finishes the story with some advice – or maybe it is a warning.

'Him who has ears to hear, let him hear'. This seems to be a favourite saying of Jesus that is repeated throughout the Gospels as well as the book of Revelation. But what did Jesus mean by it? I think once again Jesus wants to distinguish between passively hearing and actively listening. There would have been plenty, if not the majority, of people in the crowd who were really just following a crowd – a crowd draws a crowd. Following particular teachers or religious personalities was a popular pastime – people are not really any different today! But Jesus wants to tell the crowd it is not just enough to stand on the edge of the crowd and hear what he says. They need to listen properly, to think about what he says and to want to understand it. I guess it's bit like reading books. Some books can be causally read and put down. Some books demand to be studied, reread, analysed and understood.

That doesn't mean to say that we need to be clever or academic to understand what Jesus says but we do need to 'want' to understand what Jesus is saying and to recognise that it is important. We cannot simply hear for a few minutes then wonder off and forget. That will do us no good at all.

4) GIVEN – the word to the disciples.

If Mark had stopped telling the story at that point then this would have been a very simple sermon indeed! But then the disciples asked a very good question – why do you speak in parables. Why not just tell the crowd how it is in a simple straight forward way.

I am reminded of Oscar Wilde's Great Aunt Augusta – 'A man should say what he means and mean what he says'!!

And I think the disciples have a point. There do seem to be some problems with the parable...

Why did the farmer allow the seed to fall on the poor soil and the path? Why didn't the farmer use

better seed? Why didn't the farmer pull up the weeds? Why didn't the farmer better prepare the soil? Why didn't the farmer put the path in a more convenient place? And what about the weather and the time of year when the farmer was sowing?

As an enthusiastic but not very knowledgeable gardener I spend a lot of time wondering why my plants don't grow. Sometimes it's the type of soil, sometimes the amount of light, sometimes the time of year I plant, sometimes the amount of water or the type of water (is it soft acidic rain water or hard alkaline tap water) and sometimes it is the type and condition of the soil. With some plants I feel that I just need to give them a funny look in the morning and they're dead by lunch time!

But really to ask all these questions is to miss the point of the parable. There is just one variable here – the condition of the soil. If Jesus is the farmer and the seed is the Gospel then the only thing that appears able to change is the soil – us.

But the disciples want to know why that is the case. If God is the farmer why doesn't he take a bit more control of the sowing process? Why doesn't he make sure the soil is in good condition? And does he care about the seed that falls in the poor soil? No farmer wants to waste seed so why does he scatter it so carelessly? And to come to the heart of the matter ... why doesn't Jesus just tell the people the plain and simple truth instead of telling them a story that they may or may not understand?

I guess that in the midst of all the difficult questions about Jesus method of teaching the disciples do the one things we should all do with our doubts and questions – ask God!! That shows a heart that is not just looking for looking for a get our clause or dis-proof of the message but a heart that desires to know and understand the truth.

Jesus response to the disciples doesn't really seem to help that much. The disciples know the secret of the Kingdom – God has already given it to them. Those on the outside who don't know the secret get the message in parables. It doesn't quite make sense does it? Surely the disciples should get the parables – they already know the truth to enable them to interpret the story and the crowd should get the plain and simple message without the analogous message?

But in order to explain to the disciples Jesus goes back to the OT.

Jesus quotes from one of the great commissioning passages from the OT. Isaiah the prophet has a great vision of God.

The prophet is not in a good place having previously lost his leader and spiritual mentor King Uzziah when he sees a vision of the God he should have been following and taught by all along. And the vision is remarkable and has been a source of wonder ever since.

But along with the majesty and the splendour of Isaiah's vision God has two purposes in mind – firstly to cleanse the prophet of his 'unclean lips'. We don't know exactly what that means but we do know that it stood in the way of God's second purpose – to commission Isaiah to go out into the nation and speak to the people.

But when Isaiah asks what he should say God has a rather surprising and unsettling message...

9He said, "Go and tell this people: " 'Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.'

10Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed."

11Then I said, "For how long, Lord?" And he answered: "Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant, until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged, 12until the LORD has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken. 13And though a tenth remains in the land, it will again be laid waste. But as the terebinth and oak

leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land."

What a depressing message to be told to preach to the nation. And yet this is the example Jesus gave to the disciples of why he spoke to the people in parables.

I am not sure how familiar the disciples would have been with the background to Isaiah 6 but the context we find there is pretty clear.

Isaiah is to go and preach to the people but as he does so the people will become deaf and blind to all that he says and does – but God allows that to happen – otherwise the people might hear and see and understand and 'turn and be healed'. Which seems incredibly harsh but for the reality that God doesn't want his family to be a group of brainwashed mindless automatons but people who have sought out the

truth. Who have wrestled with their own mistakes and failings and come to believe that the only one who holds the answer is God.

God's message to Isaiah also turns to the idea of growing plants. This time God talks about a tree stump regrowing.

When we take a spiritual chainsaw to the trunk and branches of our own self importance, worldly distractions and faith in ourselves (in fact faith in anything that isn't God) we start to sprout green shoots of life – like the tree that has been cut down and regrows from base.

So when we look at the parable we see that there is not a fatalism about what sort of soil we are but rather a matter of choice. Like the people in Isaiah's time we can become deaf, blind and hardened to what God is saying to us - in which case the ...

“Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant, until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged,

12until the LORD has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken.”

But the alternative is to listen and see and search and try to understand. Then we discover two truths – firstly that God speaks a message of love, forgiveness and acceptance to us – and secondly that God speaks a message of purpose to us. Which leads us on to our fourth and final word

4) PRODUCE

Just as the stumps of Isaiah's vision are cut down to grow again so the seed of the truth about God is planted to grow – and not just to grow. Listen to the language of the story of the seed that fell into good soil – it came up, then it grew – but that isn't all – then it produced a crop but not just one crop – rather it multiplied up to a hundred times.

The reality is that God saves us because he loves us. It is not his desire that any should reject his message but he does leave the choice up to us – will we become callous and hard hearted, deaf and blind or distracted by the importance of the world – or will we be fertile receptive soil. If so then we discover the wonderful truth that because God loves us he has a plan and a purpose for our lives.

God's plan was that those few in Israel who did listen, understand and repent wouldn't do so just to have a warm fluffy feeling and a healthy sense of self-righteousness compared to everyone else but in order to become a seed in the land of Israel. To fulfil God's purpose for his people and to grow and spread and multiply.

Paul puts in like this in Ephesians...

8For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9not by works, so that no one can boast. 10For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Eph 2 vv 7 - 10

I put lots of plants in my garden. The chief purpose of those plants is simply to look nice. It's true that I do have some fruit and vegetables that I grow in the allotment which I do eat but they tend to be quite a mixed bag in terms of successful cropping. If I had to live off of the produce from my garden we would all be a lot thinner!! The reality is that I put plant most of the things in my garden because I want to – not because I need to. But a farmer would take a completely different stance. For a farmer it is crucial that a crop is successful. Crop failure is not good at all.

So it is with us. God doesn't plant the gospel in our hearts so that we can feel good about ourselves and look very holy and spiritual. He does it because he has work for us to do – work according to a perfect and pre-ordained plan. Work that he planned for us from eternity past. Work that means that God's work of grace in our life will be multiplied many times over – and produce new seed to be planted in the lives of others.

Maybe you think it is pretty much impossible for you to do anything for God right now. Church services are not allowed to happen at the moment, the building is all shut up. You aren't allowed to visit friends or neighbours. Social lives have been almost completely curtailed. And yet none of this is a surprise to God.

It seems that the Covid crisis defies planning. No sooner than we make a plan than we find that circumstances and government restrictions have changed and those plans all have to be scrubbed.

But God's plans for us aren't derailed by our current situation - be that the Covid crisis or some other aspect of our lives which we feel stand in the way of us serving God. God put those plans in place in spite of all the human problems which stand in the way. But if we trust in him and his resources and not our

own we find he gives us the strength to do that which he has prepared for us since the beginning of the world.

I recently watched a documentary by the BBC security correspondent Frank Gardiner. You may well remember that several years ago Frank was in front of the camera when he was shot several times in the lower abdomen.

This was a life changing event that he was very fortunate to survive. His life now is completely different - he cannot perform normal bodily functions or walk or many other things. But he is still the BBC correspondent and on television on a regular basis. The key, he said, to his new lifestyle was not to look back on the things he used to be able to do but to focus on the things he could do. Sage advice for lockdown!!

There is another great 'comissioning' story in the Bible - that of Moses.

After 40 years in the wilderness tending sheep God told Moses to present himself to the Pharaoh in the palace of Egypt. Moses came up with all sorts of very good reasons why he should - not least of all being that he was a nervous and incoherent speaker and that he was still wanted for murder in Egypt!

But God asks Moses a question - what is in your hand? Moses looks down and sees the shepherds staff that he used all day everyday as he tended sheep. It wasn't really going to be much use in talking to the Pharaoh surely? But it was where God started...

We may think that we are up to much. Maybe we are too poor, not clever enough, not able to speak in public, too rich, not 'people orientated enough' to do anything for God. Maybe we feel that achieving anything is just impossible during this current Covid lockdown. But maybe we need to take Frank Gardiner's advice and not think about what we used to be able to do but to look at what we can do.

When, like Isaiah, we are ready to serve but unsure where to start God still asks us the question...what is in your hand?... because that is where we'll start.

There's a work for Jesus, ready at your hand,
'Tis a task the Master just for you has planned.
Haste to do His bidding, yield Him service true;
There's a work for Jesus none but you can do.

Refrain:

Work for Jesus, day by day,
Serve Him ever, falter never; Christ obey.
Yield Him service loyal, true,

There's a work for Jesus none but you can do.

2 There's a work for Jesus, humble though it be,
'Tis the very service He would ask of thee.

Go where fields are whitened, and the lab'ers few;
There's a work for Jesus none but you can do. [Refrain]

3 There's a work for Jesus, precious souls to bring,
Tell them of His mercies, tell them of your King.
Faint not, nor grow weary, He will strength renew;
There's a work for Jesus none but you can do. [Refrain]

Song - The Blessing

Close - Roger

What is God saying to YOU?

Are you a feeling a part of the CROWD? One of those looking for someone or something?

Are you LISTENING and that's it, or listening PRO-ACTIVELY?

The only thing in the story that can change is the soil, and that's us. God's purpose was always to cleanse and to give a commission. We are GIVEN forgiveness and purpose. Thanks be to God!

What are WE / YOU able to PRODUCE? Think about what you can do now? What's in your hand?