

## **Notes from Sermon given by Ian Stackhouse – February 8th 2009**

### **Mark 4:3-9 Fertile Soil**

Ian began by describing how disappointed he had been when, as a new Christian, he first saw the land around the Sea of Galilee, as it was so barren, rocky with thistles and scrubby vegetation, plus all the rubbish left and the overt tourism.

Jesus is speaking in a natural amphitheatre where he can see the rocks, stones and pathways. Theologically it was perfect, because this terrain was an illustration of the Kingdom of God. He always used parables and everyday occurrences to make a point about what it is like to be in the Kingdom of God. The farmer scattering his seed is an illustration of the seed falling on different things which describe the different responses to Jesus Himself, to His proclamation of the kingdom of God.

The responses include the anger of the Pharisees, the opposition of the Scribes, the scepticism of His family, the puzzlement of the conservatives, and the superficial enthusiasm of the crowd for his miracles, and the large crowd following him out of curiosity but whose loyalty is yet to be tested. Jesus was not embraced wholeheartedly, but greeted with scorn, derision and light-heartedness. In fact the only ones who recognised Him as the Son of God, as Mark describes right at the beginning, are the demons!

Here is a very unpromising beginning, but Mark wants to say to Christians in Rome (where this gospel will go) that this apparent irrelevancy of Jesus is because we are looking at Him by the wrong standards, by the wrong models of success, with the wrong lenses. The Zealots wanted to add Jesus to their national ambitions, to their military agenda, and the Pharisees wanted to see him apply legal observance. It is therefore no surprise that if we want a Kingdom of God that matches the power and majesty of Rome, then the death of a wandering preacher in Palestine would seem to be irrelevant.

However, if we take off the spectacles, and let go of our notion that we know what's going on in the world, then we'll see that He is the Son of God. If we receive His word, despite all the opposition it will produce a breath-taking harvest, because of the life which is of God, not of men's ingenuity. In Romania, where Ian will be at the beginning of March, the mustard-seed of the Kingdom of God was not buried by the concrete of 20<sup>th</sup> century communism. God doesn't need our programmes, our good intentions, but if you live by His word, you will have power. Jesus is not worried about His mage, but He talks about an insignificant mustard-seed. He is not looking for our good ideas, our programmes, even our enthusiasms - too many renewal movements have been hindered by activism. He is looking for long-term deepening and ripening faith, the kind that grows quietly. God takes that seed and by His power multiplies it.

Jesus is anxious to keep the movers and shakers of this world with their personal agendas that he deliberately makes the teaching obscure, confusing and scrambled, so that the people who follow Jesus are not mere casual observers but they are people who want to follow Jesus all the time for all of their lives. The parables sort the spectators from the followers - people who, though they don't have all the answers, are gripped by the person of Jesus, have a deepening faith and a passion to follow this man.

So don't panic, the end is secure, we may get opposition but we are on the winning side.