

One of the greatest intellectuals who ever lived, Sir Isaac Newton once famously said:

I do not know how I might appear to the world, but to myself I seem to have been merely a child playing by the seashore; diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than usual, while the great ocean of truth lies all undisturbed before me.

If I could pick up on his metaphor – imagine for a moment that you are a child at Portstewart strand on a glorious clear summer day. The sky is blue – the water is sparkling – the sand is white and dazzling. You want to capture the experience so you gather a handful of sand and some shells in your pocket and you take them home to show your mother. The sand and shells are genuine souvenirs of your visit – but how well do they convey the experience of standing there on the beach for yourself?

That is how I feel this morning as I face the challenge of bringing before you in 30 minutes the teachings of Jesus. I feel as though all I have is a handful of sand and a pocket full of shells. That's completely inadequate. If you want to experience the teachings of Jesus you need to go there for yourself.

In part that is because of the sheer quantity and variety of his teachings. John the fisherman friend of Jesus wrote at the end of his book about the life of Jesus that [Jesus did many other things as well. If everyone one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.](#) Admittedly John was referring specifically to the things that Jesus did as opposed to the things that he taught – but I suggest to you that the point is transferrable.

Jesus taught many things and we will try to take a bird's eye view of them this morning but first can I ask if it has ever dawned on you what is the primary significance of the fact that Jesus taught at all? Why did Jesus teach?

The answer of course is very simple – he taught because he knew that we were capable of understanding and learning.

I remember going to camp when I was 10 years old. One of the most exciting aspects of the camp was that it had a swimming pool – and in Korea when the temperature in June was over 40deg to have access to a safe swimming pool was for me the biggest treat in the world. The swimming pool was fed from a mountain stream and it depended on the spring rainfall to have enough water to fill the pool – but that year was a very dry year and when I arrived at the camp the swimming pool was dry.

We played games in the dry pool but we couldn't swim. I remember we even had swimming lessons one day – we were taught how to move our arms and legs in the breast-stroke, and the back crawl – exciting stuff (not).

Finally on Thursday after a week of sunshine the rain came – on Friday the stream filled the pool – and on Saturday for one glorious morning we were able to swim in the pool.

Now here's the thing ... those swimming lessons on dry ground were boring and probably of little real value – but they were not completely pointless because we were all at least capable of learning how to swim – there even came a day when we did actually swim.

But can you imagine if we had been given similar dry land lessons on how to fly? Can you imagine getting into an aerodynamic posture – flapping our arms – aiming into a headwind? What would be the point? Human beings cannot fly! Give them a lifetime of teaching and they will be no better off – they will never fly.

Jesus taught the people he lived among because he knew that they were capable of hearing and learning and doing what he taught them.

But his style of teaching would not be acceptable today! We live in a world where people expect to be spoon-fed their knowledge. People expect their teachers to get them through – and even threaten to sue them if they fail exams. In our world knowledge is given and received.

In the kingdom of God knowledge is pursued by the student – it is buried and needs to be dug up – it is obscured behind riddles that need to be solved – it is disguised and deliberately made inaccessible so that only those who truly want to know can ever know.

Does that sound strange to you? Why would you be surprised that the way of Jesus is strange compared with the way of the world around us? Have we come so far that we actually believe that our way is right?

So many times I have heard Christians describe the parables that Jesus told as illustrations to help people understand the truth. Have you ever heard that said? Please can I say as categorically as possible in a way that you cannot misunderstand – parables are **not** illustrations to help people understand truth – parables are a way of hiding the truth in a mystery story – in a riddle that you need to solve if you are ever going to get the message. Parables are intended to make it **more** difficult for you to understand truth – not less difficult.

In Matthew 13 – the chapter that is full of parables about the Kingdom of Heaven – we read these words just after the parable about the sower:

9 He who has ears, let him hear."

10 The disciples came to him and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?"

11 He replied, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them.

12 Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.

13 This is why I speak to them in parables: "Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.

14 In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: "'You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.

15 For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.'

16 But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear.

17 For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.

18 "Listen then to what the parable of the sower means:

Even his disciples never understood what any of the parables meant – a number of times they came to Jesus to ask him to explain what they meant and Mark 4 tells us that Jesus never talked to the crowd without using parables, but that when he was alone with his disciples later he would explain the parables.

Amos prophesied centuries earlier about a day when God would send a famine – not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of the hearing of the words of the Lord. He said men would stagger from sea to sea and wander from North to East searching for the word of the Lord but they would not find it.

In our western culture information is our greatest treasure – but all our information is in databases on the internet. It is all available in response to a handful of well chosen questions to a software search engine. We cannot imagine living in a world where we could not discover in seconds from Google the population of Chile, or a recipe for chocolate brownies, or the fastest route to 24 Sychamore Street – or whatever else we want to know. Why know all those things – we simply need to know where to find them.

And when it comes to God the same applies – we live as if we don't need to actually know anything about his kingdom or his values or his plans – we just need to know where to find that out – and it's all in here ... in a database ... with a search engine.

Except that it is not!

No database – no search engine – no amount of computer analysis will help you to discover the knowledge of God if he has withheld it from you. You might understand the words of the parable – you might see a picture in your mind of herbs growing in a garden or a man finding treasure in a field ... but you won't have a clue what Jesus is really saying unless God unlocks that understanding in your mind. If God sends a famine of the hearing of the words of the Lord then you will not hear from him even if you read the Bible every day!!

The teaching of Jesus is only half of the formula for producing people who know and understand the ways of God – the other half is people like you and me willingly and hungrily participating in a quest for that knowledge.

Can I ask you carefully, has your heart become calloused?

There was a Canaanite woman who came to Jesus for help. You can imagine what that was like culturally and socially. His disciples urged him to send her away – she was an embarrassment and an irritation to them. What would he do? Surely his love and his grace has no cultural or national boundary?

He said to her:

24 "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

25 The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said.

26 He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs."

27 "Yes, Lord," she said, "but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

28 Then Jesus answered, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted."

What was going on here? Was he teasing her?

I believe he was testing her – he was giving her opportunity to truly reach out to him – he was proving the earnestness of her intention. He refused her twice and still she came back a third time with a valid yet humble argument – not prepared to be put off.

In the face of this show of evidence he declared her faith to be great.

- He knew her heart all along –
- he didn't need to be convinced –
- but I believe that she needed the pursuit.
- She needed to reach out after him.
- It was an essential part of the process by which she discovered the truth about him.

So what did Jesus teach?

Well if you read the record that John has kept for us you will find that just about everything written there describes Jesus teaching about himself. Among many other things that he said we find him telling people:

I am bread – bread of life

I am light – light of the world

I am a gate – the gate of a sheepfold

I am a shepherd – the good shepherd

I am the resurrection and the life

I am God's son

I am the way, the truth and the life

I am in my Father

I am the true vine

... and then that one that stops us in our tracks ... I am thirsty!

You understand that this is only a whistle stop tour of a tiny fraction of what John recorded from the teaching of Jesus – but it is characteristic. John was not much interested in any teaching about our morality or how we should behave towards each other or even about the Kingdom of God. John was fascinated by what Jesus taught about himself. If you want to discover who Jesus really is – read John's record – and dig.

Matthew had a different perspective on the teaching of Jesus – he had a number of key lessons that he worked his way through systematically – covering them in sequence 2 and sometimes 3 times in the course of his book. Some of these lessons were about the Kingdom of God and what really is important (and that frequently is diametrically opposed to what we think is important). Some of these lessons were about who is in the Kingdom of God and what or who lies outside it and what that can mean. Some of the lessons were about God and once again much of the lessons Matthew recalled were about Jesus himself.

- Jesus taught that what went on in your heart was as important or even more important than what you actually did.
- He taught vigorously against any form of play acting – pretence – keeping up a false image – hypocrisy
- He explained the futility of storing up things that perish – wasting effort rather than making spiritual investments
- He commanded people not to worry – why worry when your Father knows what you need?
- He commanded people not to judge – in a kingdom where everyone who is included is there by the grace of God – who could possibly have the right to judge another?
- He told people to expect persecution – if he was persecuted then it was to be expected that his followers would be also – but he told them not to be afraid of it – instead be afraid of God.
- And he taught that whoever treasures his own life will lose it – but whoever loses his life for MY sake will find it.
- He taught that God is our father

- He taught that God is personally interested in us – in every detail of our life
- He taught that God is real and sensible and not enchanted by our words
- He taught that God is fierce and terrible and will judge sin
- He taught that he had power to forgive sins
- He taught that he was the one who was foretold by the prophets
- He taught that he was greater than the temple
- He taught that he was greater than the Sabbath
- He taught that wherever he was – the Kingdom of God had arrived!
- He taught that he must suffer
- He taught that greatness in the Kingdom of God is measured by service
- He taught that outside the Kingdom of God is blackness and weeping and gnashing of teeth
- He taught that this era was coming to an end and that there would be a new era – and that we should be watchful for it.

Again you will understand that this is only a quick run through the cornfield pulling off a few ears of corn here and there. But even in such a quick run through you cannot have missed the controversy in what Jesus taught versus what is commonly held today even among evangelical Christians.

Do not store up material goods? I know perfectly well how difficult it would be to break out of this mould and how much it would exclude us from modern society – but let's not actually start to think that we are correct and that Jesus was misunderstood.

Greatness equates to service? We have translated that to mean “greatness is a reward for service” – but we are utterly wrong! It is the service that is the greatness – but it seems that we don't want to serve – we don't want to miss out on anything fun for the sake of anyone else.

Do not worry? I know that after this sermon I will have at least 6 people come up to me and qualify this statement. I know that because you have already done so in the past. We are good at qualifying statements like that because they run so contrary to our experience and our thinking that the only way we can cope with them is to rationalise them and dilute them. But Jesus did not qualify his statement – he said **do not worry**. He said which of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life?

So why are the teachings of Jesus so shocking to our modern thinking. Surely after 2000 years of studying them we must have become familiar and attuned to his thinking? Well I suggest that in fact the situation is that we as a church are not working hard to understand him – we are not digging to find the buried truth – we are not pondering and wrestling with the hard ideas to unpick the riddles in which he has hidden his thinking. We are content with our Sunday morning Bible milkshake and we spend the rest of the week imagining Jesus as our best friend who naturally agrees with everything we do and think.

But I have to say to all of you that the teaching of Jesus will not come to you passively like dinner in a restaurant. You need to go out and hunt the game – you need to skin and butcher the animal – you need to research the menu and gather the ingredients – you need to prepare the roast and the herbs and gravy to go with it – you need to set the table and cork the bottle and pour the wine – you need to carve the joint and plate the meal and serve the table – and then ... you can eat.

Are you prepared to do all that metaphorically in order to receive the teaching of Jesus? If you are not then it will all go over your head and you will miss out on being what Jesus reckoned you were capable of.