

Mark 4:1-20

What was your reaction as Harry Kane slotted home England's first goal last night? And what about when the final whistle blew at 4-0?

Maybe you weren't even watching so you had no reaction at all. I imagine some of you were jumping up and down and making a lot of noise and you're going to be in a good mood for the rest of the week, or at least until Wednesday. There's probably others of us who were pleased at the result, but it's hardly life-changing.

We all react differently and it probably depends really on how we feel about football and how we feel about England.

As we have followed through Mark's account of Jesus' life over the last few weeks we have encountered this man from Nazareth proclaiming the powerful, life-giving news of the kingdom of God. A kingdom of healing and forgiveness, of fulfilment and blessing, of joy and hope.

A kingdom where death and sin and sickness are no more, a place open to anyone who will turn and put their trust in its king, Jesus Christ.

Mark has recorded people who have reacted with enthusiasm and some with whole-hearted commitment, but he has also recorded some who are filled with hate and plotting to kill him.

If those are the extremes, there is a big group in the middle who seem interested, who want to hear Jesus, but everything he is saying makes no real difference to them and their lives. It was true in Mark's day, it's true in ours too.

People who will watch the match, enjoy it even, but as soon as the final whistle blows, life goes on as normal.

Which can be confusing. If the good news of God's kingdom is so good, if it's so powerful and life-changing, why does it make so little difference in so many peoples lives. And we might even ask ourselves, why is it so often that it doesn't make that much difference in my life either?

Jesus has something to say to us. He wants to help us understand the mixed reactions he gets and help us as we listen and want to see our own lives changed and see lives changed around us as the good news of his kingdom is heard.

A crowd has gathered again to hear him teach by the lake and it gets so big that he gets into a boat and pushes out so he can use it as his pulpit.

4:2 He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: 'Listen!

Jesus tells the parable in verses 3-9 and then he explains it in verses 14-20. And in the middle of the sandwich, is the meat or the heart of this section that is crucial for us to hear.

Mixed Results as God's Kingdom is Proclaimed (1-9 & 13-20)

4:3 Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed

This isn't a lesson in farming, Jesus is making a point about what happens to the message of God's kingdom, the word of God as it is sown, spread among people.

4:14-15 The farmer sows the word. Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them.

Firstly the path. Path people hear God's Word and it's in one ear and out the other. They might find it interesting, they might even learn something about God, but the word has had no impact whatsoever on their hearts. They have heard no challenge, no encouragement. And they go away unchanged because Satan has snatched the word away.

4:16-17 Others like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.

Secondly, rocky places. Rocky people hear God's Word and it does have an impact on their hearts. They are filled with joy at the news they have heard. But it's short lived. As soon as they realise that being a disciple of Jesus won't be all plain sailing, as soon as they are faced with a family member mocking them or problems at work because following Jesus means doing things differently... any impact is scorched away because they have no root to hold them firm. Another life unchanged.

4:18-19 Still others like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful.

Thirdly, thorns. Thorny people hear God's Word and again it seems to make a difference to their lives. But there is no fruit, no real lasting change, because the word about the kingdom of God is just one among many.

It gets choked by the kingdom of worry, the kingdom of money, the kingdom all those things people desire in this life. Another life unchanged.

4:20 Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop - some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown.

Finally, good soil. Good soil people hear God's Word and it changes them. They grow, and produce fruit, lots of fruit. God's Word is planted deep in their hearts. So it can't be snatched away. Firmly rooted it won't be scorched and the thorns won't get a look in. Fruit is seen not only in this one changed life but can be seen springing up everywhere around them.

Mixed results as God's Kingdom is Proclaimed

It's always been like this. So don't be surprised. Don't lose heart.

But why is it like this? And how do I make sure I'm good soil? How do help others to be good soil?

It all depends on how we feel about God's King (10-12)

4:10 When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables..."

The secret, the message, the good news of the kingdom of God has been given to... to who?

To the twelve and the others around him. To those who have come close to Jesus. To those who are really wanting to listen to Jesus, who trust them as their King. They are the good soil.

Path people, rocky people and thorny people are those on the outside. Those who have not come in. They hear, but from a distance, they don't trust Jesus enough to get into the boat with him.

It's like the difference between an England fan who only watches big matches when they are on tv and an England fan who will travel to a remote town on the edge of Europe to cheer on their team playing a friendly match of no real significance.

4:9 "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear"

Let them come to me and trust me and really hear me.

Is Jesus a famous historical figure or is he your king?

Until we make him our king, everything he says will be in parables. We might learn something about God, but our hearts won't be impacted, we won't be changed.

4:11 So that they may be ever seeing, but never perceiving, and every hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!

These words are stark and uncomfortable to read. Jesus takes them from Isaiah, the prophet who was sent to God's people who had been walking away from God for a very long time. Whose hearts had hardened, who did not trust him, who didn't want him as their king. And so his words were water off a duck's back.

The life-changing news of God's kingdom is only life-changing when we trust God's king.

Two implications as we come to a close:

1. Stay close to Jesus

Make sure you are in the boat with him, not standing on the shore listening to him from afar. Trust him as your king. When you come to God's Word, Don't come simply wanting to learn more interesting things.

Come expecting to get to know Jesus better. To be challenged, encouraged and changed from deep within. Come in an attitude of prayer asking God to make the soil in your heart good and ready for growth and fruit.

Stay close to Jesus, who on the cross became the ultimate outside so you could come into his kingdom.

Stay close to Jesus who has and who will deal with any birds or rocks or thorns that might threaten the growth and fruit that he promises to those who will hear his voice.

If you have never come to Jesus and trusted him as your king, his invitation is open, come, trust him and hear, really hear how the good news of his kingdom can change your life forever.

2. Stay faithful to Jesus

As we seek to make more disciples of Jesus and see more lives changed as his Kingdom is heard about, it can be so disheartening when so many don't seem to care. Why can they not see that this is the best news ever?

And the temptation can be to doubt the power of the seed, the power of the word. We can think we need to adapt it for our times. Make changes to the word to make it easier to hear to that it will grow. But can we see from this parable that the problem is never with the seed, it's only every with where it lands?

And so we need to stay faithful to Jesus and have confidence in him and in his word to do its work. We need to pray because it is his work, not ours, pray that he will soften hearts and open blind eyes.

We need to speak about Jesus in a way that shows him off for who he really is, inviting people to come to him and listen to him, to see that he is the best news ever and can be trusted as a perfect king.

The life-changing news of God's Kingdom is only life-changing when we trust God's King.

So stay close to Jesus. Stay faithful to Jesus.