In this parable Jesus explains to his disciples the reality of people responding or not responding to the seed, the good news of the Kingdom of God. Jesus splits people into 4 categories, and only one of these responds wholeheartedly and with a full life commitment. There is of course, another group of people who are not included in this and that is those who never hear the good news of the Kingdom of God. This parable is about those who do hear.

The first category is of those who hear it but do not respond at all, the truth never gets a hold within them, is never successfully planted, it is snatched away before the seed can germinate, can take root and it is Satan who snatches it away - an acknowledgement of the spiritual battle in which we live, the battle to keep people away from the truth, the knowledge of Jesus as God’s Son, saviour and redeemer. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians clearly outlines the spiritual battle and the need for the armour of God. Sadly some people will never receive the truth about Jesus.

Others will receive it and respond with joy and enthusiasm but their roots do not go deep, their hearts are like the rocky ground, and when trials and tribulations come they quickly fall away. This points forward to the persecutions that the disciples will undergo in the coming days - Jesus is preparing them for this new reality.

The third group are those within whom the truth takes root and they grow, but they do not immerse themselves in a church community, do not receive the support, encouragement, and guidance of fellow Christians, are not nurtured with biblical teaching and fellowship. Instead they try to live their faith surrounded by worldly people and so remain influenced and pressured by the seductions of this world, the enticements and deceitfulness of wealth. They do not learn to step away from these, to rely on Jesus, to live life more simply and to trust in God’s provision. So the cares and worries of this world, the fears of lack consume them and they fall away, never appreciating the beauty of relying on Christ.

The final group are those whose heart is fertile and receptive, unencumbered by other messages or pressures, those who willingly and fully respond to Jesus, to the good news of the Kingdom of God and in their enthusiasm they produce lives of fruitfulness, lives full of the joy and love of Jesus, lives which shine with a vibrancy of knowing Jesus, lives which are attractive and which draw others to know Jesus, 30, 60 or a hundred other people likewise living in the fullness of God’s love.

Thus the number of people who know Jesus grows at an exponential rate, it is a staggering growth rate. And we see a dramatic example of this when on the day of Pentecost 3000 people became followers of  Jesus. Such growth is possible.

I find this parable both encouraging and daunting. In the 35 years since I have been born again I do not think that I have brought 35 people to Jesus let alone 100. But I take solace in the description of the three categories of people who do not make life long commitments, it explains why it can be so difficult to bring others to know Jesus, softens my lack of success in doing this and gives me pointers as to how to pray for them.

But this parable leaves me with a niggling criticism of myself. It makes me feel that I am a failure, that I am not a fruitful person, because I have not produced a harvest of 30, 60 or a hundred others who have come to know Jesus through me.

This last Monday we had the funeral of our dear sister in Christ, Averil. When we arrived here Averil and Sheila were already reducing their ministry, so I never saw her in her prime. What came out at the funeral was her fun and laughter, her joy and creative mischievousness, that could bring a new perspective on a familiar bible story, and how in so many ways she was a hugely attractive person and people were drawn to her, and through her to the Christ that shone out through her. To me Averil is the epitome of the fourth category of people in this parable - she bore fruit 30, 60, a 100 times.
I am not like her and in comparing myself with her I can feel that I have failed, that my heart is not good soil, that I have not produced the fruit that brings other people to Jesus.

There are two things to note. The first is highlighted in our first reading from Paul’s letter to the Romans. In all of this it is Holy Spirit who draws us and others to God, who reveals the wonder and truth of God. It is Holy Spirit who opens people’s hearts and minds to God, it is Holy Spirit who makes us fruitful. This life giving Holy Spirit, dwelling within us, and in others. By God’s grace we are partners in the mission field, called to work alongside Holy Spirit in declaring and revealing the love of God, the Kingdom of God. It is not all upon us.

Secondly we are all different. Each of us is made in the image of God, yet each of us are ourselves, unique, loved by God and God delights in making us different. So I am Graham, Averil was Averil. Averil delighted in being herself and we were blessed by that. Each of us needs to learn to be ourselves and to delight in that. So I learn to rejoice in being me, lay aside my sense of failure and assess my own journey, my own walk with God and discover that it is worth doing a spiritual self review using the first three categories of this parable.
The first category. Do I let Satan take away some of my joy? My certainty, my conviction? Yes, I can see that at times I have allowed this to happen. Lord Jesus, forgive me for listening to these lies, for allowing them to take root in me. Help me to put on the armour of God, protect me from these lies.

As for the second category, I have not been persecuted but in my early years as a Christian I did receive a lot of negative and hurtful comments from my parents. I am glad to say that this changed in their later years. These criticisms served to strengthen my resolve to follow Jesus. As steel sharpens steel, so I was sharpened but as things became easier and the criticisms lessened, then I have become softer, not so focussed, not so rigid in my faith. There is growth in this, more gentleness and compassion but with the greyer boundaries I am more vulnerable to temptations, temptations that come under the third category.

So do I let worries and concerns, a fear of a lack of money or resources or a focus on ambition, or worldly success dominate over my being a disciple of Jesus? Yes, occasionally nowadays I do and this leads me to pray Lord Jesus forgive me and help me to remain focused on you.

Each of us can do this kind of self reflection, not to beat ourselves up, but to allow the life giving, in-dwelling Holy Spirit to draw us ever closer to God, to be more fruitful and to become more and more the unique individual Jesus created us to be, and to delight in that.

Let us pray.
Father we thank you for your Son Jesus. We thank you for the parables that he told. We thank you for Holy Spirit who you send upon us, to live within us. Help us to be the people you have created us to be, help us to be fruitful in our character and the ministry and mission field you call us to. Help us to delight in being ourselves and not to be envious of others.
Amen.