

Sermon 12 July 2026

Hymns

414 Peace perfect peace,

60 Bind us together,

398 Oh the love of my lord,

298 Let there be love,

16 All over the world.

Sermon

I don't know about you, but I think I may have reached a point where the Parable of the Sower is now so familiar, that I barely hear it. I had certainly stopped really thinking about it. But then we began to use it in Safeguarding training. Yes – exactly. What on earth has the parable got to do with Safeguarding? It's about the different ways that people hear Jesus' message, isn't it?

Yes, of course. And it's also about the different ways that people respond to safeguarding training. Safeguarding is a biblical, theological imperative, just as spreading the gospel is. We are instructed by Jesus to love one another, which implies taking care of each other. And yet we tend to shy away from the implications of safeguarding. We avoid facing up to the fact that abuse of all kinds happens even in Christian communities, so that we don't have to do something about it.

Jesus identifies four different kinds of land onto which seed might be sown. First of all, there is the pathway, which will be hard and well trodden. Then there is the stony ground, where there is a little soil, but not very much. Then there's the land which is certainly fertile, but there are so many weeds that there's not much room for anything else. Finally, there is the good soil, which yields an abundant crop. But how are we to understand what Jesus is pointing to here?

The land which is hard and walked over a lot is never likely to receive any messages of any kind.

It is just there, unyielding. In terms of safeguarding, it might represent those who cannot see the point of the training; who might let it land on them but then do nothing with it. But when it comes to safeguarding, not only is there a theological imperative to do it, but there are also powerful reasons why we cannot presuppose that it is unnecessary. Because it doesn't happen in our church, does it?

OK. How do you know? Where do we imagine that abuse happens? In homes where people are not like us? Where there are poor levels of education or social skills? No. Abuse happens right across the social spectrum. I've worked in schools where parents thought they were superior to others because they could afford to pay for their children's education. In those same schools, I've seen awful abuse – mostly emotional and psychological, but still abuse. I've worked in a school which specialised in working with children from otherwise 'good' homes, but where children have witnessed their father murder their mother,

or where parents have given up on trying to raise their children; or where the parents are drug addicts and cannot raise their children. These were not children from poor homes: they were largely middle class.

And I've watched my father being abused by his second wife, who hit him and locked him up because she didn't want him to visit me. And I have myself been abused: physically, emotionally, psychologically, financially. I was once working with a group who were doing the Basic and Foundation courses face to face. There is a little video of a boy who tells us that he has an ACE – in other words, he has been identified as an abused child. He is stereotyped as a child from a poor background who will never do much academically. I hit the roof the first time I saw that video. I have been abused. I'm from a middle class background, and I have a PhD. The group I was working with were gobsmacked by that! Really?! Why? Abuse happens regardless of social and academic standing.

So we can now probably see where I'm going with the other types of land: they are increasingly receptive to the messages that land on them, until we get to the good soil, which is fertile and fruitful.

But we are good farmers, too. Or we should be. We can see that if we want to have a plentiful harvest, we need to prepare the ground to receive the seed. We need to clear away the rocks and weeds so that the seed can grow. This is a constant process, not just a one-off.

Yet what about the pathway, which will never be able to receive the seed? Do we just forget about it? The land can't be changed until its use is changed. But how do we know which people form the pathway? And people are not visible barren land. Jesus says that those who have ears should hear. How do we know which people have ears? We can guess that those who shout loudly that safeguarding is a waste of time and unnecessary are probably the hard ground, but we can't know that for certain.

So I argue that our task is to continue preparing the ground and distributing the seed, letting it fall where it will. We then continue to tend the land, and to pray, that our seed might be fruitful, and that we, like the wise virgins of another parable, are ready for what our harvest yields.