

The Gospel Parables

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JESUS SEEMS to have used the parables not just to teach, in the sense of conveying religious information to his listeners, and not just to do so in an overtly non-religious, non-preachy way,¹ but he also forced his hearers to reflect on the parables, and try to puzzle out for themselves what they might mean. The fact that the disciples seem to have often been at a loss as to how to interpret the parables indicates they had tried but failed to do so. A consolation, perhaps, for later generations.

Jesus used material that was familiar to his hearers in his parables in order to bring them to reflect on less familiar realities. He used, therefore, the rural world of Galilee, where he had been raised, in some of his parables, evoking the world of 'farming and shepherding, and domestic scenes in a simple one-room house (Lk 11.5-8). The homes of the rich were seen only through the kitchen door – the view of servants and slaves' (pp. 984-85).² Some knowledge of this background might, for instance, help to explain – just to take one example – why in the parable of the Sower the seed is cast so widely and so liberally. It seems 'that in Palestinian farming sowing sometimes took place before plowing' (p. 985).

Like many storytellers, Jesus uses well-established devices in recounting his parables.

1. Interestingly, Jesus seems to have recounted nearly all his parables outdoors, in the open air, or in private houses, not in religious buildings, like the Temple or a synagogue. Among the apparently few exceptions would be the evangelists' placing the recounting of the parable of the Wicked Husbandmen in the Temple (Mt 21:31-34; Mk 12:1-9; Lk 20:9-16), possibly reflecting tensions between traditional Judaism and the early church, or Luke's placing of the short parables of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven seemingly in a synagogue (Lk 13:18-19; Lk 13:20-21).

2. Except where otherwise stated, page numbers in round brackets in the text refer to R. E. Brown, article, 'Parables of Jesus,' in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 10 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), pp. 984-88.

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One of these would be the rule of three, namely, that in popular stories it is customary to have three characters with the point of illustration lying in the third. Thus, in the parables, three servants are entrusted with the talents, and three men pass the man who fell among robbers. Another technique of storytelling is direct discourse: rarely is it told in the third person what a character is thinking. Rather, the characters talk aloud to themselves so that the hearer may find out what is in their minds, e.g., in the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican (Lk 18.9-14) and in that of the Rich Fool (Lk 12.16-21). Only one conversation can hold the stage at a time; and consequently, when three characters are involved, as in the Talents, the direct confrontation is repeated three times (Mt 25.14-28) (pp. 985-86).

Moreover, '[t]hinking of the parables as stories will also help to make understandable the peculiarities and inconsistencies that appear in them. "That is for the sake of the story" is the answer to many a difficulty that arises if one is too logical, e.g., why a dishonest steward should be allowed to make an inventory (Lk 16.1 [2, is perhaps meant]), or why workers should be paid in inverse order (Mt 20.8)' (p. 985-86).

While Jesus uses traditional techniques in the parables, he also puts his own stamp on them, usually by introducing an element of surprise and thus reversing his listeners' presumed expectations. An example of this is surely the parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32), where the original ne'er-do-well actually ends up 'as a more sympathetic character than the elder son who stayed at home' (p. 986).

Or, if one thinks of another parable that is unique to Luke, the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:30-37), the introduction of a Samaritan into the story (alongside the priest and the Levite), and making him the most attractive figure, must have flown in the face of the anti-Samaritan prejudices that were well-entrenched in the mainline Jewish culture of Palestine at the time. The introduction of a sympathetic Samaritan into the parable must have acted as a potentially subversive challenge to the prejudices of Jesus' listeners. And beyond that, it must inevitably have called into question, at a more general level, what it meant to believe that God had a special relationship with

the people of Israel.

The same sense of surprise can still catch anyone off-guard when they are confronted, or perhaps one should say, provided they are willing to be confronted, by the challenge of the parables.

It's hardly surprising, then, that in challenging his hearers with his parables, Jesus should be portrayed as specifically involving them in the process of trying to decipher them. He is frequently shown as asking his hearers: "What do you think?" (see Mt 21.31; Lk 7.42)' (p. 986). He gets his hearers to

pass judgment on the outcome of the parabolic story. The Matthean version of the parable of the Tenants in the Vineyard has the audience itself pass judgment on the Jewish leaders who rejected Jesus (Mt 21.41 [where the hearers answer Jesus' question]; but cf. Mk 12.9 [where Jesus answers his own question]). Throughout the Gospel is heard the personal appeal of Jesus: 'He who has ears to hear, let him hear' (p. 986).

In short, people are being called to come to some kind of decision about the parables, and hence about life itself.

One might also see the subversive features of the parables as illustrating an important, general aspect of the Christian vision of reality, namely that a badge of religious affiliation is no guarantee of God's favour. God cannot be taken for granted. We can't assume we are doing God's will simply because we belong to a particular religious grouping or follow a specific regime of religious practices. And this, in turn, is maybe ultimately a variation on an old biblical theme: human beings see so often only by appearances, but God looks at the heart (which, of course, can also be an uncomfortable thought, no matter how liberating it may be in the long run).

It has frequently been pointed out that the challenging aspect of the parables is something that the nineteenth-century German scholar Adolf Jülicher (1857-1938),³ was not really attuned to. As a liberal Protestant theologian, at the latter end of the nineteenth century, he tended to see Jesus (as Immanuel Kant had done in an earlier period)

3. See 'The Point of the Parables', *Doctrine & Life*, November 2011, pp. 30-41.

as a moral teacher, and hence to interpret the 'point' of each parable in terms of some moral lesson or exhortation. This, in turn, is part of an ongoing tendency that can be traced back to the Enlightenment, to play down or even ridicule or – to take a more benign interpretation – to be blissfully unaware of what is usually nowadays referred to as the eschatological thrust or dimension of the Christian message.

It is important to keep in mind that the parables are not told by Jesus just to communicate information, even religious information; but they

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are narrated in order to encourage in the hearer or reader a change of life, to encourage conversion. Conversion – or *metanoia*, in the New Testament Greek expression – is really about having 'second thoughts', about 're-thinking' things, about thinking again about things in the light of the

gospel. And the challenge of the gospel comes out of a conviction that life is real, and that God is real. Human experience is not a dream. The human condition calls on us to make decisions about what life really means, and how we should live it. Human lives are limited, and yet we are confronted in this limited life with demands that seem to come from an eternal, transcendent source. Our lives, one might say, are a process, in both senses of something that continues as long as we live, and also as a kind of trial. And our lives will be judged by how we live. Yet the last judgement is not for us but for God to pronounce.

It was the eschatological side of religion that the Enlightenment turned its back on most resolutely. In its stead it substituted an invitation to open-ended moral progress or development. This may well be why in our world there still is a positive glow surrounding the very notion of 'development', whether we hear talk of the 'developing world' or of 'sustainable development', and a correspondingly negative glow surrounding the notion of 'underdevelopment'. Unbeknown to ourselves perhaps, we are all children of the Enlightenment – not entirely a bad thing. But maybe in its enthusiasm for a new moral vision of life, the Enlightenment neglected to some extent weightier elements in human existence, such as our limitedness and our connection with a transcend-

ent reality beyond us. It also, perhaps, neglected the intractable nature of the problem of evil, or the 'mystery of iniquity', as St Paul called it. And such matters, it seems to me, are presupposed by the parables, indeed by the gospels as such.

Just to come back for a moment to the somewhat domesticated understanding of the parables that Jülicher pioneered, it has been argued that his outlook on the parables made him blind to the way

[s]ome of the parables, such as that of the Good Samaritan, were a blistering attack on the established religious policy of the time. Others, such as the parable of the Tenants in the Vineyard and that of the Talents, were threats of imminent judgment on the leaders of Judaism. Still others, such as the Sower and the Mustard Seed, were an apologia for the slowness and insignificance of the results of [Jesus'] own ministry in Galilee (p. 986).

Yet it should be noted as well that the parable of the Mustard Seed (Mt 13:31-32; Mk 4: 30-32; Lk 13:18-19) also contains a hidden promise in the reference to 'the birds of the air' coming to shelter in the branches or the shade of the mustard tree, for the expression 'the birds of the air' was apparently sometimes used by the rabbis in reference to the gentiles.⁴ The implication is clear: the seemingly insignificant ministry of Jesus is destined to embrace the whole world.

Finally, seeing at least some of the parables as voicing a critique of the religious establishment of the time, may be part of what the critic Terry Eagleton had in mind when he wrote in a recent book, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, that: 'There is a document that records God's endless, dispiriting struggle with organized religion, known as the Bible.'⁵

ENIGMAS

One can only presume that Jesus used parables as an easier way of teaching his message than simply giving lectures to people. And yet the fact that his disciples often asked him to explain the parables suggests that he was either not very successful in his teaching, or that

4. A. M. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables* (London: SCM, 1966), 44, n. 1.

5. Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution. Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 8.

they were a bit obtuse. Indeed, at some points it seems almost perverse when Jesus appears to suggest that he actually uses parables in order to prevent people from understanding his message! In Mt 13:10-11, for example, we read: "The disciples approached him and said, "Why do you speak to them [i.e. the crowds] in parables?" He said to them in reply, "Because knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven has been granted to you, but to them it has not been granted." Shortly afterwards, Jesus says (Mt 13:13): "This is why I speak to them in parables, because "they look but do not see and hear but do not listen or understand [see Is 6: 9-10]."

Pope Benedict also fastens on this aspect of the parables, underlining the echo of the prophet Isaiah's words in Mt 13:13, and arguing that God's success, as it were, always follows the path of initial failure and catastrophe, losing life in order to find it. And for Christianity, the paradigmatic enactment of this truth is of course perceived in the cross of Jesus, which leads to the resurrection.⁶

The way Mt 13: 3 and similar passages in Mk 4:11-12 and Lk 8:10 are explained by many scholars in fact is to argue not that Jesus' purpose was to mislead people, but rather that the net result of his preaching was that most who heard him refused to understand (see p. 986). Raymond Brown expresses it thus: "The challenge of the parables was rejected by the majority of hearers who saw and heard but refused to perceive and understand. The parables were a sword of judgment" (p. 986). The passages referred to, which echo Is 6:9-10, reproduce what "became the standard Christian explanation of why Jesus' ministry had not been received by Israel (Jn 12.37-41; Acts 28.26-27)" (p. 986).

This is an important point. Parables are meant to get inside people, as it were, to get under their skin, to disturb them. There is perhaps a sort of parallel here between Jesus and, say, a Greek sage like Socrates, who was regarded as a gadfly, someone who forced his fellow-Athenians constantly to question themselves and their vision of life. Similarly, Jesus' parables weren't meant just to instruct his hearers, but to help them, indeed to try to force them to face reality. Hence, "if the parables blinded men's minds and hearts, it was more because men refused their

6. Joseph Ratzinger, Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, tr. Adrian J. Walker (London-Berlin-New York-Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2007), 189-91.

piercing challenge than because men could not intellectually understand them" (p. 986). That is to say, people just didn't really want to take the parables to heart. And this can be said irrespective of the fact that the parables were also not always 'clear to all' (p. 986).

For instance, many genuinely misunderstood the nature of the kingdom of God that Jesus announced and whose coming he illustrated by the use of parables, especially in Matthew's gospel. For many did genuinely think Jesus meant to inaugurate a political kingdom, whereas the kingdom of heaven, though in this world, is not of it. So, a certain deliberate imprecision of the parables is also understandable and desirable in the light of this danger.

WHY ALMOST IDENTICAL PARABLES SOMETIMES DIFFER FROM ONE ANOTHER

A question that often arises is why the same parable sometimes differs from one gospel to another. Part of the explanation is that each evangelist created his own gospel out of the material he found available to him, and depending on the theological slant he wished to give his gospel, he would use parables at different times and in different settings in his text.

As an example of the same parable being found in different settings, compare Matthew's placing of the parable of the Marriage Feast (Mt 22.1-10) in Jerusalem and Luke's placing of the parable of the Banquet (Lk 14.15-24 [no mention of a guest without the proper garment]), which originally was probably the same parable, on the journey to Jerusalem. Some parables that Matthew places in the Sermon on the Mount, Luke places elsewhere (Mt 5.13 [salt of the earth]; Lk 14.34-35) (p. 987).

The question of why very similar-sounding parables occur in different settings is no doubt connected with the "audience to whom the parable was originally directed" (p. 987). It seems likely that many of the parables were originally aimed at Jesus' opponents in his ministry, namely the scribes and pharisees. However, as the early church emerged, the same parables had to be used for reasons of internal church discipline

or concern (see p. 987).

The parable of the Lost Sheep is an example of such a redirection: the parable as it is found in Lk 15.3-7 is an attack on the scribes and Pharisees who despised the outcasts with whom Jesus associated (Lk 15.2); the parable as given in Mt 18.12-14 is part of a sermon directed to the disciples (Mt 18.1), so that the parable now inculcates the duties of Church authorities towards erring Christians (p. 987).

Perhaps this, in turn, illustrates the richness of the parables, the fact that they can be seen to have one kind of meaning in one context and a different application in another. To take another specific example: 'The parable of the Lamp seems to have one meaning in Mk 4.21, another in Mt 5.14-16, and still another in Lk 11.33' (p 987).

Faced with such a spread of meaning for essentially the same parable within the gospels, one might well ask if it is really worth trying to discover what was the original sense of a parable as intended by Jesus. Probably not. Once they had been spoken, they would have taken on a life of their own. And over the course of time, they can continue to generate new meanings and varied insights into life, and they can continue to be deployed in different contexts.

This is quite a speculative claim, I have to admit, but it has maybe something to do with the simple fact that parables are linguistic creations. They are made up of words, to state the obvious. And words, in turn, are elements of language, which itself is the intellectual expression of our attempt to grasp the meaning of reality with our minds. Maybe ultimately, all language has this tentative openness or outreach to all reality, hence to God, echoing faintly God's outreach to us. And so it will always potentially be a guide to us on our way to God. Not for nothing, perhaps, one of the names of God is: the 'logos' or the Word. But language, as we have it, is a guide; it is not an all-seeing, all-comprehending, omniscient, and infallible source of insight into God. And neither are the parables.

THE SECRET OF THE PARABLES, WHAT IS IT?

It may be, of course, that the real secret of the parables lies in the fact

that they don't have any precisely fixed meaning. By this is not simply meant that they can generate ever new meanings over the course of time, and in that sense don't have any circumscribed, unique sense or interpretation. What is meant, rather, is that the parables, like the rest of Sacred Scripture draw their pre-eminent significance from their canonical status. That is to say, the parables, as indeed the entire gospels, are not just works of literature – though they are that, as well. But their really profound and enduring importance lies in the fact that they are attached to, and treasured by, a community that believes in the reality of redemption through Christ, and lives or at least officially seeks to live in the light of this conviction. It is the faith of the community, inspired, we believe, by the spirit of God, by the Holy Spirit, that gives the parables their cutting edge and their continuing relevance.

The American writer, Mary McCarthy (1912-1989), has written: 'Having to learn a little theology as an adult in order to understand a poem of Donne or Crashaw is like being taught the Bible as Great Literature in a college humanities course; it does not stick to the ribs.'⁷ This, I think, is an apt illustration of the difference between coming to know the Bible in a religious context where it has unquestioned existential weight, and approaching it from the outside, so to speak, as a free-floating text.

To try to sum up what is at stake here, in relation to the parables, we might say that we really read them not in order to find out what they have to say to us, but because we already believe that they have something of salvific importance to say to us. Faith comes first, and, as Anselm put it in his classical formulation, seeks understanding. And since Christianity is both an eschatological faith and a faith in search of understanding, or in search of meaning, that search will, in this world, never end. Hence the future of the parables is, I believe, assured.

7. Mary McCarthy, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976; first published in the U.S.A. in 1957), 24.