

Session 3 The Parables of the Kingdom

Parable: from the Greek word meaning 'a comparison, an illustration.'

One of the most difficult things in reading the parables is our old friend of having to accept that they weren't originally delivered to or intended for twenty-first century Europeans. We will miss things which were obvious to the first hearers; we will also put our own ideas on to them in ways which would probably have baffled Jesus, Matthew and the rest of the earliest Church.

A particularly nice way of understanding the problem is if we look outside Matthew, to the parable of the Good Samaritan, which is only found in Luke. What do we think it is about? (*Short discussion*).

St Augustine of Hippo didn't seem to think so. Here's his take on it:

A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho; Adam himself is meant; Jerusalem is the heavenly city of peace, from whose blessedness Adam fell; Jericho means the moon, and signifies our mortality, because it is born, waxes, wanes, and dies.

Thieves are the devil and his angels. Who stripped him, namely; of his immortality; and beat him, by persuading him to sin; and left him half-dead, because in so far as man can understand and know God, he lives, but in so far as he is wasted and oppressed by sin, he is dead; he is therefore called half-dead.

The priest and the Levite who saw him and passed by, signify the priesthood and ministry of the Old Testament which could profit nothing for salvation. Samaritan means Guardian, and therefore the Lord Himself is signified by this name. The binding of the wounds is the restraint of sin. Oil is the comfort of good hope; wine the exhortation to work with fervent spirit.

The beast is the flesh in which He deigned to come to us. The being set upon the beast is belief in the incarnation of Christ. The inn is the Church, where travellers returning to their heavenly country are refreshed after pilgrimage. The morrow is after the resurrection of the Lord. The two pence are either the two precepts of love, or the promise of this life and of that which is to come.

The innkeeper is the Apostle (Paul). The supererogatory payment is either his counsel of celibacy, or the fact that he worked with his own hands lest he should be a burden to any of the weaker brethren when the Gospel was new, though it was lawful for him "to live by the gospel"

Discuss what you make of this in pairs.

The Gospel According to Bletchley Park

In Thomas Hardy's 'Jude the Obscure,' Jude has set his heart on learning Greek and Latin and finally receives a text-book. To his horror he learns he's had hold of the wrong end of the stick:

"He learnt for the first time that there was no law of transmutation, as in his innocence he had supposed (there was, in some degree, but the grammarian did not recognize it), but that every word in both Latin and Greek was to be individually committed to memory at the cost of years of plodding."

A bit like Jude is looking for a key to unravel the mysteries of Greek and Latin, Augustine is treating the parable as a sort of code, where 'A' means 'B' and so on, where each feature of the story actually 'means' something else which has to be de-coded. All we need is a religious version of the Bletchley Park computer to deal with the Enigma code of the Gospel!

This way of reading a Parable is called *allegory*. If you've read Bunyan's 'A Pilgrim's Progress' you'll recognise the style, with places like the City of Destruction and Vanity Fair, and characters like Giant Despair and Mr Worldly Wiseman. It's not to say that we *mustn't* read a passage like that, but it may stop us from picking up what Jesus' audience *originally* got out of a story – and it's hard to get that way of thinking out of our minds for long enough to see that bit further back – it gets stuck there, like an ear-worm. Or as a better example of how our brains get hi-jacked, a simple example:

Exercise 1. NB, Please do not conjure up in your mind the image of a penguin wearing a sombrero.

The Parable of the Sower (and its explanation)

Handout 1 contains both the parable and the interpretation of it. Read both, and then, in pairs, try to answer the following questions:

- how similar is Matthew to Mark and Luke?
- How good a 'fit' is the explanation to the parable? (If you find this unclear, it's probably clearest in the Luke version: is the seed the word or the hearer?)
- The explanation can become '*the penguin in the sombrero*' – if we set aside the explanation of the parable, can we think of another meaning for it?

Share your thoughts with the rest of the group.

It's interesting that by the time Mark's Gospel is written (say 65AD), the parable has acquired an 'explanation'. The Parable of the Weeds (Matthew 13.24-30) also has a 'this stands for that' explanation (13.36-43). Does it add anything helpful to the Parable? Does it lead us down any possible cul-de-sacs?

(As an exercise to try at home, write an 'explanation' of Three Billy Goats Gruff – who's the troll, what does the bridge represent, and so on and so on. What effect does it have on the story?)

The Kingdom of Heaven

Time and again we meet this phrase in Matthew '*The Kingdom of Heaven is like....*' So much so that they're sometimes referred to as '*The Parables of the Kingdom.*' We're thrown a bit off-course because the work 'Kingdom' in English tends to suggest an area of land ('The United Kingdom'); In Matthew, 'Kingdom' represents the word '*malcuth*' which means not a land but a reign or rule: 'Thy Kingdom come' means much the same as 'Thy will be done on Earth' (*Hebrew poetry again!*).

In pairs, read Matthew 13.33, and 13.36-50.

- *What do you think they are trying to tell us?*
- *Does the fact that they don't have explanations mean that the first Christians knew full well what they were getting at?*
- *Are the Parables 'Tell, Tell' or 'Listen, Listen'?*

Any thoughts or observations?

The small print.

In pairs read Mark 4.1-12 (on handout 2). (Matthew's version is similar, but expanded.)

Any thoughts? NB this is a notoriously difficult passage!

'What's wrong with answering a question with a question?'

In the group, discuss what the Parables are 'for.' And whom are they for?