

The Parables of Jesus - Evangelical Library - 24th October 2011

The Roman historian Livy, who was born around 60BC, tells of a wise man called Agrippa Menenius, who lived 500 years before Christ. Agrippa was sent to quell a rebellion that had broken out. He went to the rebels and told them this story.

The different parts of a man's body thought it unfair that they should have all the worry and trouble of providing everything for the stomach, while the stomach had nothing to do except enjoy the good things which the other members provided it with. They therefore decided that this should go on no more: the hands would carry no food to the mouth, the mouth would accept nothing offered to it, the teeth would grind no food received into the mouth. In this way, of course, the entire body of the man was gradually starved. And so the other parts of the body saw that even the stomach made some contribution to the welfare of all - that it did not simply enjoy itself on the food provided to it, but used that food to nourish the rest of the body too, so that the body worked best when all parts co-operated together.

In this way, Agrippa Menenius prevailed on the rebels to drop their demands and live peaceably with their fellow-countrymen. (See K. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 2008, p. 47.)

At one level, of course, the use of stories to make a point is universal – Aesop's fables through to the Narnia tales are obvious examples. So in the OT we find parables (e.g. Nathan's story in 2 Samuel 12, concerning David and Bathsheba; the vineyard in Isaiah 5, which yielded wild grapes, speaking of Israel's faithlessness; Jotham's story in Judges 9 of the anointing of the bramble to rule over all the trees; as well as acted parables, as used for example by Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and much imagery). There are parable-type stories in other Jewish writings, outside the Bible, both before and contemporary with Jesus's time.

However: 'No one prior to Jesus used parables as consistently, creatively, and effectively as he did. Nor has anyone since' (Snodgrass, p. 37). So let's take a look at them.

Firstly, What is a parable?

The NT uses the Greek word *parabole* around 50 times in all, with quite a wide range of meanings (for example, in Lk. 4:23, 'Physician, heal yourself'; or in Matt. 24, speaking of the end of the age, where Jesus says, 'Learn the parable from the fig-tree.'). But usually, when we use the term we mean something more specific: some story or illustration which we recognise as a parable - maybe longer (the Good Samaritan, the vineyard and the tenants) or

very short: 'The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened.' (Matt. 13:33, introduced as a 'parable').

So how should we define a 'parable': as 'an earthly story with a heavenly meaning'? That is OK, except for three things: a parable's meaning is often very much to do with this life - faithfulness, watchfulness, etc.; a parable is not always a story (for example, the short sayings in Mt. 13:33, above); and it is not always 'earthly' - parables often contain exaggeration and unreal elements (e.g. the parables of the unforgiving servant, the hiring of labourers, the prodigal son). Jesus certainly used language and scenes with which his hearers were very familiar, but the stories were not necessarily realistic - sometimes, indeed, they are quite far-fetched. By coming at the truth in an interesting and arresting way, through the use of familiar pictures, Jesus sought to undermine wrong assumptions about his kingdom and provoke right thinking in its place. Thus parables are 'Stories with intent', or, because they are not always stories, 'an expanded analogy used to convince and persuade' (Snodgrass, p. 9). They are 'handles for understanding [Jesus's] teaching on the kingdom' (Snodgrass, p. 8). They are intended to promote right thinking, belief and action.

How many parables are there? That depends how they are counted - what counts as a parable and are similar parables in different gospels counted more than once? Avoiding a very broad definition and double-counting, there probably around 35-40. There are none in John's gospel.

Next, who tells them? Note Ps. 78:2 - quoted in Matt. 13:35. Jesus the parable-teller is the Messiah. The emphasis of the psalm is on future generations - telling them about the great things the Lord has done for his people, so that they should not repeat their forefathers' rebellion. The psalm recounts the terrible faithlessness of the people of God, despite all God's goodness to them. But it ends on a note of promise, with God's choosing Judah and, in particular, David 'to shepherd Jacob his people, Israel his inheritance. With upright hand he shepherded them and guided them with his skilful hand.' (vv. 71-72). These promises are to be ultimately fulfilled in the Messiah, identified by Matthew as Jesus. So parables are the teaching of the Messiah, as he comes into his kingdom.

A more difficult question: What is the purpose of parables? Who are they for? It is often argued that parables are simple stories, using everyday illustrations, so that all could

understand what is being said. But then how are we to understand Jesus's teaching in Mt. 13:10-17? 'This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand', v. 13 (he then quotes Is. 6:9-10). But then, is this the only purpose of parables? Note that Jesus explains the message to his disciples; later in the same chapter he seems to tell some parables directly and solely to them. This all implies that there is a message for them - it is not just for the hardened, for their condemnation. Note the end of Is. 6 promises life to a remnant - 'whose stump remains when it is felled; the holy seed is its stump', v. 13. So, as in Ps. 78, there is a twofold purpose to parables: death for those elected to condemnation, life for those elected to life. The parable works either to harden hearts or to soften and educate them.

But the main question: How are we to understand parables? The parables of Jesus are amongst his best-known and best-loved teaching – the Good Samaritan, the Sower, the Prodigal Son, the Lost Sheep. Parables are probably also the most-misunderstood and misused aspects of Jesus's teaching.

Contemporary NT scholarship often seems at a loss when it comes to the parables. On the parable of the dishonest steward (Lk. 16), one scholar recently wrote an article concluding that the author of Luke's gospel (whoever he or she [*sic*] was) inherited the story without being sure of its meaning, so added his/her own; we cannot now know how it originally ended nor what its original point was. Well, it is a difficult parable - and we shall look at it shortly to see what we can make of it - but we certainly should not give up all hope of understanding it.

But then, what about Augustine of Hippo and his interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10): the victim represents Adam, Jerusalem the heavenly city, the robbers are devils, the priest and Levite the OT dispensation, the Samaritan is Christ, the donkey is the incarnation, the inn the church and the innkeeper is the apostle Paul. This approach has been common in the church right up to the 19th century and beyond.

So is an allegorical approach (like Augustine's) acceptable? Calvin did not think so, commenting on such interpretations of the Good Samaritan parable, 'We should have more reverence for Scripture than to allow ourselves to transfigure its sense so freely. Anyone may see that these speculations have been cooked up by meddlers, quite divorced from the mind

of Christ.' (*Comm. on Gospel Harm., ad loc.*) No doubt we would agree with that in the case of Augustine's approach - but then do we want to say, on the Prodigal Son (Lk. 15), that the robe which the father threw around his returning child represents in some way Christ's robe of righteousness? Isn't that quite attractive? But then how does it differ from the more thorough-going allegorising which Augustine indulged in and which Calvin, surely rightly, condemns?

We rightly reject the approach of the contemporary scholar who seems to reduce parables to meaninglessness; but we have to say also that traditional allegory, though quite attractive sometimes, is in danger of making parables capable of meaning almost anything we like.

How then can we come to some principles which will help us understand and apply the parables as they were intended? Are there principles which we can apply which will help us to understand and use parables in the way in which Jesus intended us to do so, which reflect the purposes for which he himself told the parables in the first place?

Here are four principles to consider:

1. Is Jesus using OT imagery?

Take, for example, the parable of the tenants, Mt. 21:33ff. How did the Pharisees know that Jesus was talking about them (v. 45)? It was partly because they understood the imagery - the vineyard is a common symbol in the OT for Israel. A story about a master planting a vineyard and caring for it and looking for fruit from it was clearly about God and his people (cp. Is. 5).

2. Where the Scripture itself gives the interpretation, use that and don't make up your own.

In the parable of the sower and the parable of the weeds/tares, Matt. 13, Jesus himself provides the interpretation, so we must adhere to what he says. (Note he calls it the parable of the sower, v. 18, not the more trendy title of the parable of the four kinds of soil.) He tells us, for the sower parable, what each element means. We could call this allegory - clearly, there is allegory in scripture - but the meaning is not left to our imagination; it is controlled by Jesus's own interpretation. The same is true of the parable of the weeds.

Note, though, that Jesus does not give the application - what does it mean for the hearer? What is he/she to do as a result? Here, we do have to think and work out for ourselves. Is the main focus on the sower (encouraging us to keep on preaching and witnessing, whatever the response?) or on the soils (giving an explanation as to the different responses we witness; or warning us to be discerning about apparent conversions; or warning us to ensure that the seed has landed in good soil in ourselves)? Or both or all of these? How are we to decide? The interpretation seems to place the emphasis on the differences in the kinds of soil, and perhaps more precisely on the different hindrances to the fruitfulness of the seed. R. T. France points out that the previous chapter has recounted division about Jesus and enmity against him; ch. 13 then gives some explanation of these phenomena: so the focus of the parable is on reasons for divided views over Jesus and his message. That is quite persuasive. However, I would argue, the sower has application in a number of different areas: to the preacher (to preach to all), to the hearer (to be careful how he hears - what kind of a hearer is he?), to the church (don't expect everyone to repent, don't be hasty in judgement about whether someone is converted, but believe that some will be saved and expect true fruit from them). We don't need to choose between them.

Note that this undermines the idea, which is still quite popular, that each parable has only one main point. That was a view put forward by a German scholar, Adolf Jülicher, towards the end of the nineteenth century and gained quite a following. But it is clearly not so, as can be seen from the parable of sower.

3. Don't try to press every detail of the parable to mean something.

This is the problem with Augustine's approach to the Good Samaritan - or the idea that the robe which the father flings round the Prodigal Son represents the righteousness of Christ.

Note how the OT uses the detail of parable, in 2 Sam. 12, Nathan's parable of the ewe-lamb. We might want to say that the rich man in that story was David, the poor man was Uriah and the lamb was Bathsheba. But if we press the detail too far, that doesn't quite work. In the story, the lamb dies and the poor man lives, but of course in reality Uriah died and Bathsheba lived. The point of the story lies, not so much in a precise alignment of each character or detail of the story with the reality, but in the overall point that is made - which clearly made

its impact on David as he heard it - the outrage of a rich man depriving his poor neighbour of his only lamb, when the rich man already had everything he could possibly need.

So it is with parables. Take the ten virgins in Matt. 25. Who are the five foolish virgins, exactly - hypocrites, unbelieving churchgoers, complete outsiders? Probably unbelieving churchgoers, but then what is the oil? the Holy Spirit? But all the virgins, wise and foolish, seem to have some at the start. Why do the lamps then only start to go out when the bridegroom is announced - presumably, the return of Christ? And what is represented by the foolish virgins going out to buy more? This is to make it all too complicated. Parables don't always work that way - the point is clear, as v. 13 shows: 'Watch, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.' The whole thrust of Jesus's message in this chapter and the end of the previous chapter is the urgent need to be prepared. Don't overcomplicate it!

4. Take careful note of the detail surrounding the parable.

This is vital. Often, the clue to the parable is found in the introduction to it, the conclusion, or in the immediate context in which the parable is spoken. We've just seen that in the parable of the ten virgins, where both the thrust of Jesus's teaching before and after the parable and the conclusion to the parable itself show clearly the message which the parable is intended to convey.

Similarly, for the Prodigal Son. I have to take some issue here with Tim Keller's recent treatment of it (Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith*, Hodder and Stoughton, 2008). Much of that book is very helpful, particularly in restoring the significance of the older brother and in bringing out helpful applications of the teaching of the parable. Keller rightly points out that the parable was not intended by Jesus to be an appeal to immoral, irreligious sinners to return in repentance to a merciful heavenly Father; rather, it was intended to send a clear message to the religious hypocrites referred to in the opening verses of ch. 15, and, particularly in this final parable of the three in that chapter, to launch an appeal to them to soften their hearts and turn to their heavenly Father for mercy. That is all very helpful and a necessary corrective to how the parable is often used. However, in his exposition, Keller focuses on the two approaches to life represented by the two sons - one hedonistic, the other moralistic. 'The message of Jesus's parable', he says, 'is that both of these approaches are wrong.' (p. 33). At the risk of nit-picking, I would say no,

that is not the message of the parable, though it may be a very important application of it. The message of the parable, as of the first two in the chapter - the lost sheep and the lost coin - is about the character of God - what kind of God do we have? what kind of God is it whom the Pharisees and scribes thought they were serving? It is a God that seeks and saves sinners. That is the fundamental point of all three parables. We need to have that clear in our minds first and foremost. The parable does not tell us precisely how God saves sinners - hence there is no intimation (in my view, at least) of the atonement here - parables are not intended to tell you everything. Nor, as I have suggested, does it tell us about the imputation of Christ's righteousness. It tells us about the nature of God. From that, we can and must draw application, as Keller so helpfully does.

Let's take two more parables of Luke, whose meaning is often controverted. One is the familiar Good Samaritan (ch. 10). How many Sunday School talks, let alone sermons, have been based on this parable, with the aim of teaching us to be kind to others? To be prepared to give ourselves to the utmost for the sake of those in need? Is that what the parable is all about? Many would say so, emphasising the final statement of Jesus to the lawyer who asked the question, 'Go and do likewise' (v. 37). But did Jesus simply mean to impress upon us the full implications of the second great commandment, in the expectation that we would learn and obey? If not, why not? How can we be sure what Jesus's intention was?

The introduction to the parable should make us question the purely moral approach. Luke tells us that the lawyer 'stood up to put [Jesus] to the test', v. 25. The question was a trick question, the kind of question which we know Jesus tended not to answer in a straightforward manner. This should put us on our guard against giving the parable what might appear to be its obvious meaning. This impression should be reinforced by Luke's additional comment about the lawyer's second question, 'desiring to justify himself', v. 29. We should further be on our guard about lawyers' questions in the light of the immediately preceding passage, cp. v. 21.

With that in mind, what is the parable intended to teach? Clearly, it is, at one level, an exposition of the second great command - it tells us what it means to love our neighbour. And it shows up the religious people as signally failing to fulfil it. It is a Samaritan, of all people, who obeys it. And yes, we should do this. All the time. Every time. To anyone who crosses our path who is in need. To the very limit of our resources. And if we do, says Jesus, we will

inherit eternal life, v. 28. Yet we know that we don't and won't and can't. So what are we to do? Turn in repentance and sorrow to the one who has lived like this, to the extent of giving his life for sinners like us, and put all our trust in him. We are to hear him and believe in him. The parable itself doesn't tell us that, though in the light of the rest of the teaching of scripture, we can see clearly where it leads us. It is no coincidence, I believe, that Luke's next episode, immediately after this parable, concerns Martha's activity, which does not earn the Lord's approval, and Mary's inactive listening to Jesus, which does.

So we must take careful note of the surrounding context and its detail, as we seek to understand the message of a parable. Let's try this on our last parable, perhaps the most difficult, the dishonest steward (Lk. 16). There are multiple difficulties here - Jesus apparently commends the steward's dishonesty and, in v. 9, seems to suggest that believers should either use money to make friends or make friends with rich people, and that doing so will somehow help them to gain eternal life. It seems most confusing. How should we understand it?

Again, the key is the context. Firstly, note that this parable follows on immediately after the three parables of lostness. Note too that those parables were told to the Pharisees, 15:3, whereas this one, Luke makes clear, is told to the disciples, 16:1. Yet it is all part of the same episode, it seems, for the Pharisees were still there at the end, 16:14. So the parable is, at least in part, a warning to the disciples not to fall into the sin of the Pharisees, which was to love money (16:14). It is a parable which warns against the love of money (16:13, 15b) - a theme which continues to the end of the chapter with the story of the rich man and Lazarus. It is also a parable about faithfulness in small things, in earthly things, even in money in this world (16:10-12). So we have to understand the parable, I believe, in that light. Clearly, Jesus here is warning his disciples - don't set your heart on riches, don't trust in them, serve God not money; but at the same time, be faithful, even in money matters in this world, because faithfulness is essential and the mark of the true disciple.

How then do we understand vv. 8-9? The emphasis of the final statement of the parable, in v. 8, is on the steward's wisdom. There is a sharp contrast at work here - the steward is an ungodly, dishonest man, yet he thinks ahead, for the long term. God's people, Jesus says, v. 8b, need to learn from this (not, of course, from the dishonesty - that is there simply to sharpen the contrast between the ungodly and the godly). If men of this world think ahead,

how much more should we, the godly, consider the long-term, eternal implications of what we do. So, v. 9, use even unrighteous money faithfully, cp. v. 11 - the best understanding I have come across of this is in the sense of generosity - making friends in that sense - so as to gain eternal life (not, of course, by merit, but as evidence of true grace). Money is not there to be served, but as a servant in the service of God, cp. v. 13. We are to be faithful in our use of it, not lovers of it, enslaved to it as were the Pharisees, v. 14.

It is a difficult parable, but the surrounding context and comments make clear at least the main thrusts of the story, even if the details of vv. 8-9 remain difficult.

We have seen that the parables of Jesus are the teaching of the Messiah, who has come to gather his people together in his kingdom. Let's treat them seriously as such and not be tempted to think of them as purely Sunday School material or elementary teaching. I hope that this brief exploration will encourage us to go back to them with fresh enthusiasm to re-discover the vital truths that they have to teach us all about the nature of God, of his Son, of his kingdom and of those who belong to it.

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