

GOSPEL SEEDS

FEBRUARY, 2006

Biblical reflections to encourage us in the work of evangelisation

THE MYSTERIOUS WORLD OF PARABLES

Then the disciples went up to Jesus and asked 'Why do you talk to them in parables?' In answer, he said, 'because to you is granted to understand the mysteries of the kingdom of Heaven, but to them it is not granted. Anyone who has will be given more and will have more than enough; but anyone who has not, will be deprived of even what he has.' (Mt 13:10-12)

Many people – especially scholars and the generally intellectual and more educated – are inclined to go to the epistles of Paul and John's Gospel for the teaching content of the New Testament and Revelation in general. Yet Jesus is the centre of their message and Jesus had the reputation of being a great teacher – 'one who taught with authority not like the scribes' (Mt 7:29). Jesus taught mainly in parables -also using other forms of Wisdom. So why do we not turn more to these main sources of Jesus' teaching? Is it precisely because we overlook or quickly dismiss the humble simple stories and everyday images, either thinking we have grasped their essential point or uneasy lest we have largely missed it? We – and I include myself – are prone to rush on past the parables too quickly yet these are the very words and preferred teaching method of the very Word of God – full of grace and truth! Let us now pause to reflect.

Parables as the Divine teaching method to reveal Mysteries.

Parables are enigmatic little stories. Memorable – but mysterious too. What do they really mean? In his own day, Jesus' use of them – and their message – puzzled and perplexed even his own disciples. Parables are present in the Old Testament too and go alongside parabolic actions used by the prophets. Thus they have links with both the prophetic and wisdom strands of the Old Testament. Fundamentally parables make a comparison. In the religious sphere they seek to convey something of the Supernatural realm and reality in terms of natural things and everyday events. God uses them to communicate with us. Jesus steps into this tradition and practice. He has to communicate a message – a revelation that is so new that that there was no technical religious language already in existence to adequately or fully express it. Jesus is fulfilling what God has hinted at in the Old Testament but it is also so new that it needs new expressions, new comparisons to convey it. Thus Jesus is and brought a secret – a mystery – that he intended to reveal. He wanted to do this in ways that could be understood – at least by those that were really open to the ways of God – and hungry for God. Parables were ideal for this. Their everyday content made them accessible to all; their nature, method and dynamic meant that their outer form could only be penetrated by those whose spiritual ears and eyes were opened by grace and their own positive response to this grace (Mk 4:10-12). This often took time and prayer, dialogue and further discussion with Jesus. In other words, it happened progressively (I guess at a pace adapted to each one) with the person becoming more and more drawn to spend time with Jesus and to form a relationship with him. Parables invite rather than impose. They have incredible depth as well as simplicity. It is not easy to exhaust their meaning. We can always come back for more. Is this not like God himself?

The Responses that Parables Provoke

The parables – both the short pithy sayings and the longer stories - engage and stimulate our imagination. Yet they do more than give insights and generate ideas. They draw us into their inner world and call for a response. We are asked to affirm their insights with faith. We are

asked to journey further into their mysteries with prayer and reflection, ‘turning our mind to a parable’, asking the Lord to bring light into our darkness. We have to be patient. The Word of God - especially with his parables - silences our confident flow of words and humbles our minds. We have to admit our poverty and ask for his grace. In this we realise we are creatures but God then raises us to be created beings with the dignity and status of children. “Blessed are you, Father, Lord of Heaven and Earth, for hiding these things from the learned and clever and revealing them to mere children. For that is what it has pleased you to do! (Lk 10:21).

Jesus calls us to “Repent and believe!” To ‘repent’ literally means to ‘rethink’. Parables challenge us to rethink our understanding of God, of his Fatherly love, of Jesus and what he came to do, of the Kingdom of God (including its present and future dimensions) and more besides. They call for other aspects of response too. As well as stimulating our imagination and challenging our minds with Truth, they also stimulate our conscience and challenge our wills to love. They include a call to change our behaviour – to become Christ’s disciples in practical ways in all areas of our lives. Again they have great depth and call us ever more fully both to appreciate the scale of the gift of God’s love for us and also to respond increasingly generously, faithfully and obediently in return. As we never exhaust the depth of the Truth they contain we never exhaust the response to Love they ask of us in the call to discipleship and holiness.

For all these reasons the parables pack a big punch. They are powerful and provocative – much more so than their imagery often suggests. They shock and had – and still have – a capacity to judge. Brought to us by the true Light of the World, they highlight the difference between light and dark. “To him who has will more be given” - meaning faith, understanding, wisdom, general openness to God. “To him who has not – even what he has will be taken away.” They call us to an ongoing response – and these strong words of Jesus indicate that we dare not settle for half-measures or rely on yesterday’s virtue and grace. We have to run the race of faith, and of being taught by Jesus, until the very end (cf 2 Tim 4:7-8).

The Relevance, Attraction & Challenge of Parables & Stories Today

Do we quickly associate the telling of parables and stories with authority? Generally not, yet Jesus was recognised as one who taught with authority. This ought to challenge our understanding of authority – especially teaching and preaching authority – and the extent to which we confuse it with intellectual sophistication. Neither did Jesus shout aloud or impose his truth. He offered it and for those who were genuinely interested, he shared more, allowing them to ask questions. He made an invitation with his teaching – and one that made a deep impression. He was not authoritarian – again something we are prone to think is required when presenting the Gospel. Even if we seek to disapprove of authoritarianism we often adopt (or hide behind) an authoritarian style. Again, we could do with examining ourselves and how we preach, teach and evangelise in the light of the way Jesus did. Jesus used parables because the people of his day did not have a vocabulary to readily understand the mystery he came to reveal. That is largely true today. Most people no longer know or adequately understand the Christian story and beliefs. Would the stories of Jesus and other contemporary ones inspired by them help us evangelise, especially when delivered in the invitational style of Jesus? I think so! Good story telling can point to Jesus’ Divinity. I know someone who gave Jesus’ story-telling ability as a major reason for her being convinced of his Divinity. She became a Christian and a gifted Gospel communicator after that! I am sure there are, or could be, many more.

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