

Trinity 3, Parish Eucharist, Cirencester, Sunday 17th June 2018

Without a parable spake he not unto them: and when they were alone, he expounded all things to his disciples [Mark 4. 34].

Whether the fables of Aesop or La Fontaine may have formed part of your childhood reading or not (not to mention those glutinously moralising Victorian children's books), I can't say that stories with an explicit moral appealed to me, however witty and perceptive I now realise the classic ones are. Perhaps my childish sense of irony was undeveloped, but I felt cheated by stories that professed to be useful. They seemed to betray the first principle of a story, that it should be a good tale in its own right, rather than have an ulterior purpose, let alone one that was designed to improve you. Such a notion clouded the pure wonderment of a good story.

For that reason that I did appreciate the American humorist James Thurber's satirical take on moralising fables in a book called *The Beast in Me and Other Animals*, particularly his version of Little Red Riding Hood:

One afternoon a big wolf waited in a dark forest for a little girl to come along carrying a basket of food to her grand-mother. Finally a little girl did come along and she was carrying a basket of food. 'Are you carrying that basket to your grandmother?' asked the wolf. The little girl said yes, she was. So the wolf asked her where her grandmother lived and the little girl told him and he disappeared into the wood. When the little girl opened the door of her grandmother's house she saw that there was somebody in bed with a nightcap and nightgown on. She approached no nearer than twenty-five feet from the bed when she saw that it was not her grandmother but the wolf, for even in a nightcap a wolf does not look any more like your grandmother than the Metro-Goldwyn lion looks like Calvin Coolidge. So the little girl took an automatic out of her basket and shot the wolf dead. Moral: It not

so easy to fool little girls nowadays as it used to be.

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The reason I've recounted this is to make the rather laboured point that the parables of Jesus are not fables with an explicit moral. They are something so much more than that.

Jesus speaks to us in parables. The Gospel says, *with many such parables spake he the word unto them, as they were able to hear it* [*Greek* akousein - Mark 4. 33]. Only to his close disciples does Jesus expound the underlying significance of the parables. Here we should listen carefully to the words of the Gospel so as not to get the wrong end of the stick. The word used is *to hear*, not *to understand*. It is quite different speaking to a large crowd of people than talking face to face with those you know well. The difference in how the parables are revealed lies not in the intellectual capacity of the audience to understand, but in the way we come to know, accept and follow Jesus personally.

Likewise, when the Gospel tells of Jesus expounding the meaning to his disciples, we should not be misled by the word used in most of the modern translations, which is *explained*. That, I'm afraid, can too easily lead to the misconception of defining the sense, of making it crystal clear so that we might think that we have got the meaning definitively. Were we ever to assume that, we would be content at best with only partial truths. To define implies a limit, while in its derivation the English word *to explain* means to level out.

But that is not what the Gospel says. The word used here in the original Greek New Testament means to set free, just as *to expound* means to lay open. You may remember that after the Resurrection when Jesus had interpreted the scriptures to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, they exclaimed, *Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?* [Luke 24. 32]. To open up is quite distinct from making plain or levelling out. I remember Rabbi Jonathan Sacks once saying on the BBC radio Thought for the Day, *Science is about explanation. Religion is about meaning.*

And this leads us back to the questions, Why parables, and what do they mean? Perhaps the answer in part is this: the story is primary, whereas what we draw from it is secondary. Therefore the life is in the story, while the interpretations are abstractions of the story. A parable is a story that offers a

comparison, in which the story has a life of its own that continues after the initial telling. We can take it with us as part of the landscape of our lives. It can inhabit our imaginations, and enter into our lives, opening up new vistas as we travel along. But wherever we go, and whatever new aspects the story may reveal in response to life's perspectives, essentially the story remains true to its author if properly retold.

So it is with the parables of Jesus. They are not open and shut boxes, with the meaning neatly wrapped and easily defined within. Rather they are open-ended, and if we are ready to listen they will speak to each one of us in our individual circumstances as we happen to be at any one moment of our lives. The parables are like prisms that refract the pure light of God's wisdom which we are unable to see with our minds until made visible in the constantly varying colours of the narrative's spectrum, that will answer to the present angle of our vision and own particular needs. The parables have a life of their own, and the life derives from the author, Jesus the Son of God.

Let us look now at the two short parables in today's Gospel. They do not stand alone. They follow the telling, earlier in the chapter, of the Parable of the Sower. What is striking about all three, characteristic of the narrative style of Jesus, is that the imagery is drawn from the observation of nature. This contrasts with the diction of Saint Paul who is influenced by the rhetorical style of Greek literature □ images like *run the straight race* and *put on the armour of light*, the Platonic duality of the flesh and the spirit (to represent the Jewish concept of fallen and redeemed humanity), and the manner of rational argument he carefully constructs.

But Paul, though a Jew, was a cosmopolitan and highly educated Roman citizen who read and wrote in Greek ; whereas Jesus was a Galilean countryman who spoke Aramaic and left nothing in writing. The parable of seed and harvest in today's reading observes the patterns of light and darkness, of sleeping and rising night and day, of an integrated life in rhythm with the seasons and in harmony with nature : the life of this earth itself a parable.

And yet, though the natural creation provides the language of these parables, Jesus is drawing from the spiritual well of the Old Testament. Commentators have identified the verse, *he putteth in the sickle, because the harvest is come*, as a quotation from the prophet Joel [chapter 3.13]. And the image of the birds sheltering in the shady branches of the mustard bush arisen from a tiny seed, comes directly from Ezekiel's mighty cedar growing from the tender sprig to be planted by God *in the mountain of the height of Israel* [Ezekiel 17.23]. We may therefore be

aware not only of the vitality of God's word depicted in this parable, but also begin to see that Jesus himself is the living embodiment of the kingdom of God in which we are to dwell and find our life in him: and that opens up a new creation of infinite possibility.

Now in telling parables, Jesus was practicing an established tradition of Jewish teaching, that is the use of stories to illustrate and interpret the holy scriptures. What is unique in Jesus is the way he identifies himself with the trajectory of the Old Testament, and takes upon him the sacrificial role of *the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world* [John 1. 29]. This is an underlying factor that informs all the parables of the Gospel, whether or not Jesus is quoting directly from the older scriptures. But to interpret the parables and be led by the Holy Spirit, we must above all be true not only to the story, but also to the author.

Jesus was born into the narrative of his own people, a narrative formed by God's promise of redemption to faithful Abraham, in whose *seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed* [Genesis 22. 18]; a story shaped by the exodus and liberation from slavery in Egypt, and continually reiterated by the prophets even when the children of Israel at times turned their back on God, and again suffered exile. Jesus took upon himself this narrative and extended it to us, to the whole world, through his risen body the Church, so that his story might become our story.

Seen in this light, the parables of Jesus are not isolated chips off the divine block, they fit together to form an epic picture. They are part of a story within a story within a story within a story that goes back to the Creation itself and to Adam, made in the image of God whose likeness was lost in the Fall through human pride and disobedience, but was restored in the conception and birth of Jesus, and consummated by his death and resurrection.

They are part of the same story, relived in liturgy year by year in step with the Christian calendar, that continues in the sending of the Holy Spirit on the Church at Pentecost, and is re-enacted for us in the sacraments: the story into which we are initiated at Baptism, and constantly nourished by the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper, which are to us his body and blood. And that leads us directly to what we are doing here and now, which is to make our communion with God our Father through Christ in the unity of the Holy Spirit. We do so by entering into the story and acting it out, by following the Lord's command *to continue a perpetual memory of that his precious death until his coming again*, so that we may be true and faithful to him as he is true and faithful to us; and that we too, like

those disciples on the road to Emmaus, late in the first day of the Resurrection, may *know him in the breaking of bread* [Luke 24. 35].

[Lectionary readings :

Ezekiel 17. 22-end

2 Corinthians 5. 6-17

Mark 4. 26-34]