

The Parables of Jesus

Setting the Scene- Notes for Teachers

Telling stories seems to have been a distinctive aspect of Jesus' teaching. There is a body of over 30 stories which the Gospel writers attribute to Jesus. Some of the stories appear in several of the Gospels, in slightly different forms. Some of them appear in only one of the Gospels: Luke's Gospel has more of these stories than the others, and often gathers them together into groups. Two of the most famous parables are to be found only in Luke's Gospel: the parable of the Good Samaritan, and the Prodigal Son. Luke's Jesus is a master storyteller.

In the Gospels, Jesus himself calls his stories "parables", and this is the term which we use today. Literally, the word means "thrown together"- indicating, perhaps, the way that ideas and concepts are involved alongside the stories themselves. The term was not a common one in the time of Jesus, and his adoption of it suggests that there was something distinctive about his storytelling. Unlike Aesop's Fables, which were well known at the time, Jesus' parables all involve human rather than animal characters, and they are set in the everyday world of their original hearers. The characters in the stories are landowners, farmers and shepherds; men and women; rich and poor; parents, children and older people. They face situations which are familiar, although the outcome is often surprising: things get lost and found; powerful people are persuaded to do unexpected things; the disadvantaged end up in privileged places. Often the stories are introduced with the explanation that "The kingdom of God is like this": and it is a place where those who think they are right turn out to be in the wrong; where tiny things make a big difference; and where common sense doesn't always prevail.

The first Christians clearly wanted to preserve this aspect of the teaching of Jesus, but they didn't try to copy him by spreading his message using parables they wrote themselves. Instead, they tried to interpret the stories Jesus told in ways which spoke to the new situations they found themselves in. In the early church, it became common to try to give a meaning to every aspect of the story. So, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, the robbed man is identified with Adam, in need of salvation; the robbers are the hostile powers in the world; the Samaritan is Christ the saviour; the donkey on which the man is placed is Christ's body; the inn is the Church, accepting all those brought by Christ; and the innkeeper is Peter, the one Jesus identified as having a role to play in leading and feeding the members of the church. This is called an allegorical reading of the parables, and it was popular for many

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centuries. Perhaps it is still tempting to try to make everything in these stories have a deeper meaning, because of their status in the Gospels- although we wouldn't try to do this with other stories.

This very rigid way of reading the parables has in recent times been challenged by those who see the stories as directly addressing the hearer, engaging their imaginations in ways that can't be fixed for all time. The response of the hearers will depend on where they see themselves in the story: in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, do they identify with the younger son, or the older stay-at-home son, or the father himself? On this view, the parables remain effective as stories across time.

Others have sought to situate the parables very firmly in the ministry of Jesus (or in the world of the editors/writers of the Gospels), and to try to work out what they must have meant in that historical context. Why did Jesus tell this story at this point in his ministry? Was it, in the case of the Prodigal Son, to judge the actions of the Pharisees he was encountering; or was it a story full of meaning for the early church as it worked out how to deal with followers who left the faith, perhaps because of persecution, but wanted to return? The role of the parables for these interpreters is primarily to tell us more about the world of Jesus and his followers, rather than to mean something new for modern readers.

In using these stories in the classroom, any or all of these approaches might be offered, each bringing something different to the discussion. The parables, like all good stories, stand up to a variety of interpretations, and uncovering the layers of meaning is all part of the joy and value of reading them.

Questions to bear in mind when reading any of these stories include: what do we need to know and what is it helpful to know about the historical background of the story? Does the original meaning of the story matter, or should a story mean something different to every hearer?

Sources / Further Reading for all parables

Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Michigan; Eerdmans, 2008)

The on-line resources at NTGateway are useful: <http://www.ntgateway.com/gospel-and-acts/general-resources/parables/>