

STORIES JESUS TOLD

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1. GETTING TO KNOW JESUS THROUGH THE PARABLES

Jesus' way of speaking can help us to get to know him better, in answer to the question, 'What sort of man is this?' (Matt. 8:7). As with any person, especially the man Jesus, we cannot assume that we know him well as he really is—there is always more: 'I want to know Christ' (Phil. 3:7–11). This can only be as he shows himself to us, by his words and actions.

Jesus Man of the People

Jesus knocked around with all types of people during the thirty years of his life and work—he was a keen observer of the human condition—and he drew on all of that in telling his stories. Jesus' stories cover all walks of life, from king's palaces (Matt. 11:8; 22:2) and military engagement (Luke 14:31–32; Mark 3:24–25), to merchant trading (Matt. 13:45–46), finance (Matt. 25:14–30) and business management (Luke 16:1–7), to the fishing industry (Matt. 13:47–48), construction work (Luke 14:28–30) and the carpenter's workshop (Matt. 7:3–5), to market places (Matt. 11:16–17) and medical practice (Matt. 9:12), the labour market and intensive agriculture (Matt. 20:1–16; John 15:1–6), to the open fields of farmland (Mark 4:26–29) and pasture land (Luke 15:3–7; Matt. 12:11–12; John 10:1–5) and the weather (Matt. 16:2–3), to family life (Luke 15:11–32) and celebrations (Luke 17:26–30; Matt. 25:1–13), to the inside of a peasant household (Luke 8:16; 15:8–10; Matt. 9:16–17), to homelessness (Luke 9:58) and beggars on the streets (Luke 16:19–31).

These are not merely illustrations to apply his teaching by accommodating it to the experiences of his listeners. These come out of a life lived from within the very fabric of human existence and social interchange. See John 1:14; Luke 2:7; Galatians 4:4; Matthew 4:12–16; Luke 15:1–2; Hebrews 2:14–15, 17–18; 2 Corinthians 8:9; Romans 8:3–4; 5:2.

Jesus the Master Story-Teller

There was a time in my life when I took to writing short stories, with a Christian point to them. They were published in the newspaper of the local country town for all to read. But when I compared my stories with the parables that Jesus told, I was in awe. I was amazed. Having tried it myself, and then looking at what Jesus did, I asked myself, 'How did he do that?' No way could I do what he did. Such economy of words! Such vivid pictures! Such incisive application! I was a bumbling amateur in the presence of a Master. You try it some time, and see if you can come anywhere near it. An example of the difference between a divinely inspired parable and a humanly constructed one can be traced in 2 Samuel 12:1–14, contrast 14:1–20.

C. H. Dodd writes of the style of Jesus' teaching:

A large proportion of it comes in the form of short, crisp utterances, pungent, often allusive, even cryptic, laden with irony and paradox. This whole body of sayings . . . has an unmistakable stamp . . . They have the ring of originality. They betray a mind whose processes were swift and direct, hitting the nail on the head without waste of words.¹

At times it breaks into the structure and rhythms of poetry (as in Matt. 7:24–27). 'Clearly we are in touch with a mind of poetic and imaginative cast'.²

¹ C. H. Dodd, *The Founder of Christianity*, Collins, London, 1971, p.37.

² Dodd, *Founder*, p. 38.

Further, it is notable that Jesus ‘thinks and speaks in concrete images and pictures in preference to general or abstract propositions’:

Thus, instead of saying “Charity should not be ostentatious,” he says, “When you do some act of charity, do not announce it with a flourish of trumpets” [Matt. 6:2]. Where he might have said, “Personal relations are more important than religious observance,” he makes a picture: “If, when you are bringing your gift to the altar, you suddenly remember that your brother has a grievance against you, leave your gift where it is before the altar. First go and make your peace with your brother, and only then come and offer your gift” [Matt. 5:23–24] . . . It is this sense for the concrete, this delight in imaginative picture-making, that has shaped the “parables”.³

This makes Jesus’ teaching directly accessible to all.

In the Western tradition serious theology has almost always been constructed from ideas held together by logic. In such a world the more intelligent the theologian, the more abstract he or she usually becomes, and the more difficult it is for the average person to understand what is being said . . . *A parable is an extended metaphor* and as such it is *not a delivery system for an idea* but a house in which the reader/listener is invited to take up residence . . . that person is urged by the parable to look on the world through the windows of that residence . . . for Jesus, stories and dramatic actions are the language of theology.⁴

James Harleman uses the modern storytelling of cinema movies to bring people closer to God:

What if our creative impulse could be a pleasure to the God of the universe, a sweet incense in his nostrils? . . . Christians often neglect the art of storytelling and the arts . . . when the truth is that Jesus was, and is—fundamentally—a storyteller!⁵

Jesus’ Sense of Humour

Jesus was not only a master story-teller; he also had a quirky, almost Monty-Python-type sense of humour in the way he told them. He used comic cartoon-like elements of exaggeration, even absurdity, to get across the surprising and most unexpected way God operates in this world. Many of Jesus’ stories and word-pictures have some catch in them—something larger than life, some marked contrast, some unexpected twist or ridiculous outcome, that makes us laugh, or takes us by surprise, or pulls us up sharply. We shouldn’t try to tone down or explain away the exaggerations or surprises in Jesus’ stories—we are often much too serious in the way we try to handle Jesus’ stories—those exaggerations and surprises are the very things by which he makes his point, grabs our attention, or gets in under our guard, upsets our accustomed expectations, and hooks us in.

Someone has said that Jesus had a good line in camel jokes.⁶ Like when he said, ‘It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God’ (Mark 10:25). Bible Scholars don’t always get it. Some have even tried to make out, ‘Well there was a gate in the wall of Jerusalem that was quite low, but if a camel knelt down, and off-loaded everything it was carrying, it could just make it through’. Nonsense! There has never been any such gate in the wall of Jerusalem. Jesus was talking about a real camel fitting through the little eye of an actual sewing needle. Impossible! But then he turned around and said, ‘But God can do that!’—make even a rich person enter the kingdom of God—be part of what God is doing in His universe. (Mark 10:23–27). Or the time when Jesus sent up the religious authorities

³ Dodd, *Founder*, p. 39.

⁴ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospel*, Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove Illinois, 2008, pp. 279–281.

⁵ James Harleman, *Cinemagogue: reclaiming entertainment and navigating narrative for the myths and mirrors they were meant to be*, Cinemagogue Press, Shoreline Washington USA, 2012, p. 71.

⁶ <http://ship-of-fools.com>

by saying that they strain a tiny little gnat out of their cup of tea so they don't have to drink it, and then they drink their tea down, not realizing that they have just swallowed a whole camel! People can be like that. Or take the mustard seed (Matthew 13:31–32). Everyone knew that a mustard seed only ever produced a small shrub, at best a sizable bush. Again some Bible scholars apologise for that, and try to talk it up somehow. But the moment Jesus started talking about a mustard seed, people would have immediately thought, 'Oh yes—that little bush we've got growing out the back of our place'. But suddenly Jesus has it growing into a great big enormous tree with birds roosting in its branches! And he says, 'That's what the kingdom of God is like'. That's the way God works.

Our over-familiarisation with the parables can stop us from seeing the catch. Have you ever heard of a woman throwing a big party for all her friends and neighbours just because she has found a coin that she has lost, or have you ever heard of a shepherd or sheep farmer putting on a barbecue for all his neighbours and friends, just because he has found one lost sheep (Luke 15:3–10)? The party would most likely cost more than the value of the coin, or the sheep! If we take Jesus' parables too seriously, and try to explain them all, we can miss the twinkle in his eye and the absurd sense of humour with which he tells them! No way would anyone in their right mind throw a party like that, just because they found something they'd lost. But Jesus is making a point here: that's what God does over us. He's crazy with joy when He finds us and brings us back to Himself.

Spotting the humorous catch can be a key to the interpretation of Jesus' parables.

Jesus and the Creation

See Matthew 6:25–30, 'an imaginative apprehension of the wonder and beauty of nature, and of the unity of nature and man under the care of the Maker of both'. See also Mark 4:26–27; John 3:8, 'sayings which express this sense of wonder and even mystery in familiar natural phenomena'.⁷ This has deeper implications:

In the parables of the Gospels . . . all is true to nature and to life. Each similitude or story is a perfect picture of something that can be observed in the world of our experience. The processes of nature are accurately observed and recorded; the actions of persons in the stories are in character . . . or, if they are surprising, the point of the parable is that such actions *are* surprising . . . if the parables are taken as a whole, their realism is remarkable . . . There is a reason for this realism of the parables of Jesus. It arises from a conviction that there is no mere analogy, but an inward affinity, between the natural order and the spiritual order; or as we might put it in the language of the parables themselves, the Kingdom of God is intrinsically like the process of nature and of the daily life of men. Jesus therefore did not feel the need of making up artificial illustrations for the truths He wished to teach. He found them ready-made by the Maker of man and nature . . . Since nature and super-nature are one order, you can take any part of that order and find in it illumination for other parts. Thus the falling of rain is a religious thing, for it is God who makes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust; the death of a sparrow can be contemplated without despairing of the goodness of nature, because the bird is "not forgotten by your Father"; and the love of God is present in the natural affection of a father for his scapegrace son. This sense of the divineness of the natural order is the major premiss of all the parables.⁸

Compare: 'all things have been created through him and for him' (Col. 1:16):

as the Word of God, Christ spoke the universe into the greatest story ever told . . . Jesus told a story, and more importantly *lived* a story, that is the center and sum of human reconciliation to God, and then told his disciples to proclaim that story.⁹

⁷ Dodd, *Founder*, p. 38.

⁸ C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, Fontana Books, 1960.

⁹ Harleman, *Cinemagogue*, p. 72.

Here in the parables is a Son fully at home in his Father's creation—his inheritance, and ours (Rom. 8:14–17).

Jesus and God's Saving Kingly Rule

Jesus' stories were never told about ordinary life, just to entertain us. They were stories about what he called 'the kingdom of God', or the way things are as far as God is concerned. As he tells us these stories, he is there, confronting us with our situation as far as God is concerned. Jesus is uniquely qualified to do that, because he is the one from God.

Jesus' stories are never just general truths about life, they never stand on their own. Often Jesus' parables appear to defy common sense. They are not complete in themselves. At times there seems to be something missing, without which we can't comprehend it. Jesus' stories invariably do not contain the explanation inside the story. Mostly they just pose us with a conundrum, or a question. To make some sense of it, and to find some kind of answer, we need to go outside the story itself. And to do that, we need to look at the one who is telling the story—who he is and what he is going to do—and how we relate to him. The missing piece of the jigsaw is Jesus himself, and our relationship with him, and with what God has sent him to do for us. They are always to be taken in and understood in relationship with Jesus as the one who is telling them to us, in the light of what he came to do.

The stories deliberately contain shocks and surprises, that cause us to look again at the one who is speaking these things, and what he has come to do. Can a seed that is small and dry and hard, buried in the earth, produce a massive harvest? Can a tiny seed grow into a great big tree? Well, can one man who 'died for all' cause a world of people to 'live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them' (2 Corinthians 5:14–15)? How can a Master commend a wasteful, fraudulent, and dishonest, and disloyal manager (Luke 16:1–9)? Yet has not God done that for us in Christ? Is it not unjust to give a full day's pay to those who have done only one hour's work (Matthew 20:1–16)? Unless there is Someone who has done the full day's work for us. But to see that, we need to look outside the parable to the one who is speaking it to us.

Jesus and Conflict

Jesus took to telling stories in a situation of opposition and conflict, and many of the parables highlight this: see e.g. Matthew 21:23–46.

Jesus and the Crisis—Decision Time

So we cannot sit back and be entertained by the parables. There is an urgency about all of them. They put us on the spot with regard to our own resistance to God:

they were preponderantly concerned with a situation of conflict. They correct, reprove, attack. For the greater part, though not exclusively, the parables are weapons of warfare. Everyone of them calls for immediate response.¹⁰

See e.g. The Wedding Banquet (Matt. 22:1–14). In the course of it a city is attacked, destroyed and burned, as actually happened to Jerusalem in 70 AD—after it had largely rejected the invitation to the wedding of God that was Jesus in person. This is no ordinary wedding. It is *the* wedding of all time, and of the end time. Outside this reception venue there is not a car park, from which you can drive home. There is only 'outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth'. With this wedding, into the life of God, either we are a part of it—heart, mind, soul, strength—or we are out of it. And outside of that life of God there is nothing else—only outer darkness, and deep and lasting regret that we didn't properly take up the invitation.

¹⁰ Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, SCM Press, London, Revised Edition 1963, p. 21.