

## 2. INTERPRETING THE PARABLES

There has been a wide variety of interpretations and interpretive frameworks for the parables of Jesus over the centuries. In our understanding of and relationship with Jesus, much depends on how we interpret his parables. We seek a way of understanding them that places the person and saving work of Jesus at the centre of the process.

### What is a Parable?

The Greek word *parabolē*, used in the New Testament, suggests two things thrown side by side:

an essential feature of the parable lay in the bringing together of two different things so that the one helped to explain and to emphasise the other.<sup>1</sup>

This includes not just stories, but 'figurative forms of speech of every kind', including single comparisons, word-pictures, or one-liners. The Hebrew word *mashal* and the Aramaic equivalent *mathla* in the languages of the time may mean 'parable, similitude, allegory, fable, proverb, apocalyptic revelation, riddle, symbol, pseudonym, fictitious person, example, theme, argument, apology, refutation, jest'. The Greek word *parabolē* in the New Testament means not only 'parable' but also 'comparison', 'symbol', 'proverb', 'commonplace', 'riddle', or 'rule'.<sup>2</sup>

In Jesus' case:

At its simplest the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.<sup>3</sup>

This should warn us not to be too quick or slick in seeking out the meaning of any particular parable, but rather to let it do its work in us, and make its impact. They are '“language events” that have their effectiveness in the very act of being heard . . . an event in which barriers are broken down so that the grace of God can be received'.<sup>4</sup>

### Parable and Allegory

Early on in the Church's life the parables of Jesus were interpreted allegorically, point by point. For example, this rendition of the parable of the Good Samaritan by Augustine of Hippo (354–430 AD):

*A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho; Adam himself is meant; Jerusalem is the heavenly city of peace, from whose blessedness Adam fell; Jericho means the moon, and signifies our mortality, because it is born, waxes, wanes, and dies. Thieves are the devil and his angels. Who stripped him, namely, of his immortality; and beat him, by persuading him to sin; and left him half-dead, because in so far as man can understand and know God, he lives, but in so far as he is wasted and oppressed by sin, he is dead; he is therefore called half-dead. The priest and Levite who saw him and passed by, signify the priesthood and ministry of the Old Testament, which could profit nothing for salvation. Samaritan means Guardian, and therefore the Lord Himself is signified by this name. The binding of the wounds is the restraint of sin. Oil is the comfort of good hope; wine the exhortation to work with fervent spirit. The beast is the flesh in which He designed to come to us. The being set upon the beast is belief in the incarnation of Christ. The inn is the Church, where travellers returning to their heavenly country are refreshed after pilgrimage. The morrow is after*

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<sup>1</sup> 'Parable (in NT)', James Hastings ed., *Dictionary of the Bible*, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1909, p. 679.

<sup>2</sup> Jeremias, *Parables*, p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> Dodd, *Parables*, p. 16.

<sup>4</sup> 'Parable', Allen C. Myers ed., *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids Michigan, 1996, p. 794.

the resurrection of the Lord. The *two pence* are either the two precepts of love, or the promise of this life and of that which is to come. The *innkeeper* is the Apostle (Paul). The supererogatory payment is either his counsel of celibacy, or the fact that he worked with his own hands lest he should be a burden to any of the weaker brethren when the Gospel was new, though it was lawful for him "to live by the Gospel."—(*Quaestiones Evangeliorum*, II, 19—slightly abridged.)<sup>5</sup>

Every detail of the parable is made to refer to something specific, some items reflecting concerns of Augustine's own time. This is not likely to have been Jesus' intention in the original telling of the story, however instructive it may have been for Augustine's audience. However, it is not worth writing off completely. References to the human condition in Adam, and the failure of the Old Testament ministry and priesthood, may well have been part of Jesus' background considerations.

This allegorical manner of interpretation continued on into the nineteenth century. An influential interpreter R. C. Trench (1807–1886; Anglican Archbishop of Dublin) quotes with approval:

It must be allowed that a similitude is perfect in proportion as it is on all sides rich in applications; and hence, in treating the parables of Christ, the expositor must proceed on the presumption that there is import in every single point, and only desist from seeking it, when either it does not result without forcing, or when we can clearly show that this or that circumstance was merely added for the sake of giving intuitiveness to the narrative. We should not assume any thing to be non essential, except when by holding it fast as essential the unity of the whole is marred and troubled.

Trench gives detailed, scholarly, and devotional application to every element as he works through each parable, though he does begin by identifying the central point:

It will much help us in this matter of determining what is essential and what not, if, before we attempt to explain the particular parts, we obtain fast hold of the central truth which the parable would set forth, and distinguish it in the mind as sharply and accurately as we can from all cognate truths which border upon it; for only seen from that middle point will the different parts appear in their true light.<sup>6</sup>

To clarify in our minds the difference between parable and allegory, reference to C. S. Lewis's Narnia tales and J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* may be instructive:

Tolkien disliked allegory, and the Narnia tales were too allegorical for his taste. Lewis protested that they were not an allegory . . . but an analogy. While it is true that the characters in Narnia do not have a one-to-one allegorical relationship with abstract truths, they do point clearly to greater truths and greater characters in the Christian story. Tolkien objected . . . Tolkien disliked allegory so intensely because he felt it was too didactic. It leaves no possibility that any other levels of meaning in the work could exist. Tolkien understood the artist, created in God's image, to be a "sub-creator"—producing a work of the imagination that functioned best when it followed God's own complex action of creation . . . Lewis produced works that were profound, worthy, and beautiful, but less than fully incarnational, while Tolkien produced a masterpiece that incarnated the same truths in a complete, subtle, and mysterious way.<sup>7</sup>

It could be that Tolkien's approach (apart from its wordiness) may be closer than Lewis's to Jesus' method of storytelling.

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Dodd, *Parables*, pp. 13–14.

<sup>6</sup> R. C. Trench, *Notes on the Parables*, (1847) Eleventh Edition, D Appleton & Company, New York, 1862, p. 37; quoting Tholuck, *Auslegung der Bergpredigt* p. 201.

<sup>7</sup> Rev. Dwight Longnecker, <http://www.crisismagazine.com/2008/tolkiens-no-to-narnia>

Having said that, in the gospels themselves some parables are interpreted quite allegorically, as in Matthew 13:18–23, 37–43.

### Single Point, with General Moral Application

In reaction to the highly allegorized approach of earlier centuries, which can be arbitrary and distorting, more recent scholars have claimed that Jesus did not use allegory at all, and even that the allegorical interpretations in the gospels are not by Jesus. Adolf Jülicher (1857–1938) sought to draw from each of the parables ‘a single idea of the widest possible generality’, reducing Jesus to ‘an apostle of progress’, ‘a teacher of wisdom who inculcates moral precepts and a simplified theology by means of striking metaphors and stories’. For example the lesson of the Dishonest Manager (Luke 16:1–8) is ‘Wise use of the present as the condition of a happy future’; of the Talents (Matt. 25:14–30) is ‘A reward is only earned by performance’.<sup>8</sup>

We ourselves may need to get over asking, ‘What is the *moral* of this story?’—as if Jesus’ parables were somehow the equivalent of Aesop’s fables.

### Seeking the Original Words and Settings of Jesus’ Parables

C. H. Dodd (1884–1973) and Joachim Jeremias (1900–1979) accepted Jülicher’s discounting of the allegorical method, but not his generalizing conclusions. They used the form-critical approach of the time to try to establish what Jesus actually said, in the original setting in which he said it. They took it that the forms in which we have the parables in the gospels have undergone alteration in the process of transmission, to suit later church situations in which they were passed on and written down. They were motivated by the highest reasons:

Our task is to return to the actual living voice of Jesus. How great the gain if we succeed in rediscovering here and there behind the veil the features of the Son of Man! To meet with him can alone give power to our preaching.<sup>9</sup>

The form-critical method they use to do this, for all its appearance of being scientific, leads to by no means certain, and often contested, conclusions, and rests upon a number of prior unproved assumptions, such as:

- Jesus expected the final coming of the kingdom of God immediately, and did not foretell ‘a period of waiting between His death and resurrection and His coming in glory’.<sup>10</sup>
- Many of Jesus’ parables, spoken to vindicate his good news in the face of criticism at the time, were redirected by the later church to its own members.<sup>11</sup>
- A parable necessarily is intended to suggest some single idea.<sup>12</sup>
- Knowing what Jesus would or would not have compared himself.<sup>13</sup>
- The ‘primitive Church . . . applied many parables to its own situation, characterised by the delay of the *Parousia* [coming-again of Christ] and the Gentile mission’.<sup>14</sup>
- Jesus never used allegory.<sup>15</sup>
- The gospels give interpretations of the parables that are ‘utterly foreign’ to them.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Jeremias, *Parables*, p. 19.

<sup>9</sup> Jeremias, *Parables*, p. 114.

<sup>10</sup> Dodd, *Parables*, p. 115; based on passages such as Matt. 24:34, but discounting such passages as Luke 19:11. The writings of Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965) in *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* (1904) were also influential.

<sup>11</sup> Jeremias, *Parables*, pp. 38, 40.

<sup>12</sup> Dodd, *Parables*, p. 123.

<sup>13</sup> Jeremias in *Parables*, p. 59–60 objects that Jesus would not have compared himself with ‘a rapacious man, heedlessly intent on his own profit’ in Luke 19:21. Whether Jesus was doing this or not, if Jesus can compare himself to a thief in the night (Matt. 24:43), or a mother chook (Matt. 23:37), why not?

<sup>14</sup> Jeremias, *Parables*, p. 66.

<sup>15</sup> Jeremias, *Parables*, p. 79.

- The gospels distort some parables by expanding them.<sup>17</sup>

Even so, there is admission that it was natural and legitimate enough for the Church to apply the parables to their own situation.

These attempts to allow the parables to speak for themselves apart from the context in which they appear in the gospel writings as we have them are open to other dangers:

The introduction to the parable [Luke 18:1] is clearly supplied by Luke or his source. One strand of interpretation suggests that such Lukan settings should be set aside to let the parable speak for itself. Whenever that happens, the interpreter inevitably adds his or her own frame of reference... When the first-century "frame" is removed from this parable, consciously or unconsciously a modern frame is added by the commentator. Surely Luke's understanding of the focus of the parable is superior to the views of any modern commentator (including me).<sup>18</sup>

With regard to 'one point per parable':

If the great parable of the prodigal son has "only one point", which shall we choose? Should the interpreter choose "the nature of the fatherhood of God," "an understanding of sin," "self-righteousness that rejects others," "the nature of true repentance," "joy in community" or "finding the lost"? All of these theological themes are undeniably present in the story and together form a whole that I have called "the theological cluster." Each part of that cluster is in creative relationship to the other parts. The meaning of each can only be understood within the cluster formed by the entire parable.<sup>19</sup>

### Removing Cultural Blinkers

Bailey goes on to say, 'The content of the cluster must be controlled and limited by what Jesus' original audience could have understood'. He and others have helpfully opened up to us the cultural milieu of the Middle East then and now, as that bears upon interpretation of the parables. This also can be pressed too far, as there is much that we do not know. And there are certain human universals that we can all tap into, humbly and respectfully.

### An Approach to Interpretation of the Parables

1. We will take the text as we have it, and seek to treat its writers and transmitters with respect.
2. We will attempt to see what the text meant in its original context, with all the helps we have at hand.
3. We will pay particular attention to puzzling, comic, exaggerated, or surprising elements, as a key to the point and interpretation of the parable.
4. We will seek to see the parable in the light of the one who is speaking it—who he is and what he has come to do.
5. Knowing him to be alive now, and in direct relationship with us, we will seek by the Holy Spirit to see how the parable applies to our own lives, in the context of the present-day Church and the coming of God's Kingdom now and at the End.

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<sup>16</sup> Jeremias, *Parables*, p. 80.

<sup>17</sup> Jeremias, *Parables*, p. 105.

<sup>18</sup> Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, p. 263.

<sup>19</sup> Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, p. 282.