

## 8. PARABLES IN JOHN'S GOSPEL

In John's gospel Jesus does not tell story-parables. The Greek word *paroimia*, translated 'figure of speech' is used (John 10:6; 16:25) rather than *parabolē*. Even so, there are instances of Jesus' characteristic use of picture-language and parable-type images and likenesses. We have been saying all along that the one who speaks the parable—who he is and what he has come to do—is as significant as the parable itself. In John's gospel, Jesus relates these figurative images directly to himself and his mission.

### The Bridegroom (John 3:25–30)

We have already looked at the images of new birth, and of the freedom of the wind (John 3:1–16). Towards the end of that chapter is the image of the bridegroom (John 3:25–30). Although spoken by John the baptiser, Jesus has already enacted something of this significance when he 'revealed his glory' in 'the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee' (John 2:1–11). Jesus strikes this keynote at the beginning of his ministry, perhaps prefiguring Ephesians 5:21–32 and Revelation 19:5–9; 21:2. Jesus himself used the figure of the bridegroom in Mark 2:19–20, to highlight his own role as Bridegroom, and also his coming suffering and death. He also told parables of 'a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son' (Matt. 22:1–14), and bridesmaids 'who went to meet the bridegroom' (Matt. 25:1–13).

This is an example of how, especially in John's gospel, Jesus' words and actions were of one piece.

### Living Water (John 4:7–15; 7:37–39)

After asking for a drink of ordinary water, Jesus offers the Samaritan woman at the well 'living water' that he can give, for eternal life. In John 7:39, this 'living water' flowing from within is identified as nothing less than the Holy Spirit of God (see also Isa. 55:1; Rev. 22:17).

Note the affinity we saw in Study 1 between the created and uncreated realms:

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 . . . This sense of the divineness of the natural order is the major premiss of all the parables.<sup>1</sup>

### Harvest (John 4:35–38)

As the Samaritans approach Jesus at the woman's word, 'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!' (John 4:29–30), Jesus speaks to his disciples of the ripe harvest they are to reap (compare the parable of the sower Mark 4:3–9; see also Matt. 10:37–38; Rev. 14:14–20). We are told, 'Many Samaritans of that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony', and then came to know for themselves 'that this is truly the Saviour of the world' (John 4:39–42).

### Bread of Life (John 6:25–59)

After feeding 'a large crowd' with five barley loaves and two fish, Jesus engages in a discourse, not on 'the food that perishes', but on 'the true bread from heaven' that 'endures for eternal life', with a view to the resurrection from death 'on the last day'. In the course of this he says, 'I am the bread of life', the one who has 'come down from heaven' to do the Father's will, to bring people to the Father through believing in the Son. When he says, 'the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh', and goes on to speak of them drinking his blood, the figure becomes a confronting allusion to his saving suffering and death, and their participation in its benefits. John has no reference to the bread and wine in his account of the Jesus' last meal with his disciples the night before he died, but Joachim Jeremias treats these words as a variant of his words at the institution of the Lord's Supper.<sup>2</sup>

### Light of the World (John 8:12; 1:4–9; 3:19–21; 9:39–41; 11:9–10; 12:35–36, 46)

This is a figure that Jesus also used in Matthew 5:14–16, where he applied it to his disciples. Here he applies it to himself. His use of it underscores the urgency of responding to him and what he brings while

<sup>1</sup> Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, pp. 20–21.

<sup>2</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, New Testament Library Series, trs. Norman Perrin, SCM Press, London, 1966, pp. 106ff.

he is still present. Compare 1 John 1:5–7; 2:8–11; Ephesians 5:8–14. Again, John's gospel has no account of the transfiguration: the whole of Christ's life, and particularly his giving of himself on the cross, is the revelation of God's glory (see John 1:14, 16–18; 2:11; 11:4, 40; 13:31–32; 17:5, 22, 24; see also Rev. 1:12–16).

### **Slave and Son (John 8:34–36)**

Emphasising the freedom of a direct filial relationship with God. Picked up by the apostle Paul in Galatians 3:23–4:11, 4:21–5:1.

### **Shepherd of the Sheep (John 10:1–5, 11–18, 25–30)**

Jesus went on to identify himself as 'the good shepherd'—as distinct from the false self-seeking shepherds, such as those Pharisees who, in the previous chapter, had driven a blind man healed by Jesus out of the synagogue, and others 'who came before me' (v. 8). 'Shepherd' was a figure commonly used of rulers of people (see Psa. 23 and Ezek. 34:11–16, where God himself is the shepherd; also Ezek. 34:23–24, where 'my servant David'—the coming Messiah—is the shepherd). Supply of needs, nourishing feeding, refreshment, restoration, right living, blessing, goodness and mercy, are all positive aspects. The presence of death, evil and enemies highlight the threats and dangers (compare John 10:10, 12). Both aspects underscore the indispensable need of each one of us for a shepherd. Note also the 'rod'; compare Revelation 3:27: 'to shepherd them with an iron rod, as when clay pots are shattered' (a reference to Psalm 2:9).

An ordinary sheep-shepherd would not normally lay down his life for the sheep. But this embodies a true principle of human rulership, as revealed by God to David in 2 Samuel 23:3–5, where true rulers serve those over whom they rule, just as God serves and cares for His whole creation that is under His authority. This was exemplified by Jesus in Mark 10:42–45. So Jesus contrasts himself with those who have no intimate connection with or concern for the sheep. This intimacy and concern come from the very heart of the relationship between the Father and the Son.

But why should this involve the shepherd laying down his life for the sheep? As Jesus approached his cross, prophecies from Zechariah 11:4–17; 13:1, 7–9 were very much to the fore. It seems here that the prophet was asked by God to act out being first a true shepherd and then a false shepherd, in a time when the rulers of Israel were false shepherds, and things were going to get worse. He is paid off by these false rulers for the price of a slave (see Exodus 21:32), and terrible judgment is pronounced against the false shepherd. A day of great cleansing from sin is announced, and God's judgment comes on the one in the position of shepherd, whom God calls 'my associate'. The sheep are also judged in this action, and true relationship with God is effected. Jesus told his disciples on the way to the garden of Gethsemane how this prophecy applied to himself:

Jesus said to them, 'You will all become deserters; for it is written, "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered." 28 But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee' (Mark 14:27–28).

It is this taking of the judgment into himself, that the 'sheep' might be gathered into true life with God, that is at the heart of the Father's purpose (see 1 Peter 1:18–19), and so pleases the Father.

The 'sheep' that are humbly glad to receive this salvation hear the shepherds voice and respond:

24 So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, 'How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.' 25 Jesus answered, 'I have told you [When? When he said, 'I am the good shepherd'], and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; 26 but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. 27 My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. 28 I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. 29 My Father who has given them to me is greater than all, and no one can snatch them out of the Father's hand. 30 The Father and I are one' (John 10:24–30).

Those who refuse this great salvation are locked into hatred of God and his Messiah, and will not know or experience the wonderful relationship between the Father and the Son, between God and His Messiah (see what follows in John 10:31–39)

Where are we, in relationship to this good shepherd, and what God has done for us in him?

### **The Gate for the Sheep (John 10:1–10)**

The 'door' is first of all the entrance used by the shepherd (10:2–3). Farmers bring their sheep in and out through the gateway; stock-thieves use other approaches. The 'thieves and robbers (or bandits)' (10:1, 8, 10) are those who care for themselves and their own advantage rather than for the sheep, as in Jeremiah 23:1–6 and Ezekiel 34 and, by implication, the Pharisees in John 9 (compare Matthew 23:13). Behind them is 'the thief' of all time, Satan himself (10:10; see Genesis 3:1–15). True 'shepherds' ('pastors') of God's people will come in themselves through faith in Jesus, and will bring others in the same way (compare Numbers 27:15–17).

So the 'door' is also the one entrance used by the sheep. Jesus here, and in his claim to be 'the good shepherd', is alluding to his uniqueness as the Messiah from God, as promised in Jeremiah 23:5–6 and Ezekiel 34:23–24. The authority to open 'the house of David' (as in Isaiah 22:22) is bestowed on him (see Revelation 1:18; 3:7–8).

Jesus uses a similar figure in Matthew 7:13–14, where Jesus is speaking of entering the kingdom and its ruling action (see Matthew 7:21; compare John 3:3, 5, 14–17, with Galatians 2:20). Jesus himself, and what he has come to do, is the way in (the fulfilment of Psalm 118:19–20; 24:7–10). The hardship alluded to is not there to exclude, nor to qualify, any to enter. It is just not the way we, as sinners, would naturally choose. The apparent law-keeping of the Pharisees, which looks hard, is the easier legalistic and minimalist option (see Matthew 5:20). Its bias will resist any who choose repentant humble faith and obedience to Jesus and his way.

Jesus as the 'door' does not take us just into the security and blessing of salvation, but into participation with God in all God's righteous saving kingdom-action, through the gospel. The 'open door' in Revelation 4:1 admitted John, and us, into the throne room (or engine room) of God's action in history (see Revelation 4–5 and what follows). Hence John 14:6: 'I am the way . . . No one comes to the Father except through me'.

So in history and in our lives there open to us doors of opportunity for gospel ministry (1 Corinthians 16:9; 2 Corinthians 2:12; Colossians 4:3), which we are to take up boldly with full trust in all the gospel-armoury of God (Ephesians 6:10–20).

### **The Vine (John 15:1–17)**

It is most important that we do not distance ourselves from Jesus Christ, or ever see ourselves as being somehow apart from him. 'I am the vine, you are the branches' (v. 5) we often take to mean Jesus is the stem of the vine, and we are the branches attached to the stem. But that is not what Jesus is saying. It is closer even than that. Jesus is the whole vine, and in that whole vine we are the branches. We are to abide in this intimate unity with him.

Can we truly say, 'Apart from you, Lord, I can do nothing' (v. 5)? That is, nothing of any value or significance in life. And 'By abiding in you, I can bear much fruit' (vv. 5, 7–8)?

How do we 'abide' in Christ? Is it something we do? It begins, first of all, when we find ourselves to be in Christ, through his bringing us into union with himself, made clean by his word of truth (vv. 3, 16). This is by the cutting and pruning action of the Father upon the vine, His Son, in the judgment of the cross on all humanity, as Jesus stands in with us and for us. We abide in him in that action, and we find ourselves cleansed and pruned and fitted for fruitful action in our lives. We remain apart from Him in that action of the cross, and we are lost (v. 2, 6). There is no in-between.

The fruit of this union is constant prayer, and its powerful effects (v. 7–8).

### **The End of Parables (John 16:25–30)**

This relationship of Jesus with the Father in the Father's mission towards us is the reality underlying all the parables—here laid bare with the force of a revelation that breaks through (briefly) to the disciples.

So the Father-Son relationship is not another parable or one image of God among others, as some may claim,<sup>3</sup> but the core reality of all.

1. I have set before you  
An open door'—  
Takes you through to places  
You've not been before.  
Opened by Messiah,  
And none can close—  
Hard and narrow pathway  
For the ones He chose.  
Come and enter through it—  
Now's the time to do it!  
Life eternal for each one  
Who through it goes.
2. Hear the words of Jesus:  
'I am the door'.  
Come through Me—be saved  
And live for evermore!  
Come to where I laid down  
My life for you:  
Die in Me and rise again  
To life that's true.  
There's no other way there—  
Enter in and stay there!  
This is what My Father  
Has told Me to do.
3. Then I saw in heaven  
An open door!  
Took me through to things  
I had not seen before:  
Father God Almighty  
Upon the throne,  
Spirit and the Lamb  
By whom His love is known.  
He unfolds the story;  
Takes us on to glory,  
Through the victory-judgments  
Where His power is shown.
4. God has set before us  
An open door:  
Speak the word of God—  
That's what He's saved us for.  
Face the powers of darkness  
That bar the way:  
Pray to speak with boldness  
In the evil day.  
Take God's full salvation  
Into every nation  
Till God's holy people  
Have come in to stay.

(Martin Bleby, for 25th Anniversary of the Catacomb Church, Coober Pedy, © June 2002.

Based on revelation 3:8, which was instrumental in confirming his call to Coober Pedy in 1984. Together with Isaiah 22:22; Matthew 7:13-14; 2 Corinthians 6:2; John 10:1-18; Galatians 2:20; Revelation 4-5; 1 Corinthians 16:9; 2 Corinthians 2:12; Colossians 4:3; Ephesians 6:10-20.)

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<sup>3</sup> 'C. H. Dodd and A. M. Hunter have drawn attention to a number of brief parables which lie almost hidden in this Gospel', including '5:19f' ('Parable', *New Bible Dictionary*, Second Edition, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester England, 1982, p. 879.