

9. PARABLES OF JESUS' DEATH AND RESURRECTION

In all his ministry, Jesus is intent on what he has come to do: to establish his Father's saving kingly rule of love through his suffering and death on the cross and rising to life (see e.g. Mark 10:32–34). While this has been implicit in many of Jesus' parables, as this approaches, it is made explicitly clear in more of them.

Rejection of the Son of Man (Matthew 8:20; 21:42–44)

As early as Mark 3:6 there are those already who are conspiring to destroy Jesus. There were times when he was opposed and moved on (Matt. 8:34), even from his own home town (Luke 4:14–30), in his ministry headquarters (Matt. 11:20–24), and by members of his own family (Mark 3:21). So Jesus is very aware that, unlike the foxes and birds, 'the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head'. He is cast away like unwanted rubble on a building site (compare 1 Cor. 4:13, where Paul compares apostles to 'the rubbish of this world'). But this rejected one is to become like the head cornerstone, decisive in the exaltation of those to whom the kingdom is given, as also in the fall of those who oppose him.

The Wicked Tenants (Mark 12:1–12)

This is one parable in which Jesus is quite explicit about his death and its implications. He is the 'beloved son' of the owner of the vineyard: see Mark 14:61–64. Based on Isaiah 5:1–7, it sums up the history of Israel with regard to the prophets (compare Acts 7:51–52) and foreshadows the gentile mission (e.g. Acts 13:44–48; Rom. 10:18–11:32). It is directed publicly against those opposed to Jesus, who 'perceived that he had told the parable against them', thereby helping to seal his fate.

Justification

Paul spells out in Romans 4 the twofold benefits of justification that come to us through a faith-union with Christ as a result of Jesus' death and resurrection: the not-reckoning of sin, and the reckoning of righteousness:¹

David speaks of the blessedness of those to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works:
"Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven,
and whose sins are covered;
blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin" . . .
righteousness . . . will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification. (Rom. 4:6–8; 22, 24–25).

Jesus told two parables that bring home this double reality, and the cost to God of doing so.

The Unforgiving Servant (Matthew 18:21–35)

'A talent was more than fifteen years wages of a laborer'². No explanation is given of how the slave's debt came to be so large: that makes 10,000 talents equivalent to over 150,000 years of hard labour—another example of Jesus' crazy over-the-top exaggeration as a humorous aspect of his story-telling. But when we consider that the smallest sin is as large as the holiness of God that it affronts, maybe this is not quite so funny. The sale value of the slave, 'together with his wife and children and all his possessions', would not have added up to a tiny fraction of that amount.³ When 'out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt',

¹ Being 'justified' is not only 'Just-as-if-I'd never sinned'; it is also 'Just-as-if-I'd always been righteous'!

² NRSV footnote.

³ The going rate for a slave was thirty shekels of silver (330 grams): see Exod. 21:33; Zech. 11:12–13; Matt. 26:15; 27:3, 9.

who bore the entire cost of that? The slave's lord. God bears in His own pure spirit, in His love for us, the things that have broken His pride and hope and trust in us. Not by letting us off—how could He do that, and say these things didn't matter?—but by not sparing Himself the agony of bearing those things in his love for us—enough to kill Him. This is what we see Jesus doing on the cross. As man for us, bearing in God's own heart of love 150,000 years of hard labour—all the sin of the world, including yours and mine—in three terrible hours of unbelievable suffering and pain, horror and shame, darkness and defilement, weakness, nakedness, loss of glory. Let us never say, it was a light thing. True forgiveness is a solemn, and awful, thing.⁴ When 'the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything"'—over 150 years of hard labour!—it is clear that he has no comprehension or appreciation of the magnitude of what he has been forgiven, or the immense mercy and total debt-bearing generosity of his lord and master. Consequently, he behaves with unforgiving meanness towards his fellow-servant who owes him the equivalent of a mere one hundred days of labour⁵—another case of 'he who is forgiven little [or thinks he is], loves little' (Luke 7:47). For that forgiveness and love to come to a person, brought by the Holy Spirit, and for that person not to receive it for what it is, and live in it, is what Jesus designated as the unforgivable sin (see Mark 3:28–30; Matt. 12:24–28; John 16:7–11; Acts 2:38; 10:43–44). The worst possible sin, the sin that by definition cannot ever receive forgiveness, is for that forgiveness to be there for us, and for us not to receive and live gladly in it for what it is—a person who refuses to receive full forgiveness remains unforgiven. Hence the horrific seriousness of the consequences for the unforgiving slave. Jesus uses this parable to urge us to forgive one another as we are forgiven by our heavenly Father (compare Matt. 6:12, 14–15; Eph. 4:32–5:2).

The Labourers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1–16)

Good church people find this one of the most difficult parables to come to terms with. This is probably because we naturally tend to think of ourselves as those hired first, 'who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat'—as perhaps the Pharisees did. Those who think of themselves as 'those hired about five o'clock', who have done nothing to deserve a full day's pay, may be massively surprised and pleased to hear the outcome of the story (compare Matt. 8:11–12; 21:31–32; Luke 17:10).

The union movement would also have issues with this story. Within the story itself, the only explanation given for the landowner's behaviour is his freedom to do what he chooses with what belongs to him. Even so, as it stands, it comes across as unfair and arbitrary. Another instance of the kind of quirky twist or catch that Jesus deliberately incorporates into his parables—its impact is intentional. Is this the justice of 'the Judge of all the earth' (Gen. 18:25)? Once again, to make full sense of this story, we need to look outside the story itself, at the one who is telling it—who he is and what he has come to do. Those who have done less than a full day's work (and which of us have not?) can still receive a full day's pay rightly if someone else has done a full day's work for us—confronting as this is. What Jesus has been given to do, effective for us, is 'a fragrant offering and sacrifice' acceptable to God (Eph. 5:1):

since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus . . . Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness (Rom. 3:23–26; 4:4–5).

⁴ Based on an illustration in James Denney, 'Propitiation', a sermon preached at the annual meeting of the Baptist Missionary Society, April 1911.

⁵ 'The denarius was the usual day's wage for a laborer', NRSV footnote.

The Temple (John 2:13-22)

We have looked at a number of parable-like figures of speech that Jesus used in John's gospel. There remain some that relate directly to his death and resurrection. The first of these, again at the head of his ministry, is the temple. 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up' (John 2:19). This was the charge brought against Jesus at his trial (see Mark 14:55-59). 'But he was speaking of the temple of his body' (John 2:21). Jesus' body is the place of true worship (compare John 4:19-26), where the abiding presence of God is manifested (as in Exod. 29:42-46; 40:34-35; 1 Kings 8:10-11), and the true sacrifice is offered (see Heb. 10:1-10). This is something that could be understood and believed only 'After he was raised from the dead' (John 2:22).

The Seed (John 12:24)

Jesus has used before the images of seed and harvest. Here he applies it specifically to his death and resurrection: the seed 'dies' and 'bears much fruit'. He goes on to speak of how this will happen in John 12:27-33. Jesus also, however, applies it directly to those who follow him, who are drawn into that action of the cross (see John 12:24-26).

Mother and Child (John 16:20-23)

Although a male, Jesus could fully identify with what women go through in labour and childbirth, and used this as one of the most personal and telling illustrations of what would happen through his death and resurrection. 'I will see you again' no doubt refers to the time after his resurrection on the third day. Paul applies it to the resurrection of us all on the last day (see Rom. 8:18-25), of which Jesus' resurrection is the present anticipation and guarantee (see 1 Cor. 6:14; 15:20-28).