

10. PARABLES OF THE END

Jesus told numbers of parables relating to the end time and the final judgment, with its implications for the here and now, and the urgency of a right response.

The Rich Fool (Luke 12:13–21)

All of us have a cut-off point: it's called death. The whole of our lives then stand as they are, with nothing that can be added to them or taken away, and there is nothing more we can do about them. That is when our lives and all we have invested them in come under judgment.

Jesus said: 'Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness'—all greed. Covetousness or greed is wanting things for ourselves. Being turned in on ourselves. That is not the way we are meant to be as human persons. The way God has made us, we are not the only ones in the world. We find ourselves in this world with God, and a whole creation, and with lots of other people. We are missing out on an awful lot if we are turned in on ourselves in a greedy way. We are meant, as human beings, to be turned out toward God, and toward the whole creation, and toward each other.

'One's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.' Try telling that to most consumer-mad Australians! Why doesn't it? Because we can have heaps of possessions, but if we are not possessed by God who gave them all to us, we lose Him and we lose all them too. Get a life—love God as He is!

Where is our treasure? Jesus spoke of having 'treasure in heaven'. Did he mean we should give it away, as a kind of 'heavenly investment', so we would find it waiting for us there when we get there? Not really—that's still a basically selfish orientation. He meant something much bigger and more wonderful than that. He meant knowing, even now, that our true treasure is in heaven—that we have a never-failing treasure-chest that never runs out in the very person of our heavenly Father! So we never have to anxiously set store by any worldly possessions—there is always much more where that came from, and more than we could ever imagine when we finally get there! So we can be 'rich toward God'—and we'll find that we can never out-give Him!

What does it mean to be 'rich toward God'? Rather than being turned in on ourselves, it is to be fully turned towards God, and so opened out to the whole of God's glorious creation, and all the creatures He has peopled it with, and towards all the people He has give for us to be with, of whatever race or condition, and to love them with the love that has come to us from God Himself.

The Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31)

This picture-parable is not intended to give us literal details of the afterlife. It tells us more about how we are to live in this life here and now.

What is meant by 'the bosom of Abraham'? Jesus occupied a position 'in the bosom of the Father' (John 1:18) as the Son of God. So it may be saying that Lazarus is a true child of Abraham, by virtue of his faith in God. John the disciple 'was lying close to the breast of Jesus' at the last supper (John 13:23–25). So it may be saying that Lazarus was 'at table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 8:11). Either way, it indicates generous intimacy—something that had been sadly lacking in the rich man's life. Now the rich man is locked into his isolated poverty of spirit, and it is an eternal torment to him. His arrogant superiority has not left him—he still thinks Lazarus can be sent like a messenger-boy to do his bidding.

If the rich man had paid attention to the Scriptures, he would have known that God has a large and generous heart that reaches down to embrace the poor and the helpless. Even in his torment, he still cannot see that he also had been poor and helpless, like Lazarus, and that God had reached down to embrace and enrich him. If he had seen that, he would have embraced his brother Lazarus. If we are not prepared to be in that position, not even a meeting with one raised from the dead can help us.

The Barren Fig Tree (Luke 13:6-9)

Meanwhile, God is giving us a second chance through the gospel of His Son, before the final judgment comes. The gospel is always proclaimed with this in view (see e.g.

The Closed Door (Luke 13:24-30)

But the time will soon come when it will be too late, if any knowledge or familiarity we may have had regarding the Son of God has not resulted in lives changed by him.

The Ten Bridesmaids (Matthew 25:1-13)

Were the wise bridesmaids ungenerous in not being willing to share their oil supplies? No—they were single-minded and intent on readiness for the coming of the bridegroom.

Dorothy Sayers in her radio play *The Man Born to be King*, has Jesus telling this parable at the wedding in Cana of Galilee:

GUESTS: Hardly what I expected. . . . Didn't tell us much, did he? . . . the Kingdom . . . The Son of Man—that's the bridegroom . . . Christ is the bridegroom of his people—like the Song of Solomon . . . those foolish bridesmaids—exactly like you, Rachel—oh, *Mother!* . . . It made me rather uncomfortable . . .

SUSANNAH: Well, my Lord Benjamin! That was nice and short, wasn't it? And he didn't shout, or denounce anybody, or anything. Just a simple story.

BENJAMIN: I don't know—I don't know. It's a fact—one ought to think more about religion and all that . . . "Too late"—that's an ugly thought—what do you say, Rabbi Solomon?

RABBI (deeply moved): "Too late"—I am eighty years old, and I thought "too late"—too late now to behold the Kingdom—but the Bridegroom came at midnight.¹

The Coming of the Son of Man (Matthew 24:21-31, 42-51; Luke 12:35-38)

The arrival of the end, with the coming of the Son of Man, 'will be as unmistakable and as universally visible as a flash of lightning'.² Similarly, it will be able to be seen from a distance: when we see wedge-tailed eagles on the road ahead, we know someone has hit a kangaroo there and left it dead.

Jesus with his humorous lightness of touch does not mind comparing himself with a thief in the night. His coming requires that we be found at work about the master's business, which is not without its reward: being put in charge of all the master's possessions or, in Luke 12:35-38, having the master himself come and serve us. The alternative does not bear thinking about.

The Wedding Banquet (Matthew 22:1-14)

See also Luke 14:15-24—especially the excuses!³ Matthew's account has a couple of extra apparently ill-fitting features,⁴ highlighting the reality that this is no ordinary story.

¹ Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Man Born to be King: A Play-Cycle on the Life of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ*, Presented by the British Broadcasting Corporation Dec. 1941–Oct. 1942, London, Victor Gollanz Ltd, 1942, p. 100.

² R. T. France, *Matthew*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary, InterVarsity Press.

³ 'I cannot come to the banquet,
Don't trouble me now.

In this parable there is a father, and there is his son, and the bride and the guests are coming into something that the father and the son have between them. Earlier in Matthew's gospel we hear Jesus saying:

All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him (Matthew 11:27).

There is a wealth of relational closeness there—intimate joy in one another. Now at the wedding this relationship is being opened out to others. This is what the Christian life is all about—being in on that love-action of the Father and the Son, together with them, rejoicing in the Holy Spirit.

The invitation has always been there to participate with God in the life of God. But: 'they would not come'. How stupid is that? Don't they want to be in on this wonderful relationship for which they have been made? But that has been the story from the early days of human race—back in Eden—we wanted to go our own way. What we are missing out on! Even when God began to prepare a new people, the nation of Israel, through whom this participation in life of God could be brought to the world—it was also refused. That is what we find again and again in the Old Testament. When Jesus came—he was the invitation and the wedding himself in person—there was that same refusal on our part to recognise him as that and come, and he was crucified.

What form does this refusal take? We don't want God's joy. We want to make your own joy. We do this by looking not to God but to the things God has made, that He has given us: 'they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business'. Our occupation, and our economic security, are often the things we look to to give us joy, and to save us. And pity help anyone who tries to get us away from them: 'the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them'. This will wreak havoc in our lives—as we hear Jesus going on to say in the story:

The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city.

That sounds a strange thing to happen when the dinner has been prepared and everything is ready, but that tells us that this is no ordinary wedding. It is *the* wedding of all time, and of the end time. This is the wedding of participating in the life of God, to which every person is called—and to miss out on that is to miss out on everything that life is all about, and to be in terrible death. This is not just theoretical: the Jewish authorities in Jesus' time rejected the invitation to the wedding of God that Jesus was, in person, and what Jesus said here actually happened to their city Jerusalem in 70 AD: the Roman troops came and the people were destroyed and the city was burned. How can we survive, as individuals or as a nation, if we refuse to participate in the life of God that we are called to in Jesus Christ? There is no other kind of life that is real life.

So then the call goes out to all—no one is excluded—all of us Gentile sinners are brought in. It is a marvellous kindness of the King that we should be there at all, with such an opportunity to participate with God in all His wonderful life and action of love. The question for us now is: Are

I have married a wife,
I have bought me a cow.
I have fields and commitments
That cost a pretty sum,
Pray, hold me excused,
I cannot come.'

(Music and Lyrics composed and sung by the Medical Mission Sisters, 1966.)

⁴ The destruction of the city, and the lack of a wedding garment.

we in the joy of the wedding of God, or are we just existing as if all this is not really true? Each of us will know if there is still a burden of heaviness in our hearts, rather than that deep relational joy, that lightness of touch, that real peace, that comes from participating in the life of God. What is shaping our life right now? Is it the call of God that we have heard and responded to, or is it our own life and business that we are still trying to take care of ourselves? Are we sitting at the table of the wedding feast with something else still taking up our mind—our occupation, our economic security still in our hearts as our main game? Are we sitting at the table, but not joining in the feast? If so, we are still rather naked or undressed, and unready for the wedding.

Outside most wedding reception venues these days, there is a car park. And after the wedding is over you can go out to the car park and get into your car and drive home. But not outside this wedding. Outside this wedding there is only 'outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth'. As we have said, this is no ordinary wedding. With this wedding, into the life of God, either you are a part of it—heart, mind, soul, strength—or you 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. We can't be saved by God and just remain the same (see Isaiah 61:10–11). Becoming a Christian and so entering into the very life of God is like having a whole new set of clothes given to us. Paul says, 'As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ' (Gal. 3:27). 'You have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator' (Col 3:9–10). So how do we now live our lives in this 'new self' that is Jesus? See Ephesians 5:15–20. That is the joy of participating together in the life of God, being part with each other of the wedding of God. We are told in the Book of the Revelation that the wedding garment is 'the righteous deeds of God's holy people' (Rev. 19:8). That is the way we are, and that is the way we will be, if we are truly participating in the wedding of God—God's own life and righteous actions will be coming through and springing up in our lives. If we are not in that, then it is as if we are not at the wedding at all—and that will show up, sooner or later. Jesus finished by saying: 'For many are called, but few are chosen'. 'Called' and 'chosen' sound like the same thing—and they are. Here 'called' means we have received and accepted the invitation to the wedding, and we are here. The 'chosen' or 'elect', in some teaching Jesus gives a couple of chapters later in Matthew, are those who are enabled to endure through the hard times right up to the end (24:22, 24, 31).

So there are times when the Lord makes us aware that we are there, but we are not really there. We are preoccupied with something else, and that something else has taken away all the joy of our salvation. The great mercy is that God gives us to see this, and to know that burden and joylessness, and gets us to want even more that participation in the life of God that we know we have been made for and called to, and God gives us a distaste for the 'something else' that has been occupying our hearts, whatever that may have been—we may not even know fully—and helps us see what we can do about it, and gives us the heart and strength to do it, and to see it through. We could opt to stay where we are—and that could mean we would be stuck with that heaviness and joylessness and nothing else then—for ever. But why would we ever want to do that, when we are already in on the joy of God's great wedding!

The Pounds⁵ (Luke 19:11–27)

See also Matthew 25:14–30—the talents. Luke's account includes a second group of people besides the slaves—the king's enemies. So there are those who already belong to the king, who are subject to a judgment on what they do with what they have been given, and there are those who are opposed to the nobleman as king, and are yet to submit to him, who are liable to a death sentence (though we are not told whether or not this is carried out). Compare this with 1

⁵ A 'pound' was the equivalent of one hundred day's wages for a working man (Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, p. 398. 'A talent was worth more than fifteen years' wages of a laborer' (NRSV note, Matt. 25:15).

Corinthians 3:10–17, in which it appears that there are two judgments that can be distinguished from each other at the end time: the judgment of salvation or condemnation, determined by where we stand with regard to Christ and his work for us, and, for those who accept Christ's lordship, the judgment of works, of rewards and losses, according to what we have done.

While in the capitalistic West our interest may be in the profitability of the slaves' business enterprises, it is notable that the returning nobleman is interested not in the slaves' success but in their faithfulness. The context of contested leadership in the parable needs to be taken into account in its interpretation:

There were no stable political institutions across the Middle East at the time of Jesus. Transitions were (and are) times of great stress and uncertainty... anyone who understands the total instability of the political milieu in which they live will bury the money and wait to see who wins the right to rule: the nobleman or his sworn enemies.⁶

'Do business with these *until* I come back' is better translated 'Do business with these *in a situation in which* I am coming back'. They are to do business publicly in the name of the nobleman, trusting in the certainty of his return as king, even though that is at present contested. It is a test of the slaves' public loyalty and trust towards the nobleman as the rightful and ultimately vindicated ruler:

The nobleman wants to know, "Are you willing to take the risk and openly declare yourselves to be my loyal servants (during my absence) in a world where many oppose me and my rule?"

The master on his return wants to find out not so much 'what they had *gained* by trading' but, better translated, 'How much *business* has been transacted', which will be an indication of how willing the slaves have been 'to live boldly and publicly as his servants, using his resources, unafraid of his enemies, confident in the future as his future'.⁷

A British journalist once asked Mother Teresa how she kept going, knowing that she could never meet the needs of all the dying in the streets of Calcutta. She replied, "I am not called to be successful; I'm called to be faithful." (Very bad capitalism! Do not invest in her company.)⁸

It follows that the third slave, unfaithfully hedging his bets and waiting to see how it played out, missed out on backing the winner. He makes the excuse that he was 'afraid' of the nobleman, and he may be seeking to compliment him as a big and ruthless operator, but he has clearly misjudged the master. There is nothing in the parable (in Matthew's or Luke's account) to support this slave's assessment of the nobleman's character as 'a harsh man' who gains his income by plundering other people's goods and crops. On the contrary, he is shown to be very generous, powerful and large-hearted, an adventurous man, open to trust, and risk. What we think of God is going to determine our whole attitude to life, and its outcome (see Psa. 18:25–26; Tit. 1:15–16). God does pour out on us richly everything to enjoy. So we can take it up and run with it. And share it round. But if we've got it into our silly heads that God is holding something back from us, and is mean, and niggardly, then that's how we'll be, and that's how we'll treat others. And what we have been given may be taken away from us ('use it, or lose it!').

For the first two slaves, note the magnitude of the reward in comparison with the relative smallness of the gift: whole cities to be in charge of in place of single pounds! Such may be the order of our privileges and responsibilities in the new creation (see 2 Pet. 3:13).

⁶ Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, pp. 400, 401.

⁷ Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, p. 402, 401.

⁸ Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, p. 409.

The Renewal of All Things (Matthew 19:27-30; 9:16-17)

The brief picture Jesus gives of what awaits his disciples in the new heavens and new earth (see further Rev. 21:1-22:7) is a staggering one. The word-pictures of the patch and the wineskins have immediate reference, and wider implications. The immediate reference is to the incompatibility of seeking to incorporate Matthew and his fellow tax collectors and sinners into the strictures of the Pharisees. 'Jesus has brought something new, and the rituals and traditions of official Judaism cannot contain it. The explosive exuberance of the new era . . . must break out of the confines of legalism and asceticism.'⁹ We may seek to apply it in our own day to the misfit of traditional and newer forms of worship or ways of doing church (which then become traditional in themselves!). Ultimately it is saying that nothing less than the whole new heavens and new earth can contain the ever-fresh righteousness and glory of what Jesus has come to bring.

⁹ R. T. France, *Matthew*.