

The Prodigal Son 1 – Parables

10 7 11

Loving Father,
through parables, you teach your faithful people hidden truths
so that they might live lives informed by your precepts;
give us minds to discern what you are trying to teach us,
hearts to want to emulate the example set before us,
and the will to put them into practice in the way we live our lives.

My text today is from Luke's gospel chapter 15 and verse 3, 'So he told them this parable: . . .'

Do you ? Do you have a favourite parable ? There are lots to choose from. They range from the best known, full-blown stories such as 'The Good Samaritan', 'The Labourers in the Vineyard', 'The Wise and Foolish Virgins' to the tiny 'Mustard Seed' or 'The Pearl beyond Price'. They are mainly to be found in the Synoptic Gospels though John has hidden nuggets, images like Jesus the good shepherd, the door to the sheepfold, or the vine which suggest deep spiritual truths.

The word parable ultimately comes from a Greek word 'παράβολή' (parabole) and means to put something side-by-side, in parallel, so that by the one you can learn something of the other. Parables are a teaching technique used by Jesus drawing on his Jewish roots, stories containing hidden truth, challenging the hearer to

unearth, to bring to light its meaning. The teaching is there but it is active not passive learning.

Jesus starts from where his hearers are, with their experience of the world with common situations like a farmer sowing seeds, like making bread with yeast, like a dodgy steward defrauding his employer or a friend knocking on your door at midnight to ask you for bread: situations and the character types that are clearly recognisable to his audience. But Jesus does not want to leave his hearers where they are but is trying to challenge them to think by surprising or shocking them. Perhaps the best example is the challenge that our real neighbour is not someone we'd expect – not the priest or Levi who passed by on the other side, ignoring the man lying on the roadside bloody and unconscious, stripped and robbed, but a Samaritan, the traditional figure of their contempt and distrust, who's actually willing to stop and tend to the traveller's wounds, to take him to a place of safety and to pay for his treatment !

Of course, there is the problem that the audience may not be clever enough to understand what Jesus is implying. When I switched from teaching English to RE, the County Advisor for RE in Hertfordshire, Dr Stephen Lavender, told me with a Jewish smile that parables were not always easy for pupils to understand. And of course he is right. The disciples themselves had to have things explained to them which leads me to a problem, a text in Matthew 13 v14 & 15 which is itself quoting Isaiah 6 v9&10

You will indeed listen but never understand,
and you will indeed look but never perceive.

For this people's heart has grown dull,
and their ears are hard of hearing,
and they have shut their eyes;
so they might not look with their eyes
and listen with their ears
and understand with their heart and turn -
and I would heal them.

Wow ! Is Jesus really saying the truth is deliberately concealed to prevent people being saved ? I think not. We certainly have to work out the meaning but Jesus came to save us all not just the chosen few. Jesus is not telling parables to *cause* incomprehension but incomprehension is the *consequence* of the refusal to want to make sense of what is being said. As ever, it is a question of choice. We can choose not play. And if we don't take part in the game, then the parables of Jesus will make as little sense to us as a game of cricket might to the average French schoolboy.

With this in mind, over the next three weeks I am going to look on one of my favourite parables and in a series of three sermons, I'm going to try to reveal some of the riches it contains. 'The Prodigal Son' is a great story. It has three central characters. Each week, therefore, I'm going to focus on one of them to see what we can learn from them by reflecting on their part in the story.

So next week, let's start next week with the boys' father.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

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H: Sermon 24: PS1

