

Introduction to 'When Jesus Tells a Story'.

In February we shall begin a new series of Bible Studies called 'When Jesus Tells a Story' when we'll be looking at some of Jesus' most well-known parables. It would be brilliant if you could join us. I thought a little introduction might be helpful.

Jesus began his public teaching ministry about a year after his baptism and temptation. We are often told in the gospels that he taught with unique authority. When we read the synoptic gospels we quickly realise that Jesus very often used parables to explain his message. Parables are rarely found in the OT and are entirely absent elsewhere in the NT.

What is a parable?

The word parable comes from the Greek word *parabole* which means 'putting things side by side'. It is a story that uses the familiar things of the world to describe a truth or truths concerning God's kingdom. Christ compared the kingdom of God to things like a lost sheep, mustard seed, a robbery, treasure etc. Christ's parables have been compared to a Jewellery box. A Jewellery box may be beautiful, but it contains jewellery more beautiful than the box. In the same way Christ used attractive parables to reveal the glory of God's kingdom.

What a parable is not.

A parable is not a *fable*. A parable always portrays natural things as they are. A fable often portrays natural things behaving in un-natural ways e.g. animals, trees etc talking and acting like humans. Christ's parables were designed to convey truths concerning God's kingdom and the Christian life, whereas, generally speaking, fables are designed to carry a moral lesson.

A parable is not a *myth*. A myth is a fictional story which often conveys a moral lesson. But with a myth the moral lesson is often tied up or woven into the story. For example, in Greek mythology we read of Narcissus who fell in love with his own reflection when looking at it in a deep pool. In his desire to hold the image he threw himself into the water and drowned - a moral lesson about the dangers of vanity.

A parable is not an *allegory*. There is a very close relationship between the parable and the allegory. They have the same purpose i.e. using familiar things of the world to convey spiritual or heavenly truth. The difference is this: In a parable Jesus would **compare** the heavenly things with earthly things e.g. "*The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed*" (Mat 13:31). An allegory is a heavenly truth described **as** an earthly thing e.g. "*I am the gate for the sheep*" (John 10:7). We find numerous allegories in the epistles e.g. "*You are God's field, God's building*" (1Cor 3:9).

Why use parables?

Jesus is the only NT figure who used parables. Why did he rely so much on the parable (and allegory)?

a) Because Jesus himself is a glorious parable. As we have seen, a parable is the spiritual and heavenly being conveyed in the natural. Jesus is God made flesh, the invisible God becoming visible man, and the heavenly becoming earthly (see Philippians 2:6-8).

b) Most of Christ's listeners had very little education. In John's gospel we often see Jesus in dialogue with the scholars of his day. But in the synoptic gospels we see Jesus teaching the 'ordinary' people of the

country. He had to use things that they were familiar with in order for them to understand his message. Even simple truths were more likely to get attentive hearing if they were delivered in the form of a parable.

c) The parables weren't only designed to reveal the mysteries of God's kingdom to genuine seekers of salvation; they were also designed to conceal the mysteries to those who were too proud and self-righteous to follow Jesus (Mat 13: 10-17).

Interpreting the parables.

In order for us to grasp the real meaning of the parables we need to understand the historical background of the parables. Many of the situations that Jesus used in the parables may seem strange to us, but they were the norm in Palestine in the time of Jesus. For example, the road between Jerusalem and Jericho was notoriously dangerous, and thousands of priests and Levites lived in Jericho, and the Jews hated Samaritans. Hence we have the 'Parable of the Good Samaritan' (Luke 10:25-37). When we look at parables that involve weddings, they are consistent with the way weddings were conducted in Jesus' time. Jesus always used realistic situations.

The main point of many parables are given in the introduction (e.g. Luke 12:15). The main points of many other parables are given at the end of the parables (e.g. Mat 25:13). When the main point of a parable is not given at the beginning or the end, then we have to look at the nature of the parable and the occasion and circumstances in which it was presented. For example, the 'Parable of the Lost Son' (Luke 15:11-31) was presented as a response to the Pharisees' criticism of Jesus for welcoming sinners. Therefore the main point of the parable is that Jesus seeks lost souls and that God joyfully welcomes repentant sinners.

Most of Christ's parables are designed to present one single point. There is a danger of looking at a particular parable and finding too many points, points that Jesus didn't intend to be relevant. Parables like the 'Sower' and the 'Weeds' are interpreted for us (see Mat 13). There is no need to look deeper than the interpretations given by Jesus himself.

There is also a danger of misinterpreting a parable altogether and giving it a meaning other than the one intended by Jesus. For example, in the 'Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard' (Mat 20:1-16), Jesus gives the story of how different workers were employed at different times of the day to work in a vineyard. The first worker employed worked far longer hours than the last worker, yet their wages were exactly the same. The workers who worked longer hours complained, but the owner of the vineyard makes the point that he could pay the workers as he saw fit.

Some have interpreted this parable as Jesus saying that everybody will have the same reward in heaven. But there are other parts of the Bible that teach that there will be different levels of rewards in heaven. Others have interpreted the parable as meaning that the last workers put in more effort than the first workers. Yet there is no suggestion in the parable of this. The meaning of the parable is that God is sovereign and that what we receive from God is the result of his grace, and this should stop us from overvaluing our service to God.

Conclusion.

Through parables, Jesus ensured that the gospel was taught in an understandable way. The 21st Century Church should do the same.