

Trinity 7

'Tell all the truth but tell it slant —'

The first line of one of Emily Dickinson's best known poems could be a definition of the parables, on which we've been focussing for a few weeks. My friend Fr Peter Groves told me a couple of weeks ago that early in his time at St Mary Magdalen's Oxford a kindly auditor responded to one of his sermons (in which he had quoted a poem), 'when preachers quote poetry I reach for my gun'. I'm inclined to agree, but this poem is very short, most of you aren't close enough to fire and the parables have an affinity with poetry, so I'll risk it.

Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind —

That is a near-perfect description of parables, and parables contain the gospel, so we should want to understand them. Today St Matthew reports that Jesus taught *only* in parables: the statement is among the few verses omitted from today's passage —

Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing.
Mt 13.34.

Jesus' life, death and resurrection is the supreme enacted parable of God incarnate. Parables, both spoken and acted, have a long genealogy in Judaism. They are the common teaching method of many of the prophets, the tradition and succession in which Jesus speaks. But the insistence that he taught *only* in parables is worth unpacking. It tells us something about the message, the Gospel itself, possibly something which may have been obfuscated by attempts to make a systematic theology out of Christianity.

Systematic theology has often been constructed on the basis of a series of occasional letters from St Paul rather than from our Lord's more teasing and suggestive discourses. Any systematizing applied to our faith, however seductively appealing it may feel, should be treated with generous suspicion. Neither the gospels nor the epistles (any more than any other books of the bible) were written systematically, and the Church, which is logically prior to scripture, is a living organism, a body, not a rational construct.

Parables are a supremely *non*-systematic way of teaching and the explanations which we sometimes get in the gospels (probably additions by the gospel writers or other bearers of the tradition) achieve dogged clarity at the expense of subtlety. The lapidary and unmediated statements we heard this morning are characteristic parables. 'The kingdom of heaven' or 'the kingdom of God' is 'like this'.

Even the concept of the Kingdom, an alternative power-structure and values-system to that of the world, can seem elusive. You've all been hearing these parables for many years; you can continue to think about that for yourselves. This morning I want to suggest two things that Jesus' method of teaching implies for us.

One follows from the fact that his teaching is inherently and significantly *unsystematic*. That will appeal to some of us and not to others, but it is true. You can make statements about the kingdom, as Jesus does. You can see whether they are consistent with each other (and those we have are not mutually *inconsistent*). From that you can construct a sort of family story, shared and retold over generations, which creates who we are but never confines us in our past. This can guide our response to the situations of life (as our Lord himself tells us: the law of love informs all particular prescriptions). But as soon as you try to bind that story into a rigid system of immutable truths it will break out around the edges. We see this again and again in our history. In today's parables we see it cutting across our neatly defined categories of grace and works. One person stumbles upon a treasure in sheer serendipity; another seeks and seeks until he finds. Both receive treasure, sought or unsought, equally precious for both. The Kingdom of heaven is 'like that'.

The second thing to notice is that the Kingdom is, as I was saying last Sunday, inherently and *maddeningly* inclusive. The Kingdom is a control-freak's special hell. Sadly, of course, control-freakery and the institutional Church are rarely strangers. But the sacraments, and especially Baptism and the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar, are not instruments of control or boundary markers, even though they have too often been used like that. The sacraments are offered to us as *gifts*, gifts made using the simplest matter; they are communications made in media that all people can receive.

At baptisms in the Church of England we often hear the story of Jesus welcoming little children when his friends tried to keep them away [Mark 10.13-16], a reminder that the only entry requirements to the Church are incarnational. The Kingdom is 'like that'. We know this above all because God chose to be made flesh, as the primary enacted parable of the gospel, as *the* parable of salvation. The manner of God's dealing with us in Christ is reflected in the being of the Church.

So, looking at today's string of parabolic pearls we could conclude as follows: The kingdom is in process; we are all gathered in and held together as in today's parable of the dragnet (and as in last week's parable of the weeds in the wheat), and it is not for us to set boundaries that will exclude others from God.

The kingdom is of supreme value, 'costing not less than everything', but any and all can find it: the only question is, will *we* make the offering of our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a holy and living sacrifice, in response. That is our part in the transaction, which gets us from price to value.

And, we are *all* potentially fruitful ground for the kingdom in which the seed may be sown and the tree of faith may grow and even support others, if only we will attend, respond and persevere.

The parables show why liturgy (and liturgical theology) is of primary importance in Christianity: here we have our most reliable enacted parables (sacraments are *efficacious* parables; they produce effects in us; we are changed by them, organically, in our relations with God and each other). The liturgy is the primary encounter of the people of God with God, and God with us, *all* of us, all who respond to the invitation. What we do here is of supreme importance. Properly approached, this encounter will get us nearer to God than anything else we can *do*.

So to what shall we compare the kingdom of God? The kingdom of God is like someone who, on an unusually hot London summer's day, put a bottle of champagne in the freezer to cool it quickly. And going out to the shops he was distracted and came home late, to find the champagne had burst out of the bottle. And the ice was *delicious*.