



Parables

Parables comprise a substantial part of the recorded preaching of Jesus. The parables are generally regarded by scholars as among the sayings which we can confidently ascribe to the historical Jesus; they are for the most part authentic words of Jesus. They are generally short which would have made for easy remembering and engendered authenticity as they moved from the oral tradition into the written gospels.

The Scripture scholar C.H.Dodd provides probably the most comprehensive definition of a parable:

The parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought. – The Parables of the Kingdom

Parables are never meant to be simple little children's stories. In their essence they should connect with the lives of the hearers, but be unsettling enough to disturb the status quo. For example in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, the high status that would have been attributed to the priest and the Levite is turned upside down by the compassion exhibited by the Samaritan, a foreigner distained by the Jewish hearers of this story.

Although all parables vary in their style, structurally they can be grouped into three types:

- **Simile** (or similitude) a concise comparison between the reign of God and a familiar everyday scene. Generally a simile would begin "The kingdom of God is like ...". The three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) contain twelve similes.
- **Narrative** is often longer and more detailed than the simile. It tells a story about a one-time event which is fictitious, similar to "once upon a time" stories. Typical beginnings are: "There was a rich man" (Lk 16:1); "A sower went out to sow" (Mk 4:3; Mt 13:3; Lk 8:5). Approximately sixteen of the parables in the Synoptic Gospels belong to the type of parable (in the narrow sense).
- **Allegory** presents figures and events as symbols. Sometimes these symbols are explained (e.g. the weeds among the wheat, Matt. 13: 24-30; 37-40) but often the meaning is left to the listener to discern. A good example of an allegorical parable would be the Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13: 1-9; 18-23). For much of Church history it was thought that all the parables were allegories, with each element being a symbol for some Church doctrine or belief. More recent thinking considers each parable as a whole, open to interpretation that invites spiritual reflection and application within differing circumstances.

The parable genre which Jesus used so effectively in his ministry challenges the hearer by subverting normative worldviews (e.g. meaning of success, the place of the poor and outcast). The parable asks, "Is this all there is to the story?"

Ultimately, Jesus himself became the Parable of God. His words, his ministry and finally his death and resurrection preached a Kingdom of God that subverts the worldview of power, justice, peace and love – *the first shall be last and the last shall be first*.