



Preaching and the Parables

Reflections on Parables and Preaching today

Parables

- There is a case to be made for Parables being the most characteristic feature of Jesus' teaching

Features of Jesus' teaching

- Short aphorisms and brief teachings
- Questions
- Parables

- If you cast a definition wide and include the Johannine 'I am...' sayings then there are 60 (ish)

Parables

- There is a case to be made for Parables being the most characteristic feature of Jesus' teaching
- Parables are not unique to Jesus and can be found across most ancient cultures - but Jesus' usage of them is wider than anyone else's

The Challenge of parables

The only thing that can be said about parables with any certainty is that no one thing can be said about them all.

Range of parables

They range:

- From long complex allegorical type parables (e.g. parable of the sower)
- To rich, though sparse, narrative worlds (e.g. Prodigal son)
- To snap-shot stories (e.g. yeast)
- To brief comparisons (e.g. children in the marketplace)

The passages named as parables in the Gospels

- Matthew 13 – starts and ends with the word implying everything in it is a parable: Parable of the sower; the wheat and the weeds; the mustard seed; the woman and the yeast; treasure in the field; fine pearl; fish and the nets. (and parallel in Mark 4)
- Matthew 21.33-45 – parable of the tenants in the vineyard (and Mark 12)
- Matthew 22.1-14 – The wedding banquet
- The statement about those outside
- Mark 3.23 – How can Satan cast out Satan...?

Images Jesus used (1)

- Agriculture and Farming
 - Wheat; Trees; Vines
 - Fishing
 - Animals - sheep and goats
- Household
 - Wineskins; lamps and lights; food (e.g. bread); coins; woman in labour
 - Building houses; burglars
 - Families; masters and slaves

Images Jesus used (2)

- Society and Relationships
 - Weddings; banquets
 - Villages and cities; persistent widow; good Samaritan
 - Kings and kingdoms
 - Judges and judgement
- Money (having it or lacking it)
 - Debts and debtors; rich people

Parables

- A case to be made for Parables being the most characteristic feature of Jesus' teaching
- Parables are not unique to Jesus and can be found across most ancient cultures - but Jesus' usage of them is wider than anyone else's
- What is a parable? - the range makes them difficult to define

The Struggle to define parables

- Some define parables as ‘illustrations’ because of the etymology of parable (parabole) but they are far more than illustrations:
 - Some are narratives; others aren’t
 - Some are metaphors or similes; others are bigger than this
 - Some are strange; others are very clear what they mean

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A few definitions

- Snodgrass suggests that we think of them as imaginary gardens with real toads in the them
- ‘an allusive narrative which is told for an ulterior purpose’ David Stern
- An indirect communication which deceives the hearer into truth. Soren Kierkegaard
- The Rabbis called parables (what they called mashal) handles for understanding Torah.

A Few Observations about parables

They are:

- Visual not conceptual
- Allusive not concrete
- Based in real life not fantasy
- Are hard to tie down
- Often leave loose ends hanging

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- What is a parable? - the range makes them difficult to define
- The problems of interpreting parables

Some issues in interpreting the parables

- Allegories vs Open ended allusive images

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Some issues in interpreting the parables

- Allegories vs Open ended allusive images
- What happens when a parable dies?
- The challenge of understanding the world of Jesus to help us grasp where a parable might lead us
- The discomfort of leaving threads hanging, so that the parables can speak for themselves
- The challenge of preaching on them
- Oh and that passage...

Mark 4:10-13

- ¹⁰ When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables.
- ¹¹ And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; ¹² in order that 'they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.'" ¹³ And he said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables?"

What can we learn from parables for preaching?

- Variety – challenges to think again about having a formula for preaching
- The importance of image and story in learning new things

Apart from personal experience, stories are the quickest way to learning. We learn most easily in the concrete, but, because we cannot easily remember hundreds of concrete accounts, our brains store most easily in the the abstract. In teaching and preaching the shortcut is to repeat the abstract idea we already know, forgetting that others still need to learn in the concrete.

K. Snodgrass *Stories with Intent*

What can we learn from parables for preaching?

- The use of variety challenges us to think again about having a formula for preaching
- The importance of image and story in learning new things
- The affective importance of using everyday analogies ... as well as special and unusual ones
- Having the confidence to leave threads hanging and to allow people to make of them what they will
- The reassurance that even the disciples didn't get what Jesus was talking about