

THE PARABLES

Jesus did not explain his experience of the reign of God. Apparently it was hard for him to describe conceptually what he felt within himself. He didn't use the language of the scribes nor the solemn language of the priests. He used the language of the poets. With infinite creativity he invented images, constructed beautiful metaphors and suggested comparisons. Above all he was a master storyteller whose stories captivated his listeners. The best way we have to 'get inside' Jesus' experience of the reign of God is to take a walk through the fascinating world of these stories.

Jesus' language is unique. There is nothing artificial or forced in his words; everything is clear and simple. He didn't need to resort to abstract ideas or complicated sentences: he talked about life. He was teaching them a different view of life. God is good, his goodness fills everything; his mercy is already irrupting into human life. All Galilee is present in his language: its work days and feast days, its sky and seasons, its flocks and vineyards, its planting and harvesting, its beautiful lake and its population of fishermen and farmers. Sometimes he helped them to see the world around them in a new light and at other times led them more deeply into their own experience. They could meet God there, in the depths of their life.

The teachers of the law used parables but for a different purpose. In general they began with a biblical text which they wanted to explain and used a parable to expound the correct interpretation of the law. Jesus' purpose in using parables was quite different, it was to make something happen in people's lives and bring the realization that God was seeking to break into their lives. His parables were moving and thought-provoking; they touched people's hearts and invited them to open up to God. They shook up conventional lives and gave them a new perspective from which to accept and live God's presence in a different way.

Jesus apparently did not explain the meaning of parables either before or after he told them. He didn't sum them up or clarify them. The parable itself had to penetrate its hearers. He had a habit of saying, "Those who have ears to hear, let them hear". One commentator translates this as "those who have ears should use them". His message was out there, open to anyone who would listen; it was 'good news' that must be heard. Those who just listened as spectators wouldn't get the point and those who resisted would remain outside. But those who entered into the story and let its power transform them were already entering the reign of God.

The gospels came to be written after several decades of Christian teaching and preaching and applied the parables of Jesus to their own situation. Sometimes they reinterpreted the original content and sometimes turned them into 'moral fables'. There was also a tendency to allegorize the stories that Jesus first told as simple parables. In a parable each detail means just what it said, a sower is a sower, seed is seed, a field is a field. In an allegory each detail of the story has a figurative meaning. The sower is the Son of Man, the field is the world, the good seeds are the sons and daughters of God's reign. Jesus did not compose allegories. He told stories that surprised everyone with their freshness and their simple, vivid and penetrating style.

Jesus' language was simple but perplexing and unprecedented. Everyone was expecting the arrival of God as a great and powerful event. They would recall the image of the prophet Ezekiel who spoke of a "noble cedar" planted by God "on a high and lofty mountain", which would "produce boughs and bear fruit: All kinds of birds and winged creatures would nest in the shade of its branches" (Ezek 17: 22-23). For Jesus the true metaphor of God's reign was not the cedar which people think of as grandiose and powerful but the tiny, weak and insignificant mustard seed (Mark 4: 31-32). This parable must have affected them deeply. By comparing God's power with a bush growing from a tiny seed, was he asking them to give up their tradition of a great and powerful God and watch for a God who was acting in such small and insignificant ways in their midst?