

July: The Parables of Matthew



Jesus was a master of teaching in parables. The Hebrew word translated 'parable' is *mashal*, which is really wider than 'parable', denoting any wise saying, comparison or riddle, any thought which requires reflection to reveal its full meaning. Only so could he teach the unexpected reality of the Kingship of God, so different from any political structure; his hearers – then and now - must think and reflect. Not all Jesus' parables are stories; some are simple imaged sayings, like the camel and the eye of a needle. Mark's imagery is exclusively agricultural: all his five parable-stories are such (the Sower, the Seed growing secretly, the Mustard-Seed, the Tenants of the Vineyard).

Matthew, so rich in all kinds of imagery, develops this technique significantly. He likes pairs of parables and contrasts.

Pairs: at the end of the Sermon on the Mount we have the two builders, on rock and on sand, the narrow gate and the broad way. Mark's Seed growing secretly is joined by the Yeast, and followed by another pair, the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl of Great Price. Contrasts: the Children Playing in the Market-Place, the Talents, the Wise and Foolish Wedding Attendants, the Sheep and Goats at the Last Judgment. Luke is interested in depicting his characters, and many of his anti-heroes (the Prodigal Son, the Fraudulent Bailiff) are attractive rogues, often doing the right thing for the wrong reason (the Unjust Judge). Not so in Matthew: you are either good or bad, black or white; there is nothing attractive about the Unforgiving Debtor who throttles his own debtor; the Guests who refuse to come to the Wedding not only miss the fun, but get their city burnt to the ground too.

This development beyond Mark underlines a difference in their use of parables. In Mark the parables of the Kingdom are about the arrival of the Kingdom now: it has burst upon the world unexpected. In Matthew it is more a question of the long haul, and there is an eschatological lesson to be taught. The Kingdom is present, yes, but it has not yet come to its fulfilment, and Christians must make themselves ready for the final act. Matthew is writing at a time when the hope of an immediate completion of the Kingdom has faded, and there is an intermediate time which must be well spent. This is the point of the five major discourses teaching about the life Christians must lead, and is shown by one parable after another. At the great Wedding Feast one guest is thrown out because he is not wearing a wedding garment, has not made himself properly ready, for in Judaism being 'clothed with good works' was a standard figure. The parable of the Talents carries the same lesson: it all depends on how you use your gifts. The wise Wedding Attendants have oil in their lamps and in reserve. The way in which the talents are to be used becomes clear in the parable of the Sheep and Goats: it is in the care of the 'little ones', those who are in any kind of need. Since Luther we may be shocked that Matthew does not teach that we are saved by faith alone. But Matthew was innocent of this problem, for Luther added 'alone' to the text of Paul. We are in fact saved by a genuine faith which issues in good works: 'what you did to these, the least of my brothers and sisters, you did to me'.