

PARABLES AND OTHER IMAGES OF TRUTH

Jonah 3.10-4.1; Psalm 145. 1-8; Philippians 1. 21-30;

Today's readings include two splendid parables that are intended to make us question what we believe and how we behave. I thought however that first it might be useful to reflect briefly on the way scripture uses parables and other kinds of imagery, as opposed to history or science.

Let us start then with an easy question: give me the names of some of Jesus' parables? Ok, now something a little harder: an image that Paul uses? [the church as the body]

And finally, an even harder one: how about a parable from the Old Testament? [Nathan's parable to David re Bathsheba and Uriah, Dry Bones, the suffering servant, Jonah, Ruth]

So why use a parable or imagery, rather than a logical statement – why the parable of the good neighbour rather than just the commandment to love your neighbour?

It's to get into the heart rather than the head of the listener, isn't it? There are a whole range of reasons to do this. To change or expand their perspective on spiritual matters; one begins to see things from a different point of view. To provide a language for visualisers rather than verbalisers; for many people words do not resonate, images or stories do. Parables can also help those who struggle with complex thought or different cultures to understand and live out the Gospel. Parables and imagery are also a subversive way to speak truth to power; think of Nathan speaking to David.

Let us now turn to three cases, two from the readings and one for this Season of Creation. To begin with the Jonah reading. This is an example of the last reason – a subversive way to speak truth in the face of an opposing power. It also a lesson about the nature of God's love.

To provide some context. While the the Jews were in captivity in Babylon, their original conceptual framework of who they were and who God was, was shattered. Remember the Psalm – 'How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?' A group of those in captivity used their widened experience of the world to re-think matters through and discovered a much bigger God. They came to realise that God was not just the local God of a small Judean tribe but the universal God for all people. And further that God's role for the Jews was not for them to lord it over everybody else but to act to bring God's message of love and service to all the peoples of the wider world. We could call them 'universalists'. They wrote of their insights in the second Isaiah readings we often use – the imagery in the suffering servant songs. However, and it is a big however, when the Jews returned to Judah there was a reaction against this new view. This was led by a priest called Ezra who called people back to the old ways, to the old world view. He said that the Jews were special and other people were not part of God's plan as anything but servants – they were to be hewers of wood and carriers of water for their Jewish overlords. Consequently, God had no particular interest in the fate of them and close relationships with them were to be abhorred. The governor of the time was on Ezra's side and re-enforced his beliefs. So the 'exclusives', as we might call them, held the power and ruled the roost. The book of Jonah was written by universalists as

a parable to challenge this view by subverting the whole situation. In the book, God orders Jonah to go to Nineveh, the most hated and reviled capital city of the Assyrians – who were a violent and very nasty people of the worst kind. There Jonah was to call on them to repent lest he destroys them and their city. Jonah, a member of one of the nations suppressed and abused by the Assyrians, had no time for this idea. His problem is that he truly believes and truly trusts God will forgive the Assyrians if they repent, so his problem is not one of disbelief but his desire to upset God's plans for his own ends – he wants the destruction of Nineveh. Thus, he does the opposite of what God asks of him. He tries to ruin God's plan by taking off in the opposite direction. And so we have the hilarious tall story of him taking the boat and heading west not east; of a giant fish and other trimmings. And like all good tall stories; listeners down to this day are entranced and want to hear what will happen next. But then comes the killer blow; God keeps gently pressing Jonah until he finally goes to Nineveh and preaches repentance, and in the story, they do repent, and so they are not destroyed! The first message to the hearers' hearts – salvation is available to all, even to those as bad as the Assyrians. This sends Jonah into fury – he wants them all dead! We now come to our reading, the last chapter of this tale - Jonah's and God's responses.

First off, Jonah goes and sulks. We then have another hilarious scene of God stirring Jonah. And so we come to the second lesson, and we see the writer's second message, that of God's kindness and patience with even disobedient believers like Jonah. In the final verses we have God's message *"Should I not be concerned for the 120,000 people of Nineveh who do not know right from wrong."* A challenge purportedly put to Jonah but really aimed directly at the exclusives of the writer's day who believed that God had no real interest in other people, unlike the universalists.

Such a parable is a subversive voice isn't it. We are captivated by the story and tricked into seeing things from God's point of view even though we may otherwise be exclusives in our outlook. This story however is not just meant for 500BC but gives us an insight and a challenge for now as well. In what ways are we exclusives? Who do we place as outside the love of God? Probably not in our words, but in our actions. In our body language. Where we choose to be or who we choose to be with. Perhaps we are like Jonah: 'They should be reaping the rewards of their behaviour.'

If we now turn to Jesus' parable in today's Gospel reading. In the central part of his Gospel, Matthew has drawn together a whole series of parables and events that give the flavour of Jesus' teaching on the nature of the Kingdom and of our expected behaviour. Today's parable then is intended to extend and change our perspective and our ideas on the nature of God.

Again we are drawn into the story – we can see the crop and feel the sun. Perhaps we can feel the tiredness of those who worked all day. Perhaps the desperation of those who will not have earned enough to feed their family for the next day. In a sense as hearers we walk with the people involved.

Who sees the story from the perspective of the laborers who worked all day? The perspective of the laborers who started at four o'clock? The perspective of the landowner? Do you feel that the landowner's behaviour fair?

I am sure you understand that the vineyard represents the kingdom of heaven and the landowner God. So, do you think God's equivalent choices are fair? Who gets to be greatest in the kingdom?

How do you respond to God's bald statement: *'Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?'* or as today's psalm says: *'The Lord is gracious and compassionate: slow to anger and of great goodness.'*

Again, as with Jonah, Jesus speaks as a universalist, there is room in his heart for all.

As my third example I would like to turn to a different image. As many of you know we are in the middle of that period of the church's year when we consider the nature of God as creator and our role and responsibilities in this context. For this example of insights gained through imagery we turn to one of the series of parable-like material that constitute the first two chapters of Genesis. One of these deals with the issue of the relationship between humanity and God's entire creation. In one sense we are looking at an image dealing with the concept of stewardship.

In Genesis 2:15 we read: *"The Lord God took the human creature and placed him in the Garden of Eden to till it and to tend it."* Till and tend – today they imply agriculture but what connotations would these words have had for Hebrew readers? The Hebrew word here translated 'Till' is translated elsewhere as 'serve' or "protect"; for example, in Joshua 24 *'as for me and my house we will serve the Lord'*. 'Tend' is translated elsewhere as 'keep' or 'look after': Aaron says *'may the Lord bless you and keep you'* for example. So the sentence more clearly could be translated as: *"The Lord God took the human creature and placed him in the Garden of Eden to protect and to look after it.'* This has very different connotations, doesn't it? We now find it is a relational interaction between human and the whole of creation. Could we see the way we presently treat the earth as a constructive relational interaction? As protecting and looking after creation on God's behalf?

The second sentence that is relevant is the dreaded dominion passage. In Genesis 1:28 we read: *Be fruitful and multiply ... and have dominion over ... every living thing that moves on the earth.* The word translated *'have dominion over'* has in Hebrew the sense of: 'have responsibility for'. The sense is of a steward having dominion over the household, that is, a delegated authority with associated responsibilities. So then we have: *Be fruitful and multiply ... and have responsibility before me for ... every living thing that moves on the earth.*

But as Jesus constantly warns, one day the Lord of the steward will come to us and demand an accounting of our stewardship.

We have been given great power in creation – but as stewards; is this the right of selfish exploitation or the responsibilities of managing a relational interaction and of acting so as to

enable a vibrant and entire living community? As somebody fairly recently has said 'With great power comes great responsibility.'

As a final piece of homework, and given we have the referendum in a few weeks: which of the parables in the bible is relevant to the choice we each must make; or, alternatively, can you write a parable yourself that will enlighten your decision. We have heard a great deal of verbiage on this issue, perhaps it is time to reflect on the issues with visual images or stories.

At the recent synod, Bishop Carol preached that the world is always changing. As cultures change and our understanding and control of the physical world increases, so must our understanding, and our expression and explanation of the faith change. While genetics, ecology and the internet may have changed the patterns of human life irrevocably, the parable stories still tell us the foundational truths of our faith and challenge us in this brave new world to extend our understanding of the nature of the God we serve and what and how we are to do this. As today's parables say:

Should I not be concerned for the 120,000 people of Nineveh who do not know right from wrong.

'Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?'

The Lord God took the human creature and placed him in the Garden of Eden to protect and to look after it.

Parables are very challenging; I pray that each of us may find both hope and growth in them!