

‘LOOK AT THE BIRDS OF THE AIR . . .’

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FOR MANY CHRISTIANS, THE MOST DIFFICULT teaching of Jesus is heard in the Sermon on the Mount. ‘Love your enemies’ rings out as a fierce challenge, and yet it is not unusual for Christians to imagine themselves being capable of it. Many people find much more difficult the teaching on anxiety:

Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.

To give up control and planning is threatening; after all we can barely keep anxiety at bay by exercising some domination over our present circumstances and by minimizing the potential terror of the future. To take seriously Jesus’s teaching would mean that our potential internal chaos would be vulnerable to the actual external chaos of our world. Jesus observes that human anxieties and the plans and projections emanating from them are not self-authenticating. If they are to find a place in God’s scheme of things, ‘seek ye first the kingdom of God’, then consideration must be given to paradigms from the creation. Such a challenge coheres with the argument of Thomas Berry in his call for a shift from an anthropocentric to a biocentric paradigm:

As humans we need to recognize these comprehensive issues of the earth functioning. So long as we are under the illusion that we know what is good for the earth and for ourselves, we will continue our present course with its devastating consequences on the entire earth community.¹

Our starting point here was the language and imagery of Jesus. I would like to explore that further through some of the parables. The parables may be particularly relevant, because through them Jesus challenges people to re-think the way they look at the world, while in contemporary writing on the parables, much has been said on their polyvalency, their ability to carry multiple meaning. Mary Ann Tolbert has observed that this polyvalency is an opportunity to discover the ways in which ancient scriptural material can interact with contemporary cultural concerns.² I will look at three parables under headings taken from the quotation from Berry, 'the illusion that we know', 'devastating consequences' and 'the entire earth community'.

'The illusion that we know'

The parable which seems appropriate here is that of the Rich Fool in Luke 12, 16-20, which precedes the teaching on anxiety in Luke:

And he told them a parable saying, 'The land of a rich man brought forth plentifully; and he thought to himself, "What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?" And he said, "I will do this: I will pull down my barns, and build larger ones; and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry".'" But God said to him, "Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.'

The parable proceeds by describing a man responding to the good fortune of an exceptional harvest. His response seems reasonable, well thought out and prudent. The surprise element in the parable comes with the intervention of God, something which occurs in no other parable. It is an intervention which pronounces the man's apparent prudence as falling under the rubric of 'the illusion that we know'. The apparently prudent man is judged 'fool'. As J. R. Donahue points out, God speaks here in a manner which is prohibited of human beings.³ In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus forbade people to label another 'fool' on pain of hell-fire (Mt 5, 21-22). This suggests that such a judgement can only be made by God of a person meriting such punishment. The seriousness of the judgement indicates the seriousness of the crime. But what is the rich man's crime?

The key element in the parable is the shift of name. In the beginning the protagonist is called uncontroversially 'a rich man', while later he is named 'fool' by God. This re-naming is the result of the rich man's attitude towards his possessions. His internal debate with himself never breaks through the horizon imposed by his possessions, which he clearly views as the insurance for and the assurance of who he is: 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years' (12, 19). But the ample goods are not determinative of his identity, because as his life is claimed, they fall away from him, and their ownership becomes a question: 'The things you have prepared, whose will they be?'

One thing which is being challenged here is the rich man's exercise of dominion. The spatial imagery of domination and control is elaborated in terms of pulling down already existing barns and building new and bigger ones. This suggests that the fruitfulness of the land is something which has never occurred before; it has neither been foreseen nor planned for. It is rather the unpredictable bounty of nature in which human agency plays little or no part. The response to this gift of God's creation on the part of the rich man comes down to 'What's in it for me?' As Brandon Scott observes, the egocentric quality of the action shifts the parable from third-person narration to first-person reflection. The rich man is in control of his own narrative,⁴ until God deposes him from the centre of the story. At no point does any other person come into consideration. It is 'I will do this', 'I will do that', and all the verbs in the sequence 'take your ease, eat, drink and be merry' are in the singular addressed to himself alone.

Scott goes on to say that the rich man has sinned in two ways. The first is that riches are to be used for the good of the community, an injunction frequently attested in the Wisdom tradition. Secondly, he has offended against the principle which lies behind this injunction, which is that the goods of the world are limited, and therefore not to be hoarded since that will mean shortages for the rest of the community. Thus in the parable the selfish appropriation of limited resources is excoriated as the action of a 'fool', the person who says in his heart there is no God, the one who acts as if the sudden abundance of God's creation is for himself alone. The rich man has failed to ask the question that God puts at the end of the parable 'Whose will they be?' by assuming that they are his. The gifts of God's abundant creation outlast the rich man who discovers that his own self or soul is only on loan.

'Devastating consequences'

All the parables as we now have them exist in a context other than that in which they were spoken by Jesus, that is in a gospel composed by an evangelist. In some cases it is likely that the parable has already been re-interpreted before it becomes incorporated into a gospel. I think sometimes of the analogy with a folk song. There are many examples of British folk songs which were taken to the United States, where in that new geographical and social context adaptive changes were made to allow the songs to have a full voice in the new situation rather than be simple exercises in nostalgia. It is another feature of the folk song that it can be taken by a classical composer and worked into a larger symphonic work. In that way the basic shape of the folk song is still recognizable, but it is often penetrated by the major themes of the larger work. At its most effective, the tune has plural evocation: hearing the tune in the symphony evokes the earlier form but also the totality of symphonic work. If one is more familiar with the form of the folk song, then one has to learn how to hear its adaptation in the symphony. If one is more familiar with the symphony, then one may recognize that a folk song is being evoked without being able to construct the folk song now integrated into the symphony.

Something like this occurs with the parable of the Tenants of the Vineyard (Mark 12, 1-12 and its parallels). Apart from the version in the Gospel of Thomas 65, its canonical expressions are known to us in the symphonic form of the gospel narrative. Whatever the original parable of Jesus was, it has been overlaid with a salvation-historical reading which understands Jesus to be 'the son', 'the servants' to be God's previous messengers to Israel, and the punishment meted out to the tenants, God's just punishment for the rejection of the Messiah. This is effected by the introduction of other evocative passages of scriptural weight; the allegory of the vine from Isaiah 5, the important christological apologetic text from Psalm 118, 22 ('the stone that the builders rejected . . .') and the destructive stone not made by hands mentioned in Dan 2, 44. The effect of this enhancement of the parable makes it seem that there is now only one way of decoding it. Working with Matthew's version of the parable, I would like to explore whether the parable in this gospel form still retains a capacity for further evocation.

One of the difficulties with this particular parable of the tenants is that it can be received in such a way as to reinforce anti-Semitic attitudes. The consequent destruction of those who killed the son

could be seen, and indeed has been seen, as a justification for ill-treating the Jews. Here again, the illusion that we know has had 'devastating consequences'. That this is a wrong interpretation of the parable can be established on general ethical grounds, but also from the way the parable has been received into the Gospel of Matthew. Presumably some of those who preserved this parable were themselves Jews—albeit Jews who accepted Jesus as the Messiah—therefore any judgement which is made about the referent of the wicked tenants is not a global judgement about a particular race of people. Secondly, in talking of the punishment, the parable is performing an explanatory function which links causally the death of Jesus with the destruction of Jerusalem. That this is the explanation is probably due to an already established Jewish tradition of viewing Jerusalem as the place where the prophets meet a violent end, with a consequent threat of punishment to that city.

Thirdly, it is generally agreed that Matthew's interpretation of the parable not only views it in terms of Jesus as the Son and last of the prophets whom Jerusalem kills and is in turn rejected; in Matthew, the parable also challenges the Christian community about its stewardship of the vineyard which has now been given to it. Consequently, one might legitimately tell the parable from this new perspective where now the tenants are Christians and the Son represents Judaism coming to receive the fruits of the vineyard on behalf of Yahweh. The plot of the tenants, 'let us kill the heir so that we might have possession of it', can quite easily be read in terms of the genocide of the Jewish people attempted in our century, and the history of persecutions and pogroms which have led up to it.

What is common to all the versions of the parable is that a certain relationship is set up between the owner of the vineyard and the current tenants of the vineyard. The owner's relationship to the tenants is meant to find expression through a share in the fruits of the vineyard. The result of reminding the tenants of this responsibility is the violence done to those bearing the credentials of the owner. The motive for this is to shake off the responsibility of being tenants, with a view to maximizing their possession of the fruits of the vineyard.

This basic scenario then can speak through the language of the parable to different understandings of ourselves in the world today. It can speak powerfully to a world in ecological crisis where a maximization of the profit motive can bring people to a point where they do violence to those bearing the credentials of the owner. The refusal of human beings to acknowledge their role as tenants of an interdepen-

dent created order is at the heart of the violence done to other human beings, animals, plants and their common habitat. A particular instance where all these elements might come together is the exploitation of the Amazon rain forest which seems to entail the quasi-genocide of indigenous peoples and the murder of those who speak for them, and the destruction of trees which both destroys complex animal habitats and damages the general environment. These are devastating consequences.

'The whole earth community'

The last two parables I want to consider in this exploration appear in the fourth chapter of Mark. The parable of the seed growing secretly is unique to Mark, while the parable of the mustard seed can also be found in Matthew 13, 31-32 and Luke 13, 18-19. Both parables appear relatively close together in the Gospel of Thomas in inverse order to that of their appearance in Mark (GT 20-21). The interpretative context of these parables in the Gospel of Thomas is quite complex, and there is no scope to discuss it here. In Mark, the parables 4, 26-29 and 4, 30-32 form the climax to Mark's parable discourse on the mystery of the kingdom. The cumulative effect of this material is to communicate a view that small even hidden beginnings will culminate in abundant growth, even if the process of growth is essentially opaque to the observer.

In the Gospel of Thomas, the parable of the seed growing secretly has been interpreted in terms of correct knowledge and understanding. This short version of the parable highlights human gnosis leading to human action. In Mark, although it might be possible to read the parable in that kind of way, certain emphases in the text suggest something different:

The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed upon the ground and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he knows not how. The earth produces of itself, first the blade and then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.

In the two most recent discussions of this parable, both Scott and Donahue identify the key phrases in the parable as 'he knows not how' and 'of itself' (*automata*).⁶ Scott argues that the ignorance of the seed scatterer suggests that the farmer is not a good representative of his type. If his sleeping and lack of knowledge are taken at face value,

then the hearer would expect the lack of attention to be disastrous for his crop. But despite this, the seed goes through all its processes towards harvest. Thus the 'of itself' suggests the activity of God and also connects with other passages in the Hebrew scriptures where the same word refers to the free growth of the sabbatical year or the jubilee year, deliberate moments in which God's ownership of the land is to be acknowledged and celebrated.

Donahue also argues his interpretation on the basis of the disjunction between 'he knows not how' and 'of itself'. What is contrasted is the differing contributions of the human being and the seed. The contrast is elaborated through the different rhythms. The man has his own rhythm of sleeping and rising night and day, while the seed has a different rhythm. The repetitious pattern of the human being with his twenty-four-hour clock is not something which controls the growth process; it has its own pattern from seed to ripening.

It is not clear to me that the 'not knowing' of the seed scatterer should be interpreted in the direction of sluggardly ignorance. What is emphasized is the mysterious dimension of the process of growth which itself points to the mystery of God's providence. Human rhythms do not determine the process of growth, and in the disjunction of the rhythms of human life and the processes of growth or in the celebration of the sabbatical, the mystery of growth needs to be recognized and honoured as indicative of the mystery of God's creative purpose.

The mystery of God's creative purpose is imaged in the parable of the mustard seed which ends with a word picture of the creation in harmony.

And he said, 'With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade'. (Mark 4, 30-32)

In Mark, the parable evokes a contrast where small beginnings, 'the smallest of all the seeds', flower into disproportionate growth, 'it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs'. This is already a rather unlikely scenario which is pushed further and the already strained realism of the image bursts into extravagance where the shrub 'puts out great branches, so that the birds of the air may dwell in its shade'. This final expression evokes another range of meanings.

The verb for 'dwell' (*kataskenoun*) is often used in connection with the ingathering of the nations at the end time so that the 'birds' represent the harmonious co-existence of the nations in the end time.⁷

Following Funk, Donahue goes on to argue that there is some humour in the fact that a shrub, rather than a mighty tree, is used as the image for the shade and shelter of the birds. In the prophet Ezekiel, great empires are imaged through mighty trees. Egypt is represented as a cedar of Lebanon in the brilliant allegory of Ezekiel 31 which is essentially a judgement upon Egypt. On the other hand, the same tree is used earlier in the same prophetic book (Ezek 17, 22-24) as the image of the eschatological regeneration of Israel where Yahweh plants the sprig of a cedar tree himself. Both of these images describe the trees as providing shade and shelter for birds and beasts (17, 23; 31, 6). Through this parable, there is an evocation of eschatological regeneration, the harmony of the new creation which is dependent on the smallest of all the seeds. From an ecological horizon of interpretation, this must challenge the hearer about the understanding of even the most insignificant feature of the interconnectedness of the whole earth community. It might also be appropriate to note that there is no human actor in this imaging. We have once again been invited to consider the birds of the air.

Conclusion

The metaphorical character of parable raises the consciousness of the hearer into a space where a reflection takes place on the nature of God's relationship to the world. I would suggest that often enough the parables raise the question of theodicy, of what constitutes God's justice, of God's right ordering of the world. This emerges fairly sharply from the parable of the wicked vine-dressers where one is left with the haunting question of how it is that those bearing the credentials of God are consistently maltreated or murdered by those who arrogate dominion over God's creation. Theodicy is also an issue in the parable of the rich fool, while in the other parables considered here, we are asked to ponder the mystery of God through images drawn from the world of nature.

It is also a common claim of modern parable interpreters that the parables, in the way that they fracture their own realism, disrupt conventional understandings of the world, disrupt the way we think things are, and challenge our illusory claim to know. The parables need to be heard in a world concerned with the ecological crisis.

NOTES

¹ *Cross currents* 37 (1987), p 186.

² *Perspectives on the parables* (Fortress: Philadelphia, 1979), p 65.

³ *The gospel in parable* (Fortress: Philadelphia, 1988), p 178.

⁴ *Hear then the parable* (Fortress: Philadelphia, 1989), p 135.

⁵ Scott, p 137.

⁶ Donahue, p 35; Scott, p 368.

⁷ Donahue, p 37.