

The Parables of Jesus

What is a Parable?

The word 'parable' comes from the Greek word 'parabolé' which means "placing beside" so a parable is a comparison or an illustration. Dodd defines the parable as 'a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.' Jesus used stories from real life to describe spiritual truths. He used word-pictures to help his listeners discover deeper meaning beneath the surface. The parables Jesus told often involved an element of surprise. The meaning was not always immediately obvious but the listener was drawn to reflect on what lay behind the images and words presented.

Why did Jesus use Parables?

Jesus used some parables so that his words would be understood and remembered by people. He also intended to draw them deeper into the mystery of God. (Mt.4: 10-34) At times the challenge contained in the parables was rejected by his listeners. The disciples often asked Jesus to explain the meaning of the parable after he had told it to the crowd, e.g., (Mt. 13:13:37-43; Lk. 8:11-15). In response to their questions, Jesus explained that the gift of understanding is given to the disciples but not always to others (Mt. 13:13-14). It was the listener who placed himself in one category or the other by his response to the parable. If he chose not to believe, the parable became unintelligible. To the person who was open to God's word, the parables Jesus used brought new light and understanding. God can only reveal himself to the humble person who acknowledges the need for God and his truth.

How did Jesus use the Parables?

Jesus was a superb story-teller. His understanding of human nature made the stories real. He used the familiar circumstances of everyday life to attract his listeners. He used outdoor scenes of farming and fishing which were part of each person's experience. His stories based on the homes of people, were based in the small, one-roomed houses of the time.

Conclusion

The stories were simple enough to survive in the oral tradition of the early church until they were written down in the Synoptic Gospels years after Jesus' death. They are as relevant today as they were in the time of Jesus. If we ask what does this parable tell us about our relationship with God, we will find the answers to His word. In the time of our Lord the custom was to scatter the seed on the land before ploughing, hence the various responses in the Parable of the Sower.² Let us pray that we may be open to receive God's word.

Bernadette Geraghty C.H.F. 2008

¹ Dodd, C.H. The Parables of the Kingdom, Collins, Glasgow, 1961, p.16

² Heremias, Joachim. The Parables of Jesus, SCM Press, London 1972, p.11