

# THE PARABLES OF JESUS

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*To my*  
FATHER AND MOTHER,  
WHO BY WORD AND LIFE  
TAUGHT THEIR CHILDREN TO CHERISH  
THE PARABLES OF JESUS,  
THIS BOOK  
IS DEDICATED  
IN  
GRATITUDE AND LOVE

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## PREFACE

This little book began in a series of lectures given during the summer of 1926 on "The Parables of the Passion Week." Publishers suggested that they be printed. It seemed, however, that the Parables assigned by the Synoptists to the last week of the earthly ministry of Jesus, though they show a certain urgency and a valedictory mood, are not sufficiently distinct from the other Parables to justify their separate study. This fact and the inadequacy of the lectures forbade their publication in book form. The proposal was then made of this book of wider scope.

The task at first appeared overwhelming. It has assumed no smaller magnitude now that the book is written. The Parables are inexhaustible in meaning; they would make even the best discussion appear weak. The writing did reveal, however, that the field of this topic is surprisingly clear. Recent books on the Parables are not numerous. It may be said, without disparagement to modern authors, that for a satisfactory general introduction to this subject it is necessary to return to Archbishop Trench ("Notes on the Parables," 1841). Dr. A. B. Bruce's "The Parabolic Teaching of Christ," though first published nearly fifty years ago, still holds its place as a standard work. But in the course of these fifty years Biblical research has crystallized in certain accepted attitudes and certain verified results, which materially affect the interpretation of the Parables. It has become clear, for instance, that the allegorical method of exposition, with its search for finespun analogies, must definitely be abandoned in favor of a more "human" and vital account. The Parables of Jesus stand alone; they defy comparison; but they are far closer in mood and manner to the Fables of Æsop, the Canterbury Tales of Chaucer, or the stories of Abraham Lincoln than to the careful allegories of the Rabbis or the elaborations of the Schoolmen.

The main purpose of this book is to suggest an unfettered

interpretation of these incomparable stories, to trace them back to Jesus' daily life in Galilee; and so to rediscover in them the tang of the human and the glow of the Divine. A new Introduction to the Parables seemed timely, and has been attempted. In the interpretation of the separate stories use has been made, in untechnical language, of the approved findings of reverent and competent critics of the Scriptures; but details of exegesis have been relegated to the Notes where they will not unduly molest the reader.

Scripture quotations are from the American Standard Version except as otherwise specified. The Bible uses "lower case" for pronouns which denote Jesus. The text of this book, however, employs the customary "upper case" in such instances; not in any desire to beg a theological question (for these chapters are not theological), but because the capital letter is the only tribute type can pay Him.

No brief is held for the particular list of Parables here chosen. Some have been included which may seem to be metaphors or similes rather than parables; and other "germparables" have been omitted which may seem to have good claim to inclusion. Many of the sayings of Jesus live on the border line of parable, and any list will appear arbitrary. Examination will reveal, I think, that the Parables here selected represent with approximate completeness Christ's parabolic teaching.

It is a pleasant duty to offer hearty thanks to many who have given help and encouragement. The indebtedness of this book to several recent or remoter books on the Parables is abundantly evidenced in the succeeding pages. Grateful confession is made that "others have labored," and that I have "entered into their labor." Acknowledgement is also made of the courtesy which has permitted the use of sundry quotations. Authors and publishers who have granted this favor have been instanced in the Notes. Care has been taken to indicate each indebtedness. Any omissions must be charged to inadvertence or to the failure which besets even the most painstaking investigation. If there are such lapses, they are hereby regretted and apology offered.

There are others who have given invaluable aid. Dr. Finis

King Farr, a true friend, was good enough to discuss with me the plan of the book and the interpretation of several "difficult" parables; and he offered many illuminating suggestions. The Rev. William Raymond Jelliffe and Dr. George Stewart, my comrades in daily work, have left me deeply in debt; the former for a careful reading of several chapters and for helpful corrections and comments, and the latter for generous assistance in the preparation of the manuscript. Thanks are due also to Miss Elizabeth M. Eliot who has been assiduous in typing the copy and in items of research. Finally, my wife has been a constant helpmeet and "heart of grace." Without her furtherance the book would scarcely have been possible. In particular, the Scriptural and General Indexes are her work.

The substance of the last six chapters has already appeared in *The Record of Christian Work*. They are here reproduced (though, in some instances, in radically different form) by the kind permission of the editor.

G. A. B.

New York City,  
March, 1928.



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## THE PARABLES OF JESUS

## INTRODUCTION

Let the word "parable" be spoken, and certain well-loved pictures crowd in upon the mind. We see a rocky pass where a man fell among thieves, a shepherd searching through mountains and night, a bend in the road where a prodigal boy caught sight of home. The pictures which instinctively appear are Jesus' art; the kingdom of parable pays willing fee to Him. To refer this sovereignty to His insight, His vibrant mind, His human courage and compassion, His intimate dwelling in God, is but to grant the issue. Jesus is Master of parable because He is Master of Life.

The parables are the characteristic message of Jesus—"Without a parable spake he not unto them."<sup>1</sup> They are His most rememberable message; for pictures are still etched in recollection when a homily has become a blur. They are His most persuasive message; a prosier teaching might not break our stubborn will, but the sight of the father running to welcome his wayward son leaves us "defenceless utterly":

"Naked I wait thy love's uplifted stroke.  
My harness, piece by piece, thou hast hewn from me."<sup>2</sup>

To know these incomparable stories is to know the teaching of Jesus, and the heart of the Teacher.

*Other Parables*

There were many parables before the day of Jesus. They can be found in the Old Testament, in the extra-canonical writings of the Jews and in the literature of other ancient peoples.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Mark 4: 34.

<sup>2</sup> Francis Thompson, "The Hound of Heaven" (Burns and Oates).

<sup>3</sup> Among recent books is "The Parables and Similes of the Rabbis," Rabbi Asher Feldman. See also Chapter IV, Trench's "Notes on the Parables." There are at least five full-fledged parables in the Old Testament. See, for instance, II Samuel 12: 1-6.

Strangely enough, there were few parables after His day; the Epistles are almost bereft of them. Jesus did not invent this form of story, but under His transforming touch its water became wine. The sonata existed before Beethoven. For two hundred years prior to his time the progress of music had consisted mainly in the development of the sonata and other harmonic forms. But Beethoven, without surrendering the old design, "infused into it a new element of meaning and expression."<sup>4</sup> Such and immeasurably more was the genius of Jesus. He did not cast aside the old pattern. Even His "new commandment" was not new in the sense of being unknown until He spoke it. The Levitical law had decreed, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."<sup>5</sup> But in Leviticus the command is lost among a ruck of other rules, many of which now seem trivial. Jesus made it new by giving it new emphasis, by making it a central jewel in the crown of character; and, especially, by lighting it with the radiance of His own life. The conquering sanction of the "new commandment" is in its last phrase: "This is my commandment, that ye love one another, even as I have loved you."<sup>6</sup>

A favorite formula of the rabbinical teaching had been "whereunto shall I liken it?"<sup>7</sup> Jesus would have failed of contact with His hearers had He been unwilling to speak to them in their own tongue and, to some extent, within the range of prevalent ideas.<sup>8</sup> Was not this willingness also, in degree, a necessity in One who "in all things" was "made like unto his brethren"? Nor need we shrink, as some have felt they must,<sup>9</sup> from the admission that Jesus sometimes adopted a well-known parable, and retold it in His own way for His own purpose. Clearly the Parable of the Vineyard is a bold seizure and retelling of an Old Testament parable<sup>10</sup>—but with what significant changes and with what a tremendous issue! It does not

<sup>4</sup> See "A History of Music," "Standard Musical Encyclopedia," Vol. I, p. 47.

<sup>5</sup> Leviticus 19: 18.

<sup>6</sup> John 15: 12.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Matthew 11: 16.

<sup>8</sup> There is room for a careful consideration of the meaning of the word "unique," especially as applied (and rightly applied, so I believe) to Jesus. "Unique" does not mean completely strange and new, for, if such were the meaning, the unique could not enter our cognizance let alone our comprehension. The unique always has strong bonds with the familiar.

<sup>9</sup> Trench, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

<sup>10</sup> Isaiah 5: 1-7 and compare with Mark 12: 1-12.

belittle "The Merchant of Venice" to concede that Shakespeare was indebted in the writing of the play to certain early Italian stories. Likewise, Dvorák's "New World Symphony" is enhanced in our regard, rather than dimmed, by the supposition that it is based on negro folk-songs. Genius is not a fiat-creation of the new, but a truth-revealing rearticulation of the old. At least once, and perhaps many times, Jesus made a new world symphony from an old world song. The difference between the rabbinical parables and those of Jesus is precisely the difference between their mind and His. Their parables are mostly arid and artificial, a strongly exegetical bent having stretched analogies beyond the limits of ordinary human interest. In some few instances they are at once lovely and compassionate. But even at their best (as the history of human response well proves) the rabbinical stories lack the "inevitability" of the parables of Jesus. Wherein is the elusive mark of distinction? The question might be asked in another form: Wherein lies the peculiar authority of His "golden rule," in contrast with the golden rule which was taught in negative statement before His day? Only one answer can be given: The authority is in Him who gave the golden rule and lived it. In Him also is found the distinction of His parables.

### *What Is a Parable?*

The word means literally "a throwing alongside." The old definition, "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning," can hardly be improved. The lines of differentiation have frequently been drawn,<sup>11</sup> insofar as it is possible to draw them, between parable and the several literary forms which resemble it; but the fact has not always been made clear that the parable, among all these forms, is the one singularly fitted to the hand of Jesus.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> See Dr. Plummer's illuminating article in Hasting's "Dictionary of the Bible."

<sup>12</sup> There is no need to dwell at length upon the difference between parable and myth. The latter is the "natural product of a primitive imagination" in its endeavor to explain the wonder-compelling world. As such, it inevitably mixes truth and error, fact and fiction. Parables employ fiction, but they do it knowingly, holding it apart, in order to teach fact. The "Myths of Plato" are not myths in the strict sense of the word, but are rather the parables and allegories of an acute and extraordinarily developed intellect.

*Fable* has endearing qualities as any reader of Æsop's Fables will testify.<sup>13</sup> Why did Jesus not tell fables? First, because a fable is "fabulous." It breaks the bounds of the natural, endows trees and animals with human powers, and surrenders at its weakest to the repellently grotesque. The mind of Jesus was too divinely natural, too responsive to the world of human joys and tears, to be fond of the fabulous. Again, the fable teaches a merely prudential virtue. It recommends caution, thrift, foresight; and recommends them from the standpoint of human consequence. Its movement is on a horizontal line; its "merit is from man to man." But the movement of a parable is always on a vertical line; it has a "heavenly meaning." Of course a parable may urge that we love our neighbor as ourselves; but that injunction is always pendant to another, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God." Jesus' intense "feeling with" humanity was but one aspect of His indivisible consciousness; another aspect is revealed in the words, "knowing . . . that he came forth from God, and goeth unto God."<sup>14</sup> For One who had "authentic tidings of the Eternal," parable, not fable, was the proper medium. The Old Testament has its fable of the Thistle and the Cedar.<sup>15</sup> When the thistle presumed to ask that his son might have the daughter of the cedar for wife, a wild beast passing by trod on the thistle with summary destruction. We are thus warned against vaunting ambition; but the warning carries a sting. It casts a sidelong glance of ridicule at human foibles. A parable may speak trenchant condemnation (as the parables of Jesus frequently show), but it has no sarcasm.

"For mockery is the fume of little hearts."<sup>16</sup>

Parable, like fable, walks the streets of life; but it regards the hurrying crowd with "larger, other eyes." Its vision, though piercing, is ever kind. For it gains access to the streets by means of a Jacob's ladder set up between heaven and earth.

<sup>13</sup> A metaphor (and sometimes a proverb) is a parable in germ—as in the rabbinical "saying," "The ass has kicked over the lamp." This is a contraction of the story of the man who tried to bribe an unjust judge with a lamp and found himself outbid by a rival who offered an ass. Correspondingly, a simile is often an abbreviated allegory.

<sup>14</sup> John 13: 3.

<sup>15</sup> II Kings 14: 9.

<sup>16</sup> Tennyson's "Guinevere" ("The Idylls of the King").

*Allegory* might have been chosen as the vehicle for the teaching of Jesus; for an allegory, like a parable, is "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning." But in a well-constructed allegory each detail of the story has its counterpart in the meaning; whereas, in a parable, story and meaning meet, not at every point, but at one central vantage ground of abiding truth. Jesus spoke certain allegories, such as the Story of the Soils; but the measure of detail in them, far from being pedantic, is so small that they live on the border line of parable. An allegory is constructed, like a house; but a parable lives, like a night-blooming cereus. An allegory is constrained; a parable is spontaneous. An allegory tends to deteriorate into a pattern; a parable is a flash of light. Need we ask why Jesus chose parable rather than allegory? His mind was not mechanical; it was as fluid, as colorful, as spontaneous and real as life itself. "Therefore speak I to them in parables."

### *The Parable as a Story*

Any careful appraisal of the parables of Jesus must recognize in Him an unrivalled Teller of stories. The modern zest for romances, as seen in the dominance of fiction in our public libraries over that dull assortment called "general literature," is no new trait in human character. The romancer with a genuine gift has a Pied Piper's flute. Little children and children of a larger growth run clutching at his coat with eager clamor, "Tell us a story." Let the story be inherently true, and, though its setting be remote from the semblance of our common life, it casts on each new generation its ancient spell. The modern novelist has a wealth of prompting which, both in range and variety, is past compute. Roads girdling the earth beckon his feet. Scientific prowess has filled his age "full of a number of things," with a fullness which Robert Louis Stevenson never imagined. Even so, it is doubtful if modern stories can compare in simple vigor or poignant plea, in picturesque flavor or dramatic turn, with those told round Arab campfires by the sons of Abraham on their long trek from Ur of the Chaldees. Who worthier than they of high imaginings? Had they not fared forth across sandy wastes "not knowing

whither they went,"<sup>17</sup> seeking on the desert's rim the minarets of a "city that hath foundations"?

But what teller of stories in east or west can vie with Jesus? Was ever a perception so instant, an imagination so rich, a discrimination so true? The life of His day poured through golden gateways into the city of His soul, there to be changed by a divine alchemy into matchless parables. This gift must have found early use. If only we could have heard the stories He told in the Syrian dusk to the younger children in Mary's cottage! Were those stories parables? If so, they were the more fascinating. "With what comparison shall we compare it?" is an instinctive question. Our delight in comparisons has left its mark on the language: We "like" what is "like."<sup>18</sup> We must have parables. Whether the early stories of Jesus took that form or another the little children who ran to hear them were blessed indeed.

The claim is sometimes made in praise of a novelist that his books have mirrored for all time a well-loved countryside, or crystallized the customs and outlook of an age. Thus Wessex scenery is faithfully portrayed in the romances of Thomas Hardy, while John Galsworthy has caught and reproduced the mood of the later Victorian era. Similar claims can be made with firm assurance for the parables of Jesus. A slender volume would hold them; but from that volume, without access to any other source, we would know the aspect and attitudes of His Palestine. We read the parables, and the poor homes of that little land are before our eyes. We see the baking of bread and the patching of garments; we see even the emergency of a friend borrowing a loaf at midnight for his sudden guests. Rich homes are drawn with a pencil equally shrewd—barns bursting with fatness, laborers not daring to eat until their master has broken his fast, and the unseemly scramble for the chief seats at the feasts of the mighty. The glaring contrasts of our earth are drawn in dramatic line—"chosen" Jews and despised Samaritans, sumptuous Dives and abject Lazarus, householders and thieves, compassionate parenthood and the rascally steward who feathered his nest against the well-merited retri-

<sup>17</sup> Hebrews 11: 8.

<sup>18</sup> See Trench, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

bution. The whole gamut of human life is sounded—farmers at the plough, fishermen at their nets, a wedding procession moving through the dark with dancing torches, builders rearing towers, kings marching to their wars, and a widow pleading her cause in the persistence of despair before a heartless judge.

Over all there is the mystic glamor of Palestine. Behold a sower tramping weary furrows. Soon the fields will be "white unto harvest." On the high hillside flocks are grazing beneath a watchful shepherd's eye. In the distance there is a vineyard on a favored slope, or a deep defile where brigands lurk. That dry watercourse is a raging torrent when a storm breaks in the mountains, and on its golden summer sand a foolish man once built his house

This motley array of characters and this vivid scenery are wrought into unforgettable stories. Each parable has lines as sharp as an etching. Sometimes the unfolding comes with a stab of surprise. Occasionally an ending is so abrupt that the mind of the listener is left quivering under the challenge. Surely Jesus must have told these stories eagerly for their own sake. Surely He must have loved folk the more because, ever hungry for a story, they pressed about Him as He said "whereunto shall I liken it?"

*"That Seeing They May—Not Perceive"—?*

The reasons why Jesus adopted a story method for His customary use have already been hinted. A word-picture, rather than a homily or a syllogism, has always been the ideal teaching medium:

"Where truth in closest words shall fail,  
When truth embodied in a tale  
May enter in at lowly doors."<sup>19</sup>

It is no accident that the Fables of Æsop, the Odyssey of Homer, the Canterbury Tales of Chaucer, the early stories of Genesis, and preeminently the Parables of Jesus possess the secret of eternal youth. For the imaginative mind, a story is a joy forever; and for the unimaginative, it has power to "enter

<sup>19</sup> Tennyson, "In Memoriam."

in at lowly doors." Lodged in the mind it is not inert like a nugget of gold; it is vital, like a seed-plot continually bringing new flowers to bloom.

Then how shall we come to terms with the assertion of Jesus as recorded in St. Mark's Gospel: "But unto them that are without, all things are done in parables: that seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest haply they should turn again, and it should be forgiven them"?<sup>20</sup> We cannot take these words at their face value for the sufficient reason that, so taken, no words could more flatly deny the "mind that was in Christ Jesus." He came to illumine lives and not to darken them; and because lives were self-darkened He spoke in parables, well knowing that the rays of a parable will penetrate "where truth in closest words shall fail." Therein, beyond any peradventure of a doubt, is the dominant motive of Jesus' deliberate choice of the parable as the customary vehicle of His teaching. "And with many such parables spake he the word unto them, as they were able to hear it."<sup>21</sup>

But Jesus recognized, as the Parable of the Soils clearly implies, that some were hostile or indifferent to His teaching.

<sup>20</sup> This passage (Matthew 13: 10-15; Mark 4: 10-12; Luke 8: 9, 10) is a quotation from that *locus classicus*, Isaiah 6: 9, 10. Does the prophet there assert that it is God's purpose to harden His people's hearts and to avoid their conversion? If so, we must assign the assertion to that unworthy view of God which exalts His sovereignty at the expense of His moral responsibility to His creatures; or which, at least, represents as designed whatever may be confidently predicted. Where we to-day would point to an analogy or a result, the Jewish scriptures would frequently assume a purpose. Mark and Luke appear to accept the sternest meaning of Isaiah's words, and leave us to infer that Jesus adopted the parable-method in order to render His hearers insensible to divine truth; even as God in earlier days purposed the blinding of the eyes of a stubborn people. (See also John 12: 39, 40; Romans 11: 8.) But a more gracious view, one more loyal to the whole scriptures and more in keeping with the "soul's invincible surmise," is that the Isaiah passage may have been spoken in the irony of sorrow and in warning plea. The blindness was due, not to the Divine will and wish, but to the self-will of a stiff-necked generation.

Accepting Isaiah's words at face value, it is still doubtful if Jesus used them in more than a general sense, namely, to compare a situation existent in Isaiah's day with the situation of His day. Matthew 13: 34, 35 is significant especially as quoted from the Psalms. (Psalm 78: 2.)

<sup>21</sup> It is interesting to note that Matthew's version of Isaiah 6: 9, 10 on the one hand, and the versions of Mark and Luke on the other correspond respectively to the *spirit* of the LXX rendering and to the *spirit* of the Targum. Mark, while evidently quoting from LXX, seems to modify it in favor of some earlier form. But Matthew changes Mark's repellent *hina* to *hoti*, Mark's subjunctives becoming indicatives in the change. Matthew's version is surely nearer to the intention of Jesus. He spoke in parables not "in order that they may be blind," but "because they are blind" and in order that they may see. See "I.C.C.," *ad loc.*, Matthew, Mark, Luke. ("I.C.C." hereafter is abbreviation for "International Critical Commentary.")

He knew that human soil, stubbornly refusing a harvest, falls under heavier indictment with each fresh sowing; that privileged abusers confirm the abusers in their disobedience. He knew also that no good purpose is served by heedlessly exposing truth to mockery: "Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast your pearls before the swine, lest haply they trample them under their feet . . ." <sup>22</sup> Thus, in respect to the obdurate, the parabolic method was twice blessed: By veiling truth, it guarded it from raillery; and the hostile received, despite themselves, a story that might germinate in secret, but which did not confirm hostility and deepen guilt, as plainer statement might have done, by provoking enmity to wrath. The parables have but to be read for us to realize how swiftly they arouse the imagination, smite the conscience, and quicken the will.

### "Two Worlds Are Ours"

There was more than a natural human delight in a story, more than the fact that it is the oldest human language, and more than the unreceptiveness of His hearers to justify Jesus in the use of parables. This natural delight is itself rooted in a deeper reason:

"What if earth  
Be but the shadow of heaven, and things therein  
Each to the other like, more than on earth is thought?" <sup>23</sup>

The real world to Jesus was not the seen world; the real world was the unseen of which the seen is but the form. Heaven to us may be a dream of earth; but to Him earth was a broken and shadowy reflection of heaven. The material was ordained as a sign-language of the spiritual: "For the invisible things of him since the creation of the world are clearly seen, being perceived through the things that are made, even his everlasting power and divinity."<sup>24</sup> Jesus saw always a divine congruity between earth and heaven.

Despite the mystic, we cannot escape, except for occasional moments, from the images of sense. In the appraisals of God,

<sup>22</sup> Matthew 7: 6.

<sup>23</sup> Milton, "Paradise Lost," V., 575.

<sup>24</sup> Romans 1: 20.



our brief seasons of ecstasy when we behold with unveiled face, may have no higher grace than quieter hours when we discern the essence through the form. "No man shall see God and live." It is a kindly providence that

"Life, like a dome of many-colored glass  
Stains the white radiance of Eternity."<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, form reveals, even while it cloaks, the reality. Would love, that master-motive, be known among us except through its outward tokens—the surrender of the eyes, the word tense with feeling, the clasp of the hand? When Jesus said, "God is a Spirit," He did not therein counsel blindness to God's embodiment in the round ocean, the living air, and the mind of man. We also are spirits. Undeniably our means of communication one with another are poor and fallible—clumsy Morse codes, at best—but they are not useless. We remain forever hidden and barricaded behind walls of flesh; and, despite words (our finest code) we are still pathetically inarticulate, with

"Thoughts hardly to be packed  
Into a narrow act  
Fancies which break through language and escape."<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless, spirit with spirit can meet through the form. Words, glances, deeds, printing on a page are all parables shadowing forth the hidden realm of human spirit. In like manner, all the human was, to Jesus, a parable to reveal the unseen life of God.

There can be no logic to prove the spiritual; there can be only the prophet's opening of a window in the hope that clay-shuttered eyes may find it a "magic casement" looking out upon the mountains of God. The parable as spoken by Jesus was such a window. He knew the heaven of a perfectly obedient and loving life. Heaven, for Him, subjugated this mortal scene until all creation became heaven's impress and sign. Was there a forgiving father?—another Father was more forgiving, though unseen! Did a shepherd brave the darkening storm to

<sup>25</sup> Shelley's "Adonais."

<sup>26</sup> Browning, "Rabbi Ben Ezra."

rescue his sheep that was lost?—another Shepherd was out on a more hazardous quest for His human flock! Nor was it by happy accident that the comparisons instanced by Jesus are so inevitable in their fitness. The human image, rather, was chosen and ordained by God to be the vehicle of His mystery; even as Jesus was chosen and ordained to be the Soul of insight Who should discover the Divine Reality behind the human or natural form.

So the Son of Fact spoke until worn-out eyes saw a worn-out world become new. Under His spell men beheld the gleaming robe of the Eternal filling all the courts of earth and heaven.

"The angels keep their ancient places:—  
Turn but a stone, and start a wing!  
'Tis ye, 'tis your estranged faces,  
That miss the many-splendoured thing."<sup>27</sup>

To Him all things were a parable. The tenderness on the world's edge when daylight fades, the green fire of the grass, and the manifold life of wistful humanity were the handwriting of the Most High. Ever patient with our filmy sight, He brought forth from His treasure things new and old; and, to show us that other world, "He opened his mouth and spake unto them another parable, saying . . ."

### *The Interpretation of the Parables*

The old adage, "When doctors disagree . . .," is apropos of the various prescriptions offered for the interpretation of the parables. There are those who maintain that the central teaching of the parable must be sought; and who, in regard to the details of the story, would take Chrysostom's warning as motto: "Be not overbusy about the rest." On the other hand, there are those who run out analogies with finespun subtlety, and believe that no item of action or circumstance is without its intended significance. Between these extremes of counsel there are almost innumerable grades and shades of opinion.

Even Trench's eminently sane rules have not been exempt

<sup>27</sup> Francis Thompson. "In no strange place." ("Poems," edited by Wilfred Meynell, published by John Lane Co.)

from criticism.<sup>28</sup> Strong exception has been taken to his suggestion that the scriptural introductions to the respective parables, and the scriptural comments upon them, furnish indispensable clues to their meaning. A recent commentator maintains<sup>29</sup> (and there is sound and reverent scholarship to support the plea) that the parables themselves are more trustworthy guides than their scriptural settings. He quotes Wernle with approval: "Our delight in the parables rises regularly in the exact degree in which we succeed in liberating ourselves from the interpretations of the Evangelist, and yielding ourselves up to the original force of the parables themselves."

With this strite of tongues echoing in our ears, and the sad fate of earlier counsels before our eyes, to venture on any rule for the interpretation of the parables is to give hostages to fortune. Nevertheless, we make bold to assert:

*First*, a wise interpretation of a parable will seek its *salient truth*. A parable is not an allegory. It is a flash of light, not an ingeniously devised mosaic. It may have divergent rays, but these derive their virtue from the light itself. It may be held within a lovely lamp, but "we are to be children of the light and not slaves of the lamp."<sup>30</sup> Yet even this counsel must be applied with that "good sense" which Trench wisely enjoins. For some parables are obviously more allegorical than others. In the Parable of the Soils every detail seems to have pith and purpose; while in the Parable of the Unjust Steward the allegorical element is at its minimum, and the teaching is vividly focussed. Reverent investigation must also determine how far the scriptural setting of a parable provides a clue to its meaning. That there are "strata" in the Gospels is more and more generally admitted. In the last resort, the parable itself, viewed through such childlike receptiveness and such eager sincerity as our life and prayers can summon, is its own best evidence.

*Second*, the parables are not armories for forging theological weapons. They were spoken mostly to the common people who

<sup>28</sup> Trench, *op. cit.*, p. 31. Trench interpretations of the individual parables have been partly outgrown; but his "Introduction" to the whole subject of the parables (pp. 1-62) is invaluable.

<sup>29</sup> George Murray, "Jesus and His Parables," Introductory Chapter, p. 8.

<sup>30</sup> Hubert L. Simpson writing of the Genesis stories in his "Altare of Earth."

heard them gladly. Their purpose was not for dogma but for life. The violence done to the parables by those who have constrained them into the narrow mold of some theological predilection is past credence, and beyond moderation of language to describe. The "pearl of great price" has become, in the hands of such theological sacrilege, the Church at Geneva! The man owing ten thousand talents has been made to typify a line of Popes! The Unjust Steward has been held to personify the Devil!<sup>31</sup> Even Trench, after warning us that the parables must not be made the stalking-horse either of dogmatic controversy or ingenious allegorizing, dallies with the suggestion that the leaven which the woman hid in the three measures of meal may represent the sanctification of body, mind, and spirit; or the salvation of the human race descended from Shem, Japheth, and Ham, the three sons of Noah! It would have been more to the point, and a worthier tribute to the mind of Jesus, had he surmised that Jesus instanced "three measures of meal" because He had often seen Mary use that much on baking days in the white cottage on the Nazareth hills.<sup>32</sup>

Truth lives on many levels. The truth of literal fact is on a lower level than the truth of idea, even as the truth of idea is on a lower level than the truth of life.<sup>33</sup> A story enshrines the truth of idea, and so will yield perennial fragrance when our logics have been forgotten. Dostoevsky's "The Brothers Karamzov," though it is not literal fact, has truth to abide and truth to inspire which a census table, however accurate, can never yield. The Genesis stories will endure longer than our careful sciences of the origin of matter. Truth of idea is stronger than truth of fact. The parables have truth of idea—and more! For in Him Who spoke them their divinest word became flesh. In Him they gained the highest truth, the truth of life. He said (with what ultimate wisdom!) not, "I teach the truth," but, "I am the truth." In its finality truth is not an argument, a theology, a metaphysic, or even a story; it is spirit

<sup>31</sup> Hosea Ballou's "Notes on the Parables" is interesting as having been written from an avowedly "universalist" standpoint. As such, it has no more value than any attempt to read something *into* the parables can have—the attempt of a Calvinist, for instance, to read Calvinism into them.

<sup>32</sup> We shall have occasion to note how often Jesus was indebted for the scenery and action of His parables to his home life at Nazareth.

<sup>33</sup> See Canon B. H. Streeter's "Reality," Chapter II on "Science, Art, and Religion."



and life. Through the parable the truth of His life comes to quicken our life.

There is no need to decry theology. So long as God gives us intelligence we shall be under a necessity of nature to order our convictions concerning God and man within a system as self-consistent as we can build it. Nevertheless religion has depths which theology cannot sound. Religion is a hidden spring; theology is the ever changing channel that directs its flow. The parables are in the province of religion; only secondarily are they in the province of theology. So long as we read our prejudices into them, so long shall we live in a pre-Copernican universe; all our suns and stars will revolve in narrow orbits about our narrow house. But if we will bring our prejudices to the judgment of the parables, we shall emerge upon a universe of boundless horizons, lovely with sphere-music.

“And Tycho told him, there is but one way  
To know the truth, and that’s to sweep aside  
All the dark cobwebs of old sophistry,  
And watch and learn that moving alphabet,  
Each smallest silver character inscribed  
Upon the skies themselves, noting them down,  
Till on a day we find them taking shape  
In phrases, with a meaning; and, at last,  
The hard-won beauty of that celestial book  
With all its epic harmonies unfold  
Like some great poet’s universal song.”<sup>34</sup>

#### *The Arrangement of the Parables*

“De gustibus non est disputandum.” It is largely individual taste that must determine the arrangement of the parables. Any division will be open to attack, for a parable may have so many aspects of truth that it will leap over any fence of classification by which we may endeavor to confine it. We do not know the chronological order in which the parables were spoken; for the gospelists, especially Matthew and Luke, themselves arrange the parables, each gospelist to subserve a purpose of his own.<sup>35</sup>

Arnot indicates the “insurmountable difficulties” which at-

<sup>34</sup> Alfred Noyes, “Watchers of the Sky. (Frederick A. Stokes Co.)

<sup>35</sup> The “Kingdom” parables of Matthew 13, and the three parables in Luke 15 with the words “lost and found” as their motif, will readily occur to mind.

tend any attempt at rigid classification, and instances Bauer’s failure to divide the parables into the three groups of dogmatic, moral, and historic. Arnot himself assumes<sup>36</sup> that the sequence in which the parables occur in the Gospels is the “natural order,” and that this sequence preserves “in all cases the historical circumstances whence the parables spring.” Few scholars to-day would deem such an assumption tenable.

Bruce<sup>37</sup> maintains that the parables are of an “incidental character,” and as such are to be treated as “parts of a larger whole in connection with the particular occasions which called them forth.” Rather arbitrarily he divides the ministry of Jesus into His ministry as Teacher, as Evangelist, and as Prophet; and groups the parables correspondingly as theoretic, evangelic, and prophetic. But when was Jesus the Teacher without being also the Evangelist and the Prophet? When did He assume any one of these rôles to the exclusion of the other two? With lowly gratitude for a painstaking and eminently valuable work, we still must feel that the parables are too vital to be held within these artificial limits.

Other expositors—among whom George Murray in Scotland and George Henry Hubbard of our United States are recently notable<sup>38</sup>—have made illuminating divisions of the parables on the basis of their subject matter. A comparison of the contents pages of these two writers proves interestingly that topical classifications of the parables may be sharply different while each remains fully legitimate. Dr. Marcus Dods has not raised the question of the arrangement of the parables, but has expounded them in the order in which they occur, first in Matthew and then in Luke.<sup>39</sup>

The chronological order, if it could be determined, would perhaps be the best. It would show the unfolding of the spirit of Jesus; for Jesus was within our human category of growth, since only within that category could He have been genuinely

<sup>36</sup> Arnot, “The Parables of Our Lord,” pp. 28 and 29.

<sup>37</sup> See Bruce’s “The Parabolic Teaching of Jesus” which no student of the parables can ignore. The Parable of the Unrighteous Steward is classed as “Evangelic,” and that of the Importunate Widow as “theoretic.” But why? And is not the Parable of the Leaven in real sense “prophetic,” and not merely didactic?

<sup>38</sup> George Henry Hubbard, “The Teachings of Jesus in Parables,” a most stimulating study; and George Murray, “Jesus and His Parables,” an interpreter who has brought “compassion and new eyes” to the exposition of these greatest of all stories.

<sup>39</sup> Marcus Dods, “The Parables of Our Lord.”

human. "He *learned* obedience by the things which He suffered." <sup>40</sup> If the Hebrews conceived the universe as catastrophic, looking ever for the "great and terrible day of the Lord," and if the Greeks conceived it as static, it is characteristic of our age to regard it as emergent and vitalistic.<sup>41</sup> This conception in our time has been an open sesame to vast stores of new knowledge. Applied to the life of Jesus it would be similarly fruitful, could we but know the order of His dicta and the events which befell Him.<sup>42</sup> Then we would understand how the days that made Him happy unsealed the fountains of His wisdom, and how the tragic forces which beset Him made fertile His spirit as with a ploughshare's cruel mercy. We would see how He "advanced in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men."<sup>43</sup>

The arrangement suggested in this book is an attempt, undoubtedly vulnerable, to arrange the parables in approximate natural sequence. The endeavor is foredoomed to failure, because our knowledge is insufficient to give any promise of full success. But a study of the gospels (especially such a study as has produced the best "Harmonies"), the context of the parables, and the intrinsic message of the parables ought to make possible an arrangement which, if not chronological, will at least suggest how His mind unfolded under the impact of events and the beckoning of God. Such an arrangement is here intended. That the attempt is very fallible no one is more clearly aware than the author, who would be well content if his work should prove only one of those hidden stones which make the foundation of a bridge.

### *"Each in His Own Tongue"*

It has been wisely remarked that "the value of a parable does not depend upon the new and varied truth that we are able to extort from it, but upon our progressive and practical applica-

<sup>40</sup> Hebrews 5: 8.

<sup>41</sup> See H. E. Fosdick's "Christianity and Progress," Chapter I.

<sup>42</sup> Many studies have been made of the development of Jesus. Recently J. A. Robertson's "The Spiritual Pilgrimage of Jesus" is a study of singular insight and helpfulness.

<sup>43</sup> Luke 2: 52.

tion of its single truth to our daily life."<sup>44</sup> A commentator of an earlier day has written similarly: (each) "century must produce its own literature, as it raises its own corn, and fabricates its own garments." He adds a warning that the interpretations of other days are not to be regarded as fixed deposits of truth, but rather as time-vestures of truth. The truth abides within the changing form:—"The intellectual and spiritual treasures of the past should indeed be reverently preserved and used; but they should be used as seed . . . we should cast them into the ground, and get the product fresh every season—old, yet ever new."<sup>45</sup> It is this necessity which justifies another book on the Parables of Jesus. In these unforgettable stories He has given us the enduring truth of idea. Our meticulous sciences and elaborate theologies will dissolve and fade "like an insubstantial pageant"; but those who can "pray, and sing, and tell old tales" have found the secret of perpetual youth.

In every age the parables prove their startling modernity. They are more recent than to-day's newspaper; for a newspaper follows the fashions, and a fashion because it has become a fashion has begun to die. The parables utter the eternal verities by which all fashions, the shifting moods of an indifferent society, are judged. They are as recent as present breathing, as vivid in their tang as the "now" of immediate experience. "The words that I have spoken unto you are spirit, and are life."<sup>46</sup>

Another necessity is laid upon the expositor of the parables—a necessity deeper than that of applying them in their unchanging truth to the changing customs of the world. It is the necessity which Luke acknowledged when he wrote in the prologue of his Gospel, "It seemed good to me also."<sup>47</sup> Earlier writers of the story of Jesus had been "eyewitnesses and ministers of the word." They could boast an intimacy of knowledge which he could never claim. He was not an apostle. His eyes had not seen, nor his ears heard, nor his hands handled.

<sup>44</sup> G. H. Hubbard, *op. cit.*, p. xix, Introductory chapter.

<sup>45</sup> Arnot, *op. cit.*, Introduction, pp. 11 and 12.

<sup>46</sup> John 6: 63.

<sup>47</sup> Luke 1: 1-4.

He was not even of Galilee or Judea. He was a physician of Antioch or Ephesus; yet—"it seemed good to me also." He could not forbear to write of the Great Physician who was able to "minister to a mind diseased." That one Face, though never seen in the flesh, reigned in his imagination so benignly, with so winsome a kingship, that he needs must tell of Him!

"It seemed good to me also . . ." How can any expositor of the parables speak a new word? How can he speak an old word more clearly or penetratingly than his predecessors far nobler and abler than he? Yet, perchance, he may speak with a new accent. He may, without doubt, speak to a new generation, since "time makes ancient good uncouth." In any event, and despite the oblivion into which his words may soon pass, he *needs must* speak: "For the love of Christ constraineth us."

PARABLES OF THE EARLY MINISTRY  
THE GOOD NEWS OF THE  
KINGDOM OF GOD