Epistle for 25 August 2024

Dear Saints of Columba:
In the gospel 'According to Matthew' 20: 1-16, Jesus begins a parable: "As Jesus was telling what the kingdom of heaven would be like, he said: 'Early one morning a man went out to hire some workers for his vineyard…'"

Most Christians have an idea of what a parable is. "It's a story!" Another might chime in, "with a moral message!" Parables are a very peculiar kind of tale, with some key identifiable features. Unless we really understand those traits, we won't fully grasp what Jesus is up to with parables.

Here are three key traits of Jesus' parables:
#1: A Common, Real-World Setting (at least for Jesus' listeners)
Whenever Jesus would tell a parable, it would be in a setting his audience would understand without effort. The setting for each parable would be completely within the ambit of experience for Jesus' listeners, who would have recognised the social dynamics inherent in the story.

#2: A Shocking Event Takes Place
Knowing that Jesus intentionally adds this feature by design is extremely helpful. Within the story, Jesus adds a shocking twist, so out-of-the-ordinary that the listeners would most likely have a gut - if not violent - reaction to hearing it. This shocking twist indicates the point being made.

#3: A Disruption of the Religious Status Quo
The third element of Jesus' parables hinges on the first two: create a common scenario, then incorporate a shocking event, with the purpose of making his listeners wrestle with their understanding of their faith. The whole purpose of a parable is to shock the listener, which ultimately disrupts their pre-existing beliefs about God. The point of Jesus is not to shock, but to help people wrestle with their faith. See? Jesus doesn't give 'easy answers' but helps us wrestle with our answer. That is the genius of Jesus' parables.

How does this work? Well, why did Jesus make a Samaritan, the hated Samaritans, the 'good' hero of that story? He did it in order to disrupt the listeners' understanding of who their neighbour is. So, *why* did Jesus tell a story where a younger brother would ask for his inheritance, which was to essentially wish his father dead? This parable disrupts the common understanding of works as righteousness and point to grace. The disruption mechanism pivots us towards new insights.
We could therefore say that some (or much) of the Scripture is not intended to be literalised. A parable still speaks truth. An event that is not 'historical' can still be true in a spiritual sense; like a parable. It's a story that tells us a truth! In fact, 'truth' has never been dependent upon an event being real. Parables show that stories can still be truth whilst being stories! Parables are "teaching-stories". That's also how we can describe the Scriptures, as a collection of "teaching-stories". (See Bible Society footnote 1 below).

The German language has a *lekker* word to describe this view of history: *Heilsgeschichte*. It literally means “Salvation-history”. Salvation-history, as a theological conception, affirms that salvation is historic and that history is salvific. *Heilsgeschichte* is an interpretation of history emphasizing God's saving acts and viewing Christ Jesus as central in redemption.

You see, the biblical authors didn’t only recount historical events, they also *interpreted* them. They tried to make sense of the struggles they faced, grappling with questions many of us feel today: what does it mean to live a good life? Why do bad things happen to good people? What’s God like? And if God really is loving and powerful, why does the world seem so messed up? Throughout the stories of the Bible, the authors expressed their hope that one day God would send someone to rescue them.

For some more insights into this truth, see:
1. https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/resources/collections/curious-about-the-bible/curious-about-the-bible-articles/the-bible-what-actually-is-it-and-why-is-it-so-important/

2. https://bibleproject.com/articles/what-makes-the-bible-unified/

3. https://bibleproject.com/articles/did-god-or-people-write-bible/

4. https://bibleproject.com/podcast/who-bible-about/

There’s naturally a reason why I want you to know this: watch the SERMON space!

Grace and peace,
Rev Craig *for the 25th August 2024*