

Parables of the Kingdom
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Matthew 13: 24-43

Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables; actually, according to the evangelist Matthew, Jesus spoke to them *only* in parables (13:34). Matthew tells us his speaking in parables was a sign of his identity as the Messiah: *He spoke to them only in parables, to fulfill what had been said through the prophets* (13:34). Earlier in this chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus himself gives to his disciples another, somewhat stranger, reason for his speaking to the crowds in parables: *Because knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven has been granted to you, but to them [the large crowds] it has not been granted. To anyone who has, more will be given and he will grow rich; from anyone who has not, even what he has will be taken away* (13:11-12). *This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. [...] For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are heavy of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should perceive with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and turn for me to heal them'* (13:13-15).

The parables of Jesus are beautiful and inspiring. So many of them are familiar and comforting parts of our understanding of the Gospel: the leaven, the mustard seed, the seed on the path, the wheat and the weeds... But the parables of Jesus are not entirely unproblematic; and before discussing today's Gospel it is appropriate to try to come to terms with their difficulty. A first problem is that parables, as parables, can be difficult to understand: they involve some critical analogy or association that is oftentimes not so easy to pick up on. And a second problem – maybe even at first sight a troubling scandal – is that Jesus explains his parables *only* to his disciples, leaving “the large crowds” outside of his inner circle to scratch their heads in tragic ignorance of his message (13:36).

So, why are the parables so hard to understand? And why are the disciples the only ones to whom Jesus will explain his parables? Does he not want to make the crowds into disciples by offering them beautiful and understandable teachings?

The Difficulty of the Parables: Jesus “proposes” (13:24) his parables to the crowds, using analogies in order to communicate his understanding of the Kingdom of Heaven. Now, if I am to understand an analogy, I have to have in advance some knowledge of the two terms that are being compared. If someone says to me, “Bob is like a lion” I will probably understand immediately what he means: there is something in Bob – some attitude, some way of being – that resembles the strong, brave attitude of the lion. Bob is brave; he is strong; he is proud – and so on. I understand both terms and their association well enough to understand a connection between the two. But if someone says to me, “Bob is like a ball-point pen” then I will have to ask the person what he or she means. For I can see no association between Bob and a ball-point pen such that a comparison between the two would mean something to me. Maybe some of you have a poetic imagination flexible enough to understand such an analogy, but most probably do not! In front of such an analogy, at least I feel a bit like I imagine the crowds felt in front of Jesus: seeing I do not see, and hearing I do not hear, nor do I understand. Only their difficulty is even greater than mine. For I at least know already what the terms “Bob” and “ball-point pen” mean independently, even if I cannot understand their association. But while the crowds before Jesus knew what wheat, weeds and a mustard seed were, they did not know what the Kingdom of God was – and therefore could have no clue what a bunch of plants would have to do with any of it.

The Disciples Understand the Parables: Ultimately, we don’t know what the crowds understood of Jesus’ parables. It is sort of a sad thought experiment to wonder how we ourselves might have interpreted them had we not had the explanations Jesus gave privately to his first disciples. Thanks to the explanation recorded in the Gospel for today – and thanks to the fact that we are part of the apostolic community and therefore share in these explanations – we know that the ‘sower of good seed is the Son of Man’ and ‘the field is the world’ and ‘the good seed the children of the kingdom’ and the ‘weeds are the children of the evil one’ and so on; and with such explanations we can begin to understand the meaning of the parable.

But while the text of these explanations is helpful, it is vital to notice that the words themselves are not enough to understand the parable. Ultimately, the crowds failed to understand the parables not because they did not hear the explanations given to the disciples *but because they were not disciples* and so could not “hear” – in a deeper sense – the explanations disciples are given. In other words, being a disciple of Jesus is not a “ticket” to come to a special meeting to hear an explanation; it is a profound, integral reality of the human person that *enables* him to

understand the meaning of a parable and its explanation. In order to understand the parables of Jesus, *one must leave the crowd and become his disciple* – not because Jesus is a stingy miser of wisdom but because one must convert and follow him before *his* explanations can have any meaning. There are some things only ‘insiders’ can understand – not because only they have the ticket, *but because only they have made the interior commitment that illumines their understanding*. The nature of the Gospel – the novelty and challenge of Jesus’ message – makes conversion to Jesus Christ a condition for the understanding of the wisdom of God. *The Gospel is not a message like others: it cannot be understood abstractly by one unwilling to interiorize it; for it cannot be understood apart from an openness to conversion, an openness to understanding the message on its own terms – that is, in the terms of Jesus Christ – and without any of our own preconceptions*. For that reason, an ethical movement – the movement of conversion and adherence to Jesus in faith – must be made before the parables can be understood. One might say that the *heart* is just as important as the *head* when trying to understand the Gospel.

In other words, there is a big difference between a “member of a crowd” and a “disciple of Jesus” in the face of his preaching. For the personal commitment of a disciple shapes the powers of his eyes and ears – the world and everything in it sounds and looks differently depending upon the presence or absence of the light of faith (*lumen fidei*). This is why we speak of faith as a “light” or that by which we see all else. As we gather together today to hear the parables of Jesus, we would do well to ask ourselves: Why do I listen to him? Is it because I am part of a crowd – a member of a mob – carried by the inertia of a static culture? Or is it because I have made the conscious decision to entrust myself to him, because I accept him, Jesus of Nazareth, his life and his word, as the *light* that illuminates everything else?

The Key of a Disciple: So, how does an interior commitment to Jesus illuminate the parables? What is the “key” of a disciple? *If I am truly a disciple of Jesus, then I already know something about the Kingdom of Heaven, because in Jesus I have experienced it. I therefore have experience of both terms of the analogy, and with him I can understand the parable*. I have read and prayed the Gospels – that is, I have looked at Jesus, the one in whom the Kingdom of God is present among us, and with Peter I have confessed him as *the Christ, the Son of the living God* (16:16). I may not understand everything he says or does, but I have seen enough to know that if anyone on this earth has the words of eternal life, it is Jesus of Nazareth. Other teachers and religious leaders speak in ways that in the end are only too human; and those who speak well

speak only like impoverished copies of him. And so I will believe whatever the Son of God says; and I will hold nothing truer than the word of Truth himself: *Credo quidquid dixit Dei Filius, nil hoc Veritatis verbo verius*. I will be a disciple, even if his words call me to grow before I can understand them. His person and life will be the *light* of my understanding. For when the disciples were asked whether they too would follow the crowds and leave Jesus after a difficult and confusing teaching, Peter replied: *Lord, to whom shall I go? You have the words of eternal life* (John 6:68). And when the disciples saw Jesus behaving in strange ways and risking his own life by going to Jerusalem, Thomas said, *Let us also go, that we may die with him* (John 11:16). I will be a disciple; I too will tie my destiny to Jesus; he will be the light of my life.

At this point, the difficulty of Jesus' parables appears more like a generous invitation or an intriguing provocation rather than an arbitrary exclusion. For his parables provoke and challenge the "crowds" in all of us – those parts of ourselves that stay on the fringes, that are unwilling to risk themselves for the sake of following Jesus. His parables show us we cannot figure it out alone or on our own terms and they invite us to step outside of ourselves and to commit ourselves to Jesus of Nazareth, following him as best we can until we understand all things through him, the Word through whom all things were made. Jesus speaks in parables because he speaks the language of seeds: that is he plants in us a word that invites us to make a choice: in the face of his unsettling, difficult words and example, we must choose: either to ignore him, or to stay behind after the crowds disperse, and to follow him and as our Lord and receive the explanation of a disciple. Let us be disciples.

The Wheat and the Weed: A Perfect Example: Let's get concrete. The main parable in the Gospel for today offers an excellent example of what can happen when we read the parables with the "key" of discipleship. We hear that the Son of Man planted the wheat of the children of the Kingdom into the field of the world; and that the evil one sent among them the weeds of the children of corruption. On the command of the Lord of the Harvest, the wheat and the weeds are to grow together until the last day, the day of judgment. The wheat must struggle against the weed for life and nourishment for the duration of its growth. And, strangely, this command is given *for the sake of the wheat*; that is, the weeds are not pulled *in order to protect* the wheat.

Paradoxically, the life and nourishment of the wheat is to remain threatened for the sake of the life and nourishment of the wheat – and such is the Kingdom of Heaven. Did we get it? Do we understand the parable? In the text, we have a detailed explanation of the parallels between

the field and the Kingdom, but can we yet say we really understand it? Do we know *why* the Kingdom of Heaven is like a field of wheat and weeds? Why is the Kingdom a field in which the good and the bad are destined to remain together until the last day? Why does God wait until the end to judge and purify his harvest? Why isn't the Kingdom like a field of beautiful olive trees or a field of summer squash, a field to be pruned and protected by the angels of God so that each seed blooms its brightest? Why does the Lord of the Harvest allow that evil and sin should exist in our world and in our own hearts to fight us incessantly? Why doesn't he weed this world and give us the peace of the Kingdom of Heaven! Why does he wait until the end of a long history of compromise, confusion and contradiction!?

Ultimately, no one can finish answering such questions. There is something mysterious, something free and personal to the plans of God that cannot be pulled down into a water-tight synthesis. But the disciple of Jesus Christ can nevertheless give an answer. For a disciple of Jesus is united to Jesus, to the one in whom the Kingdom of Heaven is truly come. For a disciple of Jesus has watched the King himself live with patience among the weeds of contradiction and sin: *in Jesus the disciple has experienced the Kingdom where wheat and weed grow together, and therefore he has seen what such a life makes possible: the revelation of the infinite depths of God's love, and the glorification of the man in whom this love is made flesh.* A disciple of Jesus has witnessed the humble and docile heart of the Lamb of God, the one who ate with sinners, who gave his back to the smiters and his cheeks to those who struck and spat upon his face (cf. Isaiah 50:6). And a disciple of Jesus has accepted this patience, this love that lasts "until the end" (John 13:1), as the meaning of all being and history, as the word through whom all things were made and the light that enlightens every man (John 1). The disciple of Jesus is a witness to the sacred heart of God himself. And the disciple accepts God's decision to win the world by the revelation of his infinite love and patience; that his power is made known in our weakness. The King of the Kingdom of Heaven reigns from the wood of the cross – the throne of long-suffering, patience and forgiveness. His Kingdom emerges, therefore, precisely through the contradiction and conflict between wheat and weed, because it emerges through the self-sacrificing and limitless love of God.

And the disciple of Jesus understands that he has the privilege of *following* him "to the end" (John 13:1), to experience the bliss of loving like God for all eternity. For God did not send full-grown wheat into the world, a pre-determined and passive Kingdom, blowing soullessly in

the winds of time until the harvest on the last day. God sent only the *seeds* of wheat into the world, that is, he sent living and growing souls made in his image and likeness, with the power to love and to know in freedom. He gives freedom to his field, withholding the mighty intervention of final judgment until the end of history. And for the *wheat* of the saints to mature in this Kingdom, they will, like Jesus, learn freely and humanly to love like God – for that docile love “to the end” is what it means in time to be divine; it is on earth the life of heaven and its Kingdom. In a life of patient struggle against the contradictions of sin – both in ourselves and in each other – we reveal ourselves as citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven. It is not by being perfect that we reveal ourselves as citizens; rather, it is by *striving* for perfection, looking forward to the day of final purification, that we show we are citizens of the Kingdom. And so, following Jesus, as disciples we must learn to live as wheat among the weeds; that is, we as disciples must learn to love God, ourselves and our neighbors in spite of our contradictions and sins; that is, we must learn to take up our crosses daily, in moments of patience, docility and love. For no disciple is greater than his master, though he is certainly called to share in his master’s greatness.

There is a beautiful antiphon we sing here at the monastery for the feast of St. Andrew – one of my favorites. It says that when Andrew saw the cross upon which he would be martyred, he exclaimed, “O good and long desired cross, now prepared for the longing soul: confident and joyful I come to you. Receive me, the disciple of him who hung upon you!”¹ Andrew, a disciple of Jesus, understood the Kingdom of Heaven, and why it may be likened to a field of wheat and weed. The children of the Kingdom of Heaven are, like their King, called to grow amidst trial and contradiction. They struggle against the weeds in and around them in order to receive the nourishment that will mature them for the harvest. For their nourishment is the nourishment of divine love and docility. And so they are nailed to the Cross as to the Tree of Life. If you take them off the cross, you will uproot them and deprive them of their nourishment. But if you leave them, they will have the glory of following their Lord into eternal life.

¹ *Cum pervénisset beátus Andréas ad locum ubi crux paráta érat, exclamávit et díxit: O bóna crux, díu desiderata, et jam concupiscénti ánimo praeparáta: secúrus et gáudens vénio ad te: ita et tu exsúltans suscípias me, discípulum éjus qui pepéndit in te.*