

Anyone who is familiar with the gospels no doubt comes to understand the method Jesus used in his teaching, for his teaching style is **Parable**. Therefore one would ask: Why did Jesus usually teach in parables? Did his hearers really understand them? How do we unlock the meaning of these seemingly simple stories that are in fact full of mystery?

To begin with, let us not be so naïve in thinking like a Sunday school teacher telling his or her class, that this teaching method is unique for Jesus because He was the Son of God. Nor should we think of it simply as a moral teaching clothed in a story form – this is the mistake of so many secular folks' thinking.

I suppose many of us would answer the parables of Jesus are simply information about the Kingdom of God. We are on the right track but let me emphasize this point, they are not just about the Kingdom of God. The parables are part and parcel of the Kingdom of God.

The clue to answer the above-mentioned questions is to be found in this statement. *'Jesus was a first-century Jewish prophet announcing the Kingdom of God, believing that this Kingdom was inaugurated with his own work, summoning others to join him in his Kingdom movement, and warning of dire consequences for the nation, for Jerusalem, and for the Temple, if his summons was ignored.'* The Old Testament prophets used parables. Jesus simply followed the Jewish prophetic tradition. Ezekiel and Jeremiah used parables to articulate their message, which was usually a message of warning to the nation. What they wanted was to change their contemporaries' worldview and no other methods are better than stories in the form of parable.

Furthermore, parables as stories are sometimes clothed in the form of apocalyptic or allegories. In other words, metaphors used in the story represent elements in the real world and evoke a larger world of story, myth and symbol. Most of the apocalyptic stories are the Jewish tradition basically telling the story of a new world, a new creation. Jesus' parables are no different. But true to apocalyptic character, they are subversive, revolutionary and secretive stories. The present pagan dominion will soon be overthrown by the coming of the Kingdom of God! That is the basic message of these stories. Imagine today if someone in Hong Kong publicly denounced Xi Jin Ping and claimed that the Chinese government would soon be overthrown - before he finished his denouncement, he would have been arrested and charged by this newly introduced National Security Law. Jesus wasn't that stupid. One of the most puzzling sayings of Jesus is the concluding sentence in many parables, 'He who has ears let him hear.' Do you not understand Jesus meant the parables to be a secretive?

With this in mind, let us come to the first parable of Jesus. This morning let us deal with the parable of the sower as recorded in Matthew 13.1-23. The Rector's Warden should show interest in this parable because it seems to be quite innovative in agricultural production. Some people call it the parable of the seeds, or the parable of the soils. Most of us have been taught to call it the Parable of the Sower. Whatever is the name of the parable is a moot point. What is important is the purpose of it.

To the Jewish listeners, a sower sowing seed is not just a familiar picture from everyday farming. If that had been the case, they would have left immediately because most of them would have known a great deal more than Jesus who was a carpenter by trade. Instead they listened eagerly. The story tells us a farmer wastes two-thirds of the seed! And what sort of crop is this that can yield a hundred-fold? How would that come about? These questions interested the crowds. So too our Rector's Warden!

Nobody among the listeners would have missed the underlying meaning. Sadly post-modern listeners, generally speaking, miss Jesus' original meaning.

The crowd knows it is a picture of God sowing Israel again in her own land after the long years of exile; of God restoring the fortunes of his people, making the family farm fruitful again after the thorns and thistles have had it their own way. The listeners would very likely know the words of the prophet of Second Isaiah, *'The grass withers and the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever.'* (Isa 40.8) They also know, as the same prophet informed them, that God's word will be like rain and snow, producing good harvests (Isa. 55.10-11). This is a story about the word that produces harvest, even though grass withers and flowers fade.

The problem, as Jesus understands it, is that his vision of how God was sowing his word was contrary to the peoples' expectation. They were expecting a great moment of renewal. They believed that Israel would be rescued in full. God's Kingdom would explode onto the world stage in the most spectacular fashion. No, declares Jesus: it's more like a farmer sowing seed, much of which apparently goes to waste because the soil isn't fit for it, can't sustain it.

This story tells us that people have different reactions to Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God. Some hear and forget; some are enthusiastic but short-term, some have too much else in their minds and hearts. However, there are some who are fruitful, very fruitful. But Jesus is

giving a coded warning that belonging to the Kingdom isn't automatic. The Kingdom is coming all right, but not in the way they have imagined.

Doesn't Jesus want everybody to get the message? Yes and No. What he is saying is such explosive that it can't be said straightforwardly and openly. Any kingdom movement was dangerous enough. What would Herod and Roman authorities think when they heard about it. Likewise, think of the present situation of in Hong Kong! Those who previously advocated democracy in Hong Kong have now declared publicly to withdraw from any association with democracy movement. Naturally they would be worried. Their worry would turn into suppression. Furthermore, if word got out that Jesus' kingdom-vision was radically unlike what most people wanted and expected, the ordinary people would be furious too. It was doubly dangerous.

'What does the text mean to us today?' First of all, do we really believe and understand that the parable is also good news to us? Do we really believe God has sown his word in the world? In other words God has already established His Kingdom in us? Do we believe that, in Jesus, God has redeemed us from our sins and rescued us from evil and oppression? Do we have the understanding that the parable is not a puzzle but a mystery? In other words, it is a divine secret which Jesus is revealing. But as with all divine revelation, you can only understand it if you believe, if you trust. That is to say, you have faith in Jesus' words.