

John Docherty, June 26, 2016

New wine in old wineskins

I remember, thirty-odd years ago, hearing Tilman Martin saying that one of the best ways to spoil a story for a child is to tell him or her what it means. As soon as you do that, the child has no more need to explore and wonder about the story – you've turned it into a lesson to be learned, rather than an image to be enjoyed, and pondered, and wondered about.

What you need to do instead is tell the story and then step back to let the child's imagination take over. You have to let the story take on a life of its own, and you have to allow the child permission to draw his or her own understanding about what's going on; about what's important; about what it all *means*.

Jesus' use of parables, of course, is very much like that – he draws an image and then steps back to let you question, and ponder, and wonder about what it all *means*.

Mind you, two thousand years after the fact, and countless sermons that attempt to interpret the parables for us may sometimes stunt our imaginations a little bit.

We've probably grown up hearing the stories and being told what they mean – and I suppose most of us probably don't spend too much time *wondering* about them. We know that they're usually about the Kingdom of Heaven somehow; we've probably heard them picked apart and analysed to explain to us what this element represents and what that element alludes to.

The risk with that kind of approach, of course, is that we can start to overthink things; we get carried away looking for the hidden significance of the story, beyond the surface, obvious, point of it.

In preparing for this meditation, for example, I came across C.H. Dodd's description of Augustine's treatment of the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Apparently Augustine's interpretation is quite famous. Here is Dodd's rendition of it :

“A certain man went down from Jericho : Adam himself is meant;

Jerusalem : is the heavenly city of peace, from whose blessedness Adam fell;

Jericho : means the moon, and signifies our mortality, because it is born, waxes, wanes, and dies.

Thieves : are the devil and his angels.

Who stripped him : namely, of his immortality;

and beat him : by persuading him to sin;

and left him half-dead : because in so far as man can understand and know God, he lives, but in so far as he is wasted and oppressed by sin, he is dead; he is therefore called half-dead.

The priest and Levite : who saw him and passed by, signify the priesthood and ministry of the Old Testament, which could profit nothing for salvation.

Samaritan : means Guardian, and therefore the Lord Himself is signified by this name.

The binding of the wounds : is the restraint of sin.

Oil : is the comfort of good hope;

Wine : the exhortation to work with fervent spirit.

The beast [upon which the man is placed to carry him to the inn] : is the flesh in which [God] deigned to come to us.

The being set upon the beast : is belief in the incarnation of Christ.

The inn : is the Church, where travellers returning to their heavenly country are refreshed after pilgrimage.

The morrow : is after the resurrection of the Lord.

The two pence : are either the two precepts of love, or the promise of this life and of that which is to come.

The innkeeper : is the Apostle (Paul).

The supererogatory payment (how's that for a mouthful? It's the payment over and beyond what's required or asked) - *The supererogatory payment* : is either his counsel of celibacy, or the fact that he worked with his own hands lest he should be a burden to any of the weaker brethren when the Gospel was new, though it was lawful for him 'to live by the Gospel.'"

Oof! And here I always thought it was about figuring out who is my neighbour.

If you've got Augustine around to give you a hand, you don't really need to use your imagination much – he's got more than enough for most of us.

We may have to use our imaginations a little more to just figure out what the images might have meant to Jesus' contemporaries, because some of the parables might be a little too far removed from our reality to strike us the same way they would have struck Jesus' audience.

Some of the parables use references that may not have much bearing on our own day-to-day experience of life. Take today's parable for example. Not too many of us walk around with wineskins anymore, although I guess we all have some familiarity with them.

But I think the parables *are* intended to stir our imaginations somehow, and not always as object lessons with specific significance and hidden meanings of the kind favoured by Augustine.

Yes, the parables are often images of the Kingdom of Heaven, but I suspect Jesus' many different images of the Kingdom of Heaven are a way of encouraging us to pull away from our narrow experience of life and allow our minds to enter new realms with new understandings.

In the case of the parable about the wineskins, for example, Jesus doesn't explicitly say that he's describing the Kingdom of Heaven somehow. He's been asked why he and his disciples don't fast and pray like the followers of John the Baptist or the Pharisees. He simply tacks this image on to his defence of the fact that his disciples aren't praying and fasting like the others, because they don't have the same need to pray and fast.

You don't fast when you're at a feast.

You don't insult the bridegroom by wearing sackcloth and ashes, when you should be dressed in your finest robes (he uses this very example in another parable elsewhere).

In a way, he seems to be simply implying that there's something new happening – they're in a new era – but he doesn't specify that it has to do with the Kingdom of Heaven. It *does* have to do with *him*, though.

But the parable itself could have left his hearers scratching their heads : “what does all this have to do with their undisciplined behaviour? This guy and his followers are

behaving like drunkards and gluttons (this very accusation is hinted at in another context as well). Okay, so you don't put new wine in old wineskins – duh – so what??"

Jesus leaves it up to them to put two and two together. Those with some imagination might succeed in doing so, and go away wondering about this effervescent embrace of life; this new spirit that's entering the world. Others perhaps just wander off, thinking "the guy is spouting a lot of nonsense."

I've said many times that I don't think of myself as a mystic at all. I think I'm pretty grounded; not particularly other-worldly; and not given to a highly contemplative, or ecstatic, experience of faith.

I want to feel that my feet are firmly planted on the ground, and not given to flights of wild fancy.

Mind you I like symbolism a lot. I like Jesus' use of parables, and the mental images they conjure up.

I love his way of setting lecture aside and drawing his hearers into an interactive, story-telling, expression of truth.

I like his parables very much, but I *am* two thousand years removed from his usual examples.

What if I were to try to bring the parables into my own context, and suggest, for example, that living in the Kingdom of Heaven is like riding a bike?

I love cycling.

From the first time I rode a bike, and rode it into the back of a parked car, at about age six – I had managed to master the art of making it move, but hadn't thought far enough ahead to have it occur to me that I might need to figure out how to stop it – from that first experience on a bike, I've felt that cycling is the closest any of us will ever get to experiencing free flight.

It's a liberating experience for me.

I have enough of an imagination to imagine that, on a bicycle, you're floating a few feet above the ground, feet not touching the soil, moving under your own power; a smooth, silent, almost effortless, passage through the air.

What could be more enjoyable and uplifting than that?

Or what if I were to carry it a little further and suggest that the Kingdom of Heaven is like a bird of the air?

While walking to work a few weeks ago, I passed a schoolyard where daycare kids were playing behind the fence. One of the kids, a little boy of maybe three or four years old, was a little apart from the others. He was weaving around in figure eights, arms outstretched behind him at 45 degree angles.

He was clearly in free flight, and would immediately understand what it means to say that the Kingdom of Heaven is like a bird of the air.

When Jesus says things like “you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free”, this little boy would know exactly what freedom means.

Or what if I were to tell you that the Kingdom of Heaven is like an ailing branch grafted to a healthy tree?

Some years ago I was working with a man from Chad. He'd been terribly tortured and was in process of a series of operations to try to repair some of the damage his body had endured.

He told me that he felt like a plant that had been uprooted and planted in a foreign garden where it was unable to thrive. The soil was fertilized to meet the needs of the native plants, but it wasn't life-giving for him.

I knew that he also felt that he was a burden on his Canadian family. The trauma of his past was just too heavy, and too painful. He was afraid that he was dragging everyone around him down into an abyss.

In an attempt to reassure him that things weren't as bleak as he thought, I suggested that maybe there were other ways of thinking about his situation.

I suggested that instead of seeing himself as a plant left to itself in a hostile garden, maybe he could think of himself rather as a branch taken from an unhealthy apple tree and grafted onto the trunk of a healthier, and hardier, apple tree; that maybe he could accept that he had permission to draw strength from the tree he had been grafted onto; that the healthy tree would be taken care of, and the resources native to the orchard would be put to good use to take care of the tree as the tree gave him life.

The message I tried to pass to him in *that* parable was that he didn't need to worry overly about the effect he was having on his family. He had permission to draw strength

from them. They loved him, cared for him, and they were, in their turn, being cared for as he was drawing life from them.

He came back to see me a week later and said, “John, you're right. I've been thinking all week about what you told me last week. And you're absolutely right. God wouldn't have put me here if it wasn't the right place for me. I need to trust the gardener.”

I hadn't said anything about God.

I hadn't said anything directly about the gardener.

I hadn't said anything about any plan for his life.

But I wasn't about to challenge his interpretation of my illustration.

He had found meaning in those words; had drawn inspiration from them; and had embraced a perspective that allowed him to feel that he belonged; that he was where he was meant to be.

What if I were to suggest to you that the Kingdom of Heaven is like an orchard of ailing branches grafted onto healthy trunks?

In one of his parables, Jesus says that the Kingdom of Heaven is like a woman who puts yeast into her bread mix and works it until the entire lump of dough has been leavened.

Well, what if I were to try to bring that into a more contemporary example and suggest that the coming of the Spirit of the Kingdom of Heaven is like a teenager dropping a Mentos mint into a bottle of diet Coke?