

Cloth and wine skins

During Lent the Lent groups will be studying five parables of Jesus and at this service we will also be looking at a different parable each Sunday. But what are parables? In her book on parables Paula Gooder identifies 55 parables across the four Gospels. They cover a wide-range. Paula Gooder again; “parables are far more than illustrations, similes or metaphors. They often present an imaginary world, but it is a world based on reality and not on fantasy. They challenge us to think and think again until we begin to get a sense of the truth that lurks just beyond our reach. They are a tantalising, expansive invitation into seeing our world with new eyes...Parables are nearly always about the nitty-gritty of earthly life rather than what is going on in heaven.” (Page xvii)

But the nitty-gritty of everyday life in the Palestine of Jesus’s day was very different to ours so we need help in understanding the background. Mark records Jesus saying that the very beginning of his ministry. “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.” (Mark 1:15) All the parables are in some way related to Jesus trying to get people to understand what the kingdom of God is about and how they need to respond to its coming. He is saying think about it like a mustard seed; think about it like salt or yeast; or lost sheep; or building a house; or an unreliable son; or dishonest estate manager; or a wedding feast; or a moneylender; or a friend in need. He is always trying to help us to look at the world we live in and the people we live with new eyes and see signs of the coming kingdom of God.

Let’s look at the parables we have today. In practice these parables are closer to similes than most others and are very short. Here is Gooder’s translation of the first: “no one sews the patch of unprocessed cloth onto old clothing. If they do the cloth that fills the hole pulls away from it – the new from the old – and the tear gets worse.” (Page 83) The point is that the new ‘unprocessed cloth’ has not been treated by the rather laborious process of fulling and therefore would be a very different substance from the processed cloth the two simply would not fit together.

Gooder translates the second: “No one pours new wine into old wineskins. If they do the wine bursts the wineskins and the wine is ruined, as well as the wineskins. Instead one puts new wine into brand-new wineskins.” A wineskin is of course made from leather and “at first the leather with soft and supple and able to stretch as the wine fermented inside it, but once it had already stretched it brittle and liable to burst, thereby making it unsuitable for fresh wine.” Whether Gooder is correct in saying that

the wine would be fermented in wineskins seems to me to be questionable but the main point is clear, “one puts new wine into brand-new wineskins.”

This illustrates well the very different social, economic context within which Jesus was living. I think it would be difficult to buy wine in a wineskin anywhere in this country. But it also illustrates another point about parables. Parables are a bit like a joke. There is one point to a joke and if you try to analyse too much it you kill the joke stone dead.

The essential point is that it is often hard to fit in old with the new: it is difficult to accept change and move from the old to the new. It requires a different way of thinking. Matthew, Mark and Luke all include both these parables and there is very little difference between them but, interestingly, it looks as though Luke was not sure what the point was. He adds at the end: “No one after drinking old wine desires new; for he says, ‘The old is good.’” (Luke 5:39) Surely that is not the point. I think Jesus was telling people that kingdom of God is something new. Wake up and realise what is happening. Something new is happening, something important and you need to respond to it and you need to respond to it now.

At this point in reading through the sermon I decided it was extremely dull and the parables are not dull. In the parables Jesus is encouraging us to use our imagination and not to be too pedantic. Think for example of children’s stories or fables or songs. Goldilocks, Rumpelstiltskin, the three Bears. Stories like Gulliver’s Travels, Kidnapped, Treasure Island.

What about the Pilgrims Progress? I do not think it is read by many of us now but it has been hugely influential. More recently CS Lewis and his children’s books, especially for example The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, have had a real impact and they were made into a TV series. Possibly more significant is Tolkien’s Lord of the Ring trilogy. CS Lewis and Tolkien knew one another well. Significantly Tolkien absolutely refused to explain or interpret the Lord of the Rings. In the parables it is up to us to use our imagination which is what I’m going to do now.

Here is a very simple parable from me. Make of it what you will. There was a man who had a very old electric fan heater which however hard you kicked it, the fan simply would not work. He thought, ‘oh dear, I think I’ll have to get a new one,’ which went against all his instincts. Then he saw a leaflet on the environmental noticeboard in church about Reyt Repair, repair workshop, so he took it there. They said, “We’ll

see what we can do.” Next day they rang up saying it was working again. All they had to do was open it up and clean it. The problem for the man had been that he did not have the tool which was needed to open it up.