

Chichester Cathedral
Fourth Sunday in Lent, 11.00am Eucharist, 14 March 2010

Sometimes the readings are enough to silence the preacher. The parable of the prodigal Son, in particular, is so brilliantly told, commenting on it can seem superfluous. It's said St Francis once climbed into the pulpit, congregation expectant, and simply said 'God has given me nothing to say to you today', blessed them, and sat down again. Well I'm not going to do that, as God appears to have given me something to say, however imperfectly; first about the nature of parables in general, and then about this parable in particular.

You will be aware that scholars argue about the extent to which the Gospels, written down decades after Jesus' ministry, reflect the actual words he spoke. Some sayings are considered completely authentic, and some adaptations or constructions of the early Church. It's in the nature of scholarly debate that no final agreement is possible about which is which! But it is widely recognized that in the parables of Jesus we stand on particularly firm historical foundations.

This is partly because the parables are unique. The rabbinic literature from Jesus' time contains nothing like them. Nor is there anything quite like them in the Old Testament. So when we hear the parables, we can rightly imagine Jesus speaking directly to our hearts and minds.

So it's matter of some importance to properly understand what a parable is, and what it is not. It is not, for example, like a fable by Aesop, where there is always a neat moral to explain the meaning. Neither is it an allegory, like Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, where every element in the story directly corresponds to something else. Sometimes there may be elements of both, but to think of the parables as moralistic fables or allegories is to be in danger of mishearing what Jesus is saying to us.

The New Testament scholar Kenneth Bailey, who has spent forty years living and teaching in the Middle East, puts it this way: A parable '...does more than *explain* meaning, it *creates* meaning. A parable... is not a delivery system for an idea, but a house in which the reader or listener is invited to take up residence.' From this point of view, parables are not so much about illustrating a point, as about creating a worldview, a way of looking at the world through the windows of the house. Rembrandt painted, to the best of his extraordinary ability, what the parable of prodigal son enabled him to see. Preaching on the parables becomes a matter of evoking their worldview and their landscape, not discerning a moral.

In this sermon I propose to try to do this in two ways: first, by examining some features of the parable, and secondly and more riskily, by sharing with you a contemporary story evoking related themes.

The context for the parable is Jesus' table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners. When Jesus is criticized for the company he keeps, he tells the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and then the lost son, or sons. All three parables are about losing, searching, restoring and celebrating. The third parable, the one about the sons, brings to the fore themes of recognition, and grace. The younger son comes to his senses about his situation, and on his return is recognized and embraced by his father, while the elder son resents his own apparent lack of recognition.

We might note that the younger son's repentance is rather ambiguous. Recalling that even his father's *servants* live a better life than he does, he rehearses his repentance into a well crafted speech. This may make us wonder, if we are honest, whether there is *any* repentance untouched by self-interest or bargaining; any repentance that needs no grace to be made acceptable?

And grace is perhaps the major theme, as the father runs out to meet his long lost son. In Jesus' day this would have been beneath the dignity of a Middle Eastern patriarch, the head of the household. But the father, knowing his returning son is likely to be humiliated by the taunts of the surrounding populace, humiliates himself by running out in public to meet his son. Later he will again leave his house, and the music and dancing, to plead with his elder son to come and join the party.

The younger son sinned against his father and is nonetheless welcomed home. The older son sins against his father despite his obedience and hard work. The grace of the father is extended to both. This is a model of parental love for both mothers and fathers; a model born not so much of what Jesus was likely to have seen in the families around him, but of the new world, the new creation he is calling his disciples to live in.

And now for my contemporary story, which is also a story about recognition and grace. A story that is also a house to inhabit, evoking the worldview of Jesus' parables.

The central character in the story is Martha, a genuinely good person. If someone's sick, she's the first one round to visit and help out. When she says, 'If you need anything else, let me know', she really means it. But this doesn't mean she neglects her family. After dinner, with the washing up done, she helps her daughters Janet and Alice with homework. She's also socially concerned. 'No one cares for anyone but themselves', she often says. 'Martha to the rescue,' chides her husband Tom. 'Well, they don't.' she insists, calmed down a bit. She is determined she will not be that way.

Her parish staffs a soup kitchen for the homeless, which they call 'Nazareth'. One night a week Martha and her oldest daughter go there, and prepare sandwiches and soup for whoever comes in off the street. While the homeless are eating, Martha and Janet clean the kitchen. On their 'social action' night Tom cooks and has dinner

waiting for them. "How many tonight?" Tom asks. 'Ten,' Martha answers. "It's a good work." 'It's little enough.' "It's a lot."

That very night at 11:30 the doorbell rang. 'Who could that be at this hour?' Tom said as he got out of bed to answer it. "Oh my God!" Martha heard Tom say. It was his father. The last time they had seen him was at their wedding fifteen years ago. He was drunk then, too. 'Martha,' he smiled and gave her a hug. The first night he slept on the sofa. But by the end of the week the lounge had been turned into a temporary bedroom. He would sleep away the days and prowls at night. Whatever alcohol was in the house always disappeared.

It was Alice, the youngest, who said it. "We have our own personal homeless person." Martha was not amused. 'Tom, how long is he going to stay?' "He's my father. I can't just throw him out," Tom said. 'Give me time,' he pleaded. But the weeks went by and still he stayed. One night at supper, after the girls had left the table, he slurred, 'That Janet of yours really is a lovely looking girl.' That night in bed Martha said, 'He has to go.'

Two days later they found him on the floor of the lounge. The ambulance got him to the hospital in time. The heart attack was not fatal. When he came out of hospital, the lounge was rearranged into a permanent sick room. And Martha became a full-time nurse to an unappreciative, foul-mouthed old man. One afternoon he yelled from his bed, 'Dammit, Martha, bring me a drink.' In the kitchen Martha stood perfectly still. Her voice was quiet, but the words all too clear: 'God, I hope he dies.' And this prayer at least appeared to be answered pretty fast. For Tom's father had another heart attack, this time one that left her staring into the coffin with the words she'd uttered filling her mind, wondering how she'd ever find peace of mind again.

The day of the funeral was also Martha's 'social action' night. She insisted on going. But for once she didn't clean the kitchen while the homeless ate. For some reason she didn't understand, she sat at a table with a bowl of soup. Tears came with the first taste and did not stop for some time. But she finished the soup like a medicine she'd long avoided. On the way home in the car her daughter asked, "You okay, Mum?" 'Next week we'll bring flowers for the tables', Martha said. The words were spoken slowly, and with much effort. 'Maybe your father and sister will come with us. We'll all eat at Nazareth.'

So ends my contemporary parable. I don't want to 'explain it' beyond saying that for me it's a powerful picture of a worthy person painfully realizing her own need of grace. For the first time she sits down at the same tables as the homeless she's used to serving. The worldview this evokes, like that of the prodigal son, is of a world where the real question is not, 'What can I do for God?' but, 'What do I need God to do for me?' A world where grace has begun to prevail, and we can begin to see what it would be like for that grace to permeate every aspect of our lives. AMEN.