

Parable & Miracle

Communication by word and power

PARABLES AND THE GOSPELS

Jesus and parables

Jesus was master of every skill and technique known to the rabbinic teacher: hyperbole (Mk 9:43-48), Proverb (Mk 3:24), poetry (Mat 7:7-8), question (Mt.17:25), irony (Mt. 16:2-3), etc. But without doubt it is his use of parable that is the distinctive mark of his teaching. We have in fact a record of some sixty parabolic stories and sayings of Jesus, far more in number than those recorded for any other individual Jewish rabbi.

The English word 'parable' is a direct transliteration of the Greek '*parabole*' which means literally 'to throw alongside'. It is a story or saying that is used as a comparison. The Hebrew equivalent is '*mashal*' which includes any story or saying, riddle or puzzle which illustrates, communicates or highlights truth.

Parables and truth

The relationship between parable and truth is winsomely illustrated by an old Jewish story:

A rabbi, famed for his learning and his wit, was once asked by his students why he so often used parables in his teaching. "I can explain that best by telling you a parable", he replied. "A Parable about Parable itself. There was a time when Truth wandered among men unadorned, as naked as his name. All who saw Truth turned away from him, in fear, embarrassment or shame. He was given no welcome. As a result Truth wandered the earth, rebuffed and unwanted. One day sitting alone by the roadside weeping, he met Parable strolling along happily in his brightly coloured robes. "Truth, why are you so sad?" Parable enquired, "Because I am so old and ugly that all people avoid me", Truth replied. "Rubbish!", laughed Parable, "that is not why people avoid you. Here; dress in some of my clothes and see what happens". So Truth adorned himself in some of Parable's lovely garments - and suddenly everywhere he went he was welcomed." The rabbi smiled. "For the truth is that men cannot face Truth naked, they much prefer him disguised."

Here we touch at the heart of the use of parables. They are not simply an illustration of truth, nor an attractive means by which to communicate truth, though they may in fact do both. The parable recognises that the human mind and spirit has resistance and reactions to truth and it works to break through them. As we shall see a parable has something of the 'Trojan horse' about it, truth incognito, cloak and dagger communication.



Parables misinterpreted

Sadly the history of Christian interpretation of the parables is not a good one. As the church began to draw away from its Hebrew roots it increasingly lost an understanding of the subtle nature of parable and treated them as allegories. An allegory is also a story, but quite different in nature from the parable. All the details of the story have an important and particular meaning in an allegory, and the meanings are often quite unrelated to the original story; a parable is not like this.

Treating the parables like allegories defused the power of their message, and led to sad, though admittedly amusing misinterpretations. One example must suffice, the story of the 'Good Samaritan'. This is the way the main points of the story were treated by men like Origen and Augustine:

- The traveler Adam
- Jerusalem Heaven
- Jericho the world
- Thieves Devil and his demons
- Stripped him of his immortality
- Beat him persuaded him to sin
- Priest and Levite Law and the prophets
- Samaritan Christ
- Donkey Christ's human body
- Legs of the donkey the four gospels
- Oil and wine Holy Spirit
- Inn Church
- Innkeeper Paul
- Two pence the sacraments
- Promise to come again . the Parousia

Amid this bizarre, though obviously sincere, approach to the story, sight has been completely lost of the question, "Who is my neighbour?" which provoked the parable and to which it was a reply. It is true that some parables (e.g. 'The Sower' [Mk 4:1-20] and 'The wicked husbandmen' [Mk 12:1-9]) have some allegorical elements in them, but these are rare exceptions (easily recognised) and are not a pattern for all parable interpretation, even though this form of interpretation has a rich history.

Parables: History of Interpretation

- Allegory
 - Takes its cue from Matt 13:1-9, 18-23
 - Sower = Son of Man (Matt 13:37)
 - Seed = word of the kingdom
 - Birds = evil one
 - Path = failure to understand
 - Rocky ground = word fails to take root



- Thorns = cares of the world & lure of wealth
- Good soil = hearing & understanding
- And Matt 13:24-30, 36-43
 - Sower = Son of Man
 - Field = world
 - Good seed = children of the kingdom
 - Weeds = children of the evil one
 - Enemy = Devil
 - Harvest = end of the age
 - Reapers = angels
 - Fire = judgement
- Key to understanding all the parables? Mark 4:13
- Single Point (Jülicher, Jeremias, Dodd)
 - Parables reflect conditions of first-century Palestine
 - Details simply fill in the story to make it realistic
 - Parables are extended similes
 - Each parable makes a single point
 - Allegorical details in Gospel parables are therefore inauthentic and are later additions by the church
- Mediating Position (Blomberg)
 - Main characters of parable lend themselves to allegorisation
 - Many parables have three main characters and therefore make three main points
 - Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32)
 - Lost Sheep & Coin (Luke 15:4-10)
 - Two Debtors (Luke 7:41-43)
 - Two Sons (Matt 21:28-32)
 - Faithful & Unfaithful Servants (Luke 12:42-48; Matt 24:45-51)
 - Ten Virgins (Matt 25:1-13)
 - Wheat & Weeds (Matt 13:24-30, 36-43)
 - Dragnet (Matt 13:47-50)
 - Rich Man & Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31)
 - Children in the Marketplace (Matt 11:16-19; 7:31-35)

According to Blomberg, therefore, the meaning of parables generally falls somewhere in between a single point and full allegory. He classifies the parables as follows:

Complex Three-Point Parables

- Talents (Matt 25:14-30; Luke 19:12-27)
- Labourers in the Vineyard (Matt 20:1-16)



- Sower (Mark 4:3-9, 13-20)
- Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)
- Great Supper (Luke 14:15-24)
- Unforgiving Servant (Matt 18:23-35)
- Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-13)
- Wicked Tenants (Mark 12:1-12)

Two-Point Parables

- Pharisee & Tax Collector (Luke 18:9-14)
- Two Builders (Matt 7:24-27; Luke 6:47-49)
- Unprofitable Servant (Luke 17:7-10)
- Seed Growing Secretly (Mark 4:26-29)
- Rich Fool (Luke 12:16-21)
- Barren Fig Tree (Luke 13:6-9)
- Unjust Judge (Luke 18:1-8)
- Friend at Midnight (Luke 11:5-8)
- Householder & Thief (Matt 24:43-44; Luke 12:39-40)

One-Point Parables

- Hidden Treasure & Pearl of Great Price (Matt 13:44-46)
- Tower Builder & Warring King (Luke 14:28-33)
- Mustard Seed & Leaven (Luke 13:18-21)

Parable as Metaphor

On the other hand, Paul Ricoeur emphasises the metaphorical, elusive character of parables and thereby suggests that the somewhat mechanical approach of Blomberg is also inappropriate. For Ricoeur:

- Parables cannot be reduced to propositional statements
- Parables are performative or affective – they do something
- Their meaning consists of their effect on hearers/readers
- Meaning is thus multidimensional

Parables at work

The best way to describe parables is 'truth force'; they are not so much an 'illustration' but an 'encounter'; the hearer being impacted by the truth and challenge of the kingdom of God. Parables have been described, as 'like' stories, here are pictures of what parables are like:

- **A joke:** The key to understanding parables is to recognise that first and foremost they are concerned with impact and experience; an encounter with truth that leads on to understanding. One of the most useful analogies of a parable is that



of a joke. A joke is to be experienced and responded to. You may think it useful to analyse why a joke is funny, you may have to explain a joke to someone who doesn't 'get it', but in neither case is the original impact and experience sustained. The same is true for the parable.

- ❑ **A hook:** When Jesus told a parable he captured people's attention with a story. He drew people along with him as they identified with the central elements of the story. Then suddenly the story concluded either abruptly or with an unexpected twist that left the hearers confronted with a truth about them or about the kingdom of God (usually both), to which they had to respond. A joke gets people's attention and personally involves them either by telling a story with which they can identify, or by asking questions. This is the hook by which they are drawn into the experience to share in the impact of the climax. A parable does exactly the same.
- ❑ **An arrow:** A joke succeeds because within all the detail of the story there are certain things that serve as key points by reference. They are things people can identify with and also create expectations in the hearer as to how the story will end. The joke lies in the unexpectedness of the conclusion, or some other way in which the points of reference are manipulated. It has been well said that a parable is like an arrow, it has a sharp point that must hit the target; at the other end of the shaft there are feathers (often brightly coloured) which keep it on target and guide it to its goal. These flight feathers are like the 'points of reference' in the story with which the hearer particularly identifies and which unwittingly set up the human mind and spirit as a target for the force of truth that is about to explode. The ability to identify with key elements in the story relaxes people's defences, they receive what is being said into those areas of their life at which they are vulnerable. Thus when the impact comes it takes maximum effect.
- ❑ **An explosion:** The hearer is confronted with the truth which explodes within their heart. It is a very disturbing experience. Everything in them is challenged and they have to choose.
- ❑ **A circle:** The analogy of the joke has another dimension that parallels with Jesus' use of parables. In telling a joke in a crowd there is always the possibility that some of the hearers will not 'get' the joke or will simply not find it funny. There are the 'in crowd' who find it funny and the 'outsiders' who do not. As the punch line is reached a circle is drawn which includes or excludes the hearers according to their response. Jesus' use of parables was creative communication about the kingdom of God, but it was also an act of judgment. The people who heard his words were faced with issues about which they had to decide; and any indecision was decision against. Jesus' words in Mk 4:10-12 have given some people problems:

“... to you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables; so they may indeed see but



not perceive ... may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn again and be forgiven.”

It has been suggested that Jesus told parables deliberately to obscure the truth of the kingdom from his hearers. In fact the reverse is true. He spoke in parables deliberately to confront them and impact them with the truth. There were those who were so unwilling to receive Jesus’ message they were unprepared to even identify with his points of reference. To them it was nothing more than a story. Others received the impact but were unprepared to embrace the truth, its challenge was too radical. Jesus’ words are actually a quote from Isaiah (6:9-10) where the prophet is told to be faithful in the proclamation of God’s message, even when the cause seems hopeless, so that when God’s judgment ultimately fell the hearers had no excuse about not hearing the message properly. That is exactly what Jesus did.

In studying the parables our first responsibility is to rediscover their true impact. This will require identifying the original audience, understanding the points of reference in terms of first century Jewish culture, and recognise the ‘punch’ the parable first made.

The core of the parable

The key to the thrust of every parable is to recognise that each one, whether story or pungent saying, is revealing some important truth about the kingdom of God and confronting the hearers with it. If each parable is seen within the perspective of Jesus’ single burden, to proclaim the kingdom of God, one will quickly touch its core.

Drawing parables together from where they are scattered throughout the pages of the gospels and grouping them according to themes is clearly artificial. Nevertheless it can be very helpful in giving us focus and stimulating our understanding. In doing this we can identify at least four main aspects of the gospel of the kingdom of God that the parables proclaim.

□ Coming of the kingdom: God’s rule was breaking upon people:

- The patch and the wineskins (Mk 2:21-22);
- The mustard seed (Mk 4:30-32);
- The leaven (cf. Lk 13:20-21);
- The seed growing spontaneously (Mk 4:26-29);
- The tares (Mat 13:24-30);
- The dragnet (Mt 13:44-48);
- The soils (Mk 4:3-8);
- The strongman, the divided realm (Mk 3:23-27);
- The empty house (Lk 11:24-26);
- The wedding guests (Mk 2:19-20).



- **Grace of the kingdom:** the king is a father, whose heart is one of extravagant goodness (note that most of these parables are in reply to hostile questions):
 - The doctor and the sick (Mk. 2:17);
 - The places at the table (Lk 14:7-11);
 - The labourers in the vineyard (Mt 20:1-15);
 - The Pharisee and tax collector (Lk 18:10-14);
 - The two sons (Mt 21:28-31);
 - The searching shepherd (Lk 15:4-7);
 - The two debtors (Lk 7:41-43);
 - The persistent woman (Lk 15:8-10);
 - The great supper (Lk 14:16-24);
 - The waiting father (Lk 15:11-32).

- **People of the kingdom:** what is the attitude of those who put themselves under God's rule (Lk 7:41-43):
 - The persistent woman (Lk. 18:1-6);
 - The asking son (Mt 7:9-11);
 - The builder and the king at war (Lk 14:28-32);
 - The householder (Mt 13:52);
 - The obedient servant (Lk 17:7-10);
 - The unjust steward (Lk 16:1-8);
 - The friend at midnight (Lk 11:5-8);
 - The persistent widow (Lk 18:2-8);
 - The unmerciful servant (Mt 18:23-28);
 - The good Samaritan (Lk 10:30-37);
 - The rock and sand (cf. Mt 7:24-27).

- **Crisis of the kingdom:** the coming of the kingdom creates a crisis of awareness, decision and responsibility:
 - The weather signs (Lk 12:54-56);
 - The eye (Mt 6:22-23);
 - The playing children (Lk 7:31-32);
 - The rich fool (Lk 12:16-20);
 - The savourless salt (Lk 14:34-35);
 - The lamp and the meal tub (Mk 4:21);
 - The servant in authority (cf. Lk 12:42-46);
 - The talents (Mt 25:14-28);
 - The barren fig tree (Lk 13:6-9);
 - The defendant (cf. Lk 12:57-59);
 - Dives and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31);
 - The waiting servants (Lk 12:35-38);
 - The burglar (Lk 12:39);
 - The ten bridesmaids (Mt 25:1-13);

- The wicked husbandmen (Mk 12:1-9);
- The sheep and goats (Mt 25:31-46).

Parables as Subversive (Herzog)

The imaginative, metaphorical dimension of parables has to be placed in the context of the first century agrarian peasant society from whose world Jesus constantly draws on:

- Jesus as a rural artisan in an agrarian peasant society
- Peasants internalise world of oppressors
- A new language, therefore, has to be learned and a new world constructed for liberation to occur
- Jesus does this by means of parable
- Consistently deals with political & economic issues
- Parables are thus designed to stimulate social analysis
- Need an understanding of social situation of agrarian societies

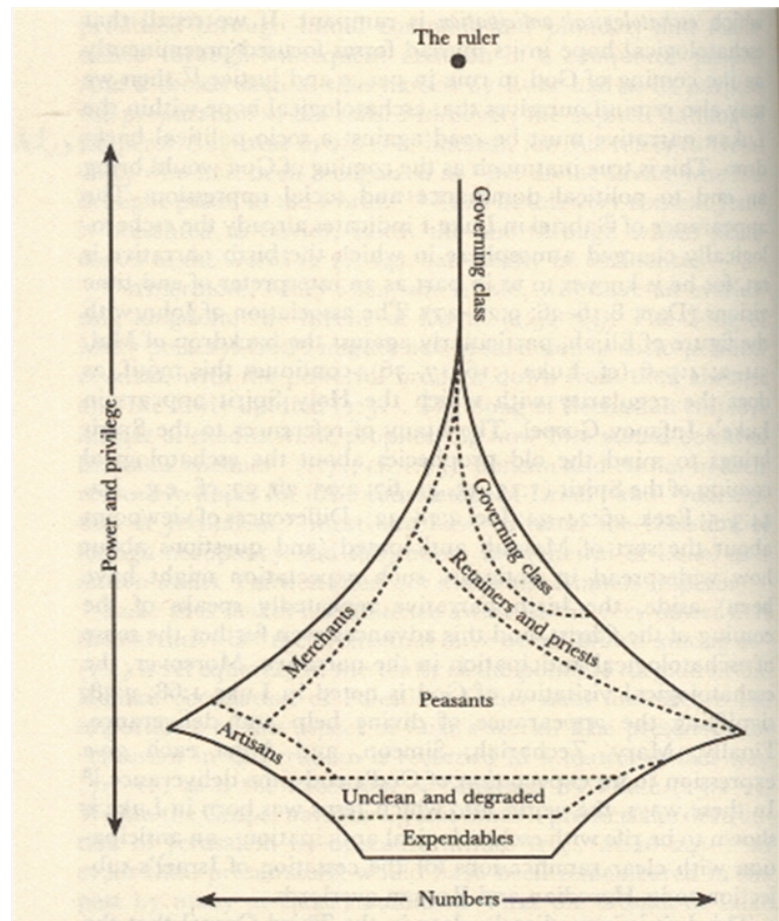
Lenski's Diagram of Social Stratification

< 1% governing class

5% retainers

3-7% artisans

5-10% expendables



This diagram powerfully illustrates the difference between the ruling elite and the rest of society. Jesus, as a rural artisan, would be fairly low down the social scale



but not as low as the unclean and degraded (e.g. lepers, prostitutes) or the expendables (e.g. criminals, outlaws, beggars).

With this analysis in mind, the parables come into even sharper focus as Jesus' message of the kingdom can be seen to be powerfully subversive of the status quo. Here is just one example of this social-scientific approach to the parables:

Labourers in the Vineyard (Matt 20:1-16)

- Landowner = wealthy patron
- Marketplace full of potential workers at all hours of the day indicates high unemployment
- Workers, therefore, have no bargaining power
- Landowner, typically, takes advantage of the situation by hiring subsequently without a wage agreement
- Jesus depicts collusion between retainers (manager/steward) and elites
- Social analysis has revealed that these day labourers were in the class of "expendables" – the bottom of Lenski's stratification scale
- Denarius is not a generous wage but minimum necessary to support a worker at subsistence level
- When wages are given landowner ruthlessly shames those who have worked longest – all they have to offer is their labour and this has been counted worthless
- Heroes are those who grumble – they dare to challenge the elite
- "Friend" (v 13) is a condescending term which reinforces inequality
- Labourers are dismissed and salt is rubbed into their wounds - how did landowner get "what belongs to him" – through exploitation of the poor
- Undermines biblical notion of land as gift

This kind of analysis often overturns normal interpretations of parables which have been espoused in Christendom by the contemporary equivalent of the wealthy elite of Jesus' day. However, those reading parables from the margins of contemporary society often grasp the socio-economic significance of them immediately.

MIRACLES AND THE GOSPELS

Jesus the power of God

The works of Jesus are interwoven into his words to form the single message of the gospel of the kingdom of God. The two cannot be prised apart. Just as the parables are at the centre of his words, so the miracles are at the centre of his works:

- 'A man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs which God did through him in your midst' (Acts 2:22);
- 'He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him' (Acts 10:38).



The scriptures declare that God is and that he is Power. They do not dwell on his being, but on his actions by which he is made known and which are his power. His activity is seen primarily in two areas: in nature (highlighted in his acts of creation) and in history (highlighted in the events of the Exodus).

Jesus is the incarnation of the power of God. His actions are the constant demonstration of the rule of God. His actions and his words stand inseparable. He even challenges his hearers who are scandalised by his words, to accept only his actions, knowing they will point directly to his words and without which they have no significant meaning, (Jn 10:38). This scripture is a vital key to understanding the miracles of Jesus.

The fact is that Jesus' miracles were not simply dramatic acts to gain attention, nor were they mere random acts of divine kindness. They were primary acts of revelation: proclamations of the truth about the kingdom of God, creative communication.

We shall now explore the central aspects of Jesus' miracles via the four key New Testament Greek words used to speak about them; '*dunamis*' (power), '*erga*' (works), '*semeia*' (signs) and '*exousia*' (authority). They all make distinctive contributions to our understanding and yet, as we shall see, the ideas of each flow freely between each one.

***Dunamis*: powers of the age to come**

Every miracle of Jesus was a manifestation and declaration of the fact that in him the power, the energy and the life of 'the age to come' was breaking into 'this present age'. The clash of the ages, which the Jews only expected on the Day of the Lord, at the omega point of history, was taking place now in the person of Jesus. Every miracle is an eschatological flashpoint.

Jesus declared that he was inaugurating the rule of God (Mk 1:15), and the miracles stood as irrefutable evidence of this fact. This is most clearly stated in the important words:

'If I by the finger (Spirit) of God cast out demons, then you know that the kingdom of God has come upon you'. (Lk 17:21; Mt 12:28)

'*Dunamis*' is both the latent capability of action and also power actually in action. It is the being of God in his dynamic aspect. The '*dunamis*' in Jesus is the demonstration of the kingdom.

It is important to note that Jesus' exercise of '*dunamis*' is never the exercise of naked power. It is never used to engender dread, awe, wonder or amazement in order to demand a response or as a means of manipulation. To do this was the basis of one of the temptations (cf. Lk 4:9-12). Jesus refused to do miracles as proof



of his message (cf. Mk 8:11-12), or as any form of public demonstration (Lk 23:8-9). Instead of being neutral acts of naked power randomly executed, the miracles of Jesus were all filled with expressions of the character of God, and they were only demonstrated in express response to the Father's will (Jn 5:19). An important reminder of this fact is the clear statement of Jesus that there will be those who do miracles in his name which neither reflect God's character nor his will and so those who do them have no place in God's kingdom (Mat 7:22-23).

Miracles as '*dunamis*' remind us that in Jesus we are touching the power source of the universe. Not some neutral force but the energy of divine character, one who brought all things into being and has the rule over all things. The manifestations of '*dunamis*', with their control and character, is clear evidence that the life and power of eternity is breaking into the here and now.

Erga: works of God

The miracles of Jesus are the very works of God himself. He is acting directly in what takes place. They are accomplished by one who is his totally obedient son:

'My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work' (Jn 4:34)

One who is himself one of the Godhead accomplishes them: -

'The Father who dwells in me does his works' (Jn 14:10)

The miracles of Jesus are premeditated sovereign acts of God. The God who acted so clearly in the past continues to act in the works of his son. They are acts of revelation to those with the eyes to see. They are acts that illustrate his character and that of his kingdom.

These works of God were time and again acts of compassion. Whether reaching out to touch the leper (Mk 1:41), or feeding a hungry multitude (Mk 6:34; 8:2), or raising the dead body of a widow's only son (Lk 7:13), in each case the response could rightly be that of the people of Nain :

'God has visited his people' (Lk 7:16)

But they are sovereign acts. On one hand 'he healed all who were sick' (Mt 8:16), but on the other hand he moved towards particular people; he healed only one man from among the multitude of sick at the pool of Bethesda (Jn 5:2-9). God's compassion moving through his acts is universal and yet it is never random, always particular.

The works of God in the miracles of Jesus had the purpose of stopping people in their tracks and bringing them to repentance, but so rarely did this happen (Mt 11:20, cf. Jn 12:37). Jesus' miracles were to be meeting points between God and people, and turning points in personal lives.



Semeia: signs of the kingdom

The miracles of Jesus were dramatic demonstrations of the presence of God's rule, they are actions of clear significance. They have meaning; 'signs' that have to be given attention to, and responded to. The Greek word '*semeion*' (singular of '*semeia*') has a number of important senses:

- **A symbol:** a distinguishing mark which separates or identifies particular people or items from a whole group; used of an emblem on a shield or ring;
- **A sample:** a token or representation of something even more substantial;
- **A signal:** information demanding a response, significant to those attentive and waiting;
- **A logical basis:** (in Gk. philosophy) from which one could confidently infer conclusions that were not necessarily immediately obvious.

From these dimensions of '*semeion*' we can identify some important features of the miracles of Jesus:

- **Evidence of Messiahship:** Jesus was an enigma to his contemporaries. His words and works drew people, "No one ever spoke like this person" (Jn 7:46). Yet there was always room for people to question, "Are you he who is to come?" (Mt 11:3). Many of course were repelled, "Crucify him!" (Jn 19:6). In this whole debate the miracles stood as primary evidence. When confronted with a miracle people had an option in how to respond, but the only logical conclusion (to use '*semeion*' in its philosophical sense) was that Jesus was in fact the Messiah. The Gospel writers see the 'signs' as presenting irrefutable evidence as to who Jesus was, to reject them was in fact to reject the whole gospel of the kingdom. Particular requests from the Pharisees for a 'sign' were refused - those that had been given were enough (Mk 8:12). On the one hand the miracles are suggestive, "Is this the Messiah?" On the other hand they are clear credentials, which if rejected mean judgment. They are a 'signal' to those alert enough to respond (Mk 8:18). They are distinguishing marks that mark out Jesus from all others; they are the mark on the signet ring of his authority.
- **Windows into God's rule:** The miracles are not only demonstrations of God's power, irrefutable evidence of who Jesus is, but in examining them one sees into the kingdom. We must recognise a central teaching dimension to the miracles. Let us briefly highlight some of the themes and truths that are proclaimed in the miracles and serve as windows into what the character and coming of God's Kingdom brings:
 - **Forgiveness:** in healing the paralytic Jesus says 'your sins are forgiven you' (Mk 2:5 cf. Jn 5:14).
 - **Healed relationship with God:** a leper (Mk 1:40-44) was said to be under God's judgment; he approaches Jesus, Jesus touches (identifies



with, breaks down the taboo) and receives him, in healing him the Torah demands are met, he becomes clean and restored to society - the whole event is justification in action.

- **Victory over death:** Jairus' daughter (Mk 5), widow of Nain's son (Lk 7) and Lazarus (Jn 11) "I am the resurrection and the life".
- **True Sabbath:** in healing the man with a withered hand (Mk 3:1-6) declares the Spirit of Sabbath is 'doing good' and 'saving life'.
- **Blessing to the Gentiles:** healing the centurion's slave (Mt 8:5-13) and the daughter of the Syrophenician woman (Mk 7:26) declares the inclusion of the Gentiles in the blessings of the kingdom.
- **Enlightenment:** every time Jesus healed the blind or restored hearing to the deaf he was declaring that what was happening physically was also happening spiritually in his work. "I came into this world, that those who do not see (physically and spiritually) may see, and that those who see (physically) may become blind (spiritually)" - (Jn 9:39).

□ **Foundations for faith:** miracles took place because faith was generated; people recognising God at work in Christ. The interwoven events of Mk 5 illustrate this well; the woman with a hemorrhage is told, "Your faith has saved you" (v 34). Jairus is told, "Fear not, only believe" (v 36).

□ **Prophetic declarations:** The miracles of Jesus are acted prophecies. While Jesus is moved with compassion and touches people, the crisis point of each miracle is the spoken word. The prophet is the herald of God's word that is the encapsulating of his will. Jesus speaks the Father's will into situations and brings wholeness. The miracle itself is an illustration that God is at work and what his work is like. In Jesus we see a unique demonstration of the 'word of God' in signs, in that it combines the prophetic word and the creative word together:

- **Mt 8:16** 'he cast out spirits with a word and healed all who were sick';
- **Lk 4:36** "What is this word!" (after healing the epileptic boy);
- **Lk 7:7** "... only say a word" (centurion about the healing of his slave).

Another example of the acted prophetic word is seen in the incident of the cursing of the fig tree (Mk 11:12-14, 20-25), a prophecy against faithlessness especially with the Jewish nation in mind.

□ **Prophetic fulfilment:** The miracles of Jesus are a declaration that in Jesus prophecy is being fulfilled. Jesus himself identified his ministry with the Messianic vision of Isaiah 61:1-2 (Lk 4:16-19), which has as its background the whole festival of Jubilee (Lev 25). Jesus ministry of healing the sick identified him as the anointed one about whom the prophet spoke:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me ... he has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind..."



Jesus also appeals to this prophetic vision in his reply to John the Baptist's enquiry, "Are you he who should come?" (Mt 11:2-6): -

"...the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the good news preached to them."

The healing of the Syrophenician woman (Mk 7:24-30) and the centurion's slave (Lk 7:1-10) both proclaim a realisation of the prophetic call for Israel to be 'a light to the Gentiles' (Isa. 49:6) The raising of the dead; Jairus' daughter (Mk 5), widow of Nain's son (Lk 7) and Lazarus (Jn. 11) declare that the promise in Daniel 12:2, 'those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall wake', will find its fulfilment in the person of Jesus (cf. Jn 5:25-29).

- **Prophetic interpretation:** In the miracles of the feeding of the multitudes (cf. Mk 6:32-44; 8:1-10) we can identify another dimension of what God is saying through the works of Jesus. These events are giving fuller meaning and interpretation to passages in the Hebrew scriptures. In the miracles of feeding the multitude there are clear links with feeding the people with manna in the wilderness. The same God is at work. The manna provided physical needs, as do the loaves and fish, but the one who divides them is the true manna, the bread of life (Jn 6:35) who provides for spiritual needs:

"For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world" (Jn 6:33).

Exousia: rule and authority

The word 'exousia' focuses on the 'status' of the miracles. The miracles were not only demonstrations of power, and filled with significance, but proclaimed the fact that Jesus had the right to act as he did. Jesus is frequently spoken of as having 'authority'. This is not only 'the ability to perform an action without hindrance' but 'the right' to do it. It overcame any other rights that might have tried to stand in his way, the permission and freedom to act in this way.

'Exousia' is at the heart of the idea of the 'kingdom'. It is the 'rule of God', it is the exercise and submission to divine authority. Here we see Jesus fulfilling the vision of the Son of man in Daniel 7 to whom is given 'dominion, and glory and kingdom' (v14). Jesus who has perfectly submitted to God's rule can perfectly exercise its authority.

While Jesus exercises authority in everything he says (cf. Mat 7:29) and does it is especially highlighted in his control over demons and over nature.

- **Authority over demons:** Jesus rejoices that in his ministry he has seen Satan fall like lightning (Lk 10:17-18) and that he is a strongman whose house has been bound and his house plundered (Mk 3:27) and he himself has been stripped of



his armour (Lk 11:22). The demons themselves give unwilling witness to Jesus' person and authority: -

“What have we to do with you, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know you, you are the Holy One of Israel” (Mk. 1:24; cf. 5:7)

The hold of the forces of darkness was broken (Mt 12:22). They are rebuked, silenced and removed (Mk 1:25). The testimony of everyone was:

“With authority he commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him”
(Mk 1:27)

- **Authority over nature:** All miracles that involve physical healing display the exercise of authority over nature. However, this fact is most clearly seen in the two incidents of Jesus' control of the wind and the waves: the stilling of the storm (Mk 4:35-41) and walking on the water (Mk 6:45-52). To the Hebrew mind the sea was symbolic of chaos, a place of danger, mystery and terror; in many ways a picture of the troubled sinful world (cf. Isa 57:20). Yahweh controls the storms (cf. Ps 107:23-30; 89:9; 29:3 etc.). It was his spirit that brooded over 'the deep' at the outset of Creation (Gen 1:2). So when Jesus walked on the water and stilled the storm, he was declaring himself Lord of Creation. In fact in Mk 6:50 he greets the disciples with the words, “Fear not; **I am**, take heart”, using the unique name of God, Jesus is declaring that just as his word of command can release the tormented mind from demonic control, that same word can draw the 'Shalom' of God out of the chaos of nature. It is interesting that when casting out the demon in Mk 1:25 and stilling the storm in Mk 4:39 he uses exactly the same response; he issues a word of rebuke and then commands, “Be muzzled!” Those who saw it happen were incredulous:

“Who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”
(Mk 4:41)

Here indeed is the one in whom “all things hold together” (Col 1:17) revealing just a glimpse of his essential majesty.

QUESTIONS

1. What does Jesus' use of parables have to teach us about communicating the gospel of the kingdom in our modern environment?
2. How would studying Jesus' use of miracles affect our expectations about moving in signs and wonders in society?



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