

Chapter 13

Learning to look beneath the surface

Children need to be more mature than we may think before they understand that a familiar word can also have a less than familiar meaning. A classic example is the small girl who stopped stroking her cat after she heard that her grandmother had died of a stroke, afraid that either her furry friend or the one who stroked it may meet the same end. Either way she dared not take the risk. A word like ‘holy’ may suggest moth-eaten garments to an English-speaking child. A few years later, as vocabulary expands, children (and some adults) enjoy playing with the double meanings of words, finally understanding the inner meaning of proverbs, parables and puns.

Teaching in parables

Jesus often told parables, using earthly stories with heavenly meanings. There had to be a certain level of spiritual understanding to see the point. Even the religious leaders did not always grasp what he meant and neither did his particular trainees and friends. As with his parable of the sower, the Twelve had to question what he had meant by talking of widely scattered seed reaching very different ends according to where it landed.¹ He said that if it fell on the hard path the birds would eat up the seed, or it would quickly die away if it landed on shallow or rocky soil, or was choked by thorns and thistles. Only in a field of good soil does seed take root and produce a plentiful harvest.

Like younger children, these grown men could not see the double meaning until Jesus explained how he had matched the different kinds of soil with the ways that different human hearts deal with his words. Some are hard-hearted, so the word is snatched away immediately. Others at first seem to take in the truth with joy, but their earlier interest becomes choked by opposition and worldly cares and they turn away. What Jesus longed for was for his words to be well received, and to grow up to bear fruit in people’s lives. Instead he pointed out the risk of hearing without trying to understand,

sometimes known as lack of 'double listening'. This allows many people to read the Bible or hear it read without realising that it brings a message from God. In another parable Jesus described as 'sons of the kingdom' those who accept his word and let it grow and influence their lives. Instead, others allow wrongdoing to take over and spoil God's intention for them.²

Parables in action

Earlier, we looked at Jesus' manifesto, where all the categories mentioned there had a double meaning (see Luke 4:18-19). The poor to whom he preached were poor in spirit as well as possessions, prisoners were locked in to lives of hopelessness or bound by sinful habits, the blind could not see who he was and the oppressed were weighed down by circumstances. He had come to liberate them all. Many of Jesus' miracles were acted out parables, such as when blind eyes were made to see, or disabled people healed and enabled, or even the dead brought back to life. Each of these incidents had their inner meaning, for he was also offering clear spiritual vision, restored power in life and spiritual revival.

Today we can still see events that act as parables. In 2010, the roof of a Chilean mine collapsed, trapping 33 mine workers underground. After almost ten weeks of uncertainty and enormous efforts to rescue them, each of them in turn finally stepped into the small chamber lowered down to bring them back to the surface, out of the darkness of the mine. They came out to meet the media headlights and the welcome of their loved ones. 'As we came out of darkness into light', said one of them, 'I understood what babies feel as they are born. It was like being born again.'

Being born again is the telling phrase that Jesus used when speaking of the spiritual rebirth he offers.³ In fact, among those trapped underground was a Christian believer who encouraged his fellow miners to put their trust in Jesus' offer of loving forgiveness for their past sins. Many of them were 'born again', sure that whatever happened to their bodies they now had new and undying spiritual life. In his day, many of those healed by Jesus would find that they had not

only been made whole physically but, by receiving his forgiveness, had also become fully alive spiritually. Not one of those miners refused to get into the rescue chamber, sent down to them at such great cost. To hang back would have been fatal, but to believe that this was their way of escape gave them hope and persuaded them to step inside and be saved. The spiritual application should be clear. We could reject Jesus' costly offer of new life but that would be to choose to die in the dark. Instead, as with the miners, fresh light and new life await those who decide to put their trust in him.

Bread of life

One occasion when Jesus openly pointed to the message within the miracle is recorded in all four gospels. Amazingly, he fed over 5,000 people with a small boy's picnic lunch. Jesus had just heard of the brutal execution of his cousin John the Baptist and taken the Twelve to a remote place for some peace and quiet. Instead, the huge crowd had tracked him down and as they grew hungry he set aside his own grief to attend to their need. Before the coming of fast food stalls or farmers' markets, he miraculously divided the lad's small donation of five small barley loaves and two little fishes to feed everyone, with plenty of leftovers, too. Some picnic! How amazed the boy's mother would be when she heard what had happened to his packed lunch. It is still worth remembering that, placed in Jesus' hands, our little can become much.

In John's Gospel the account of the miracle is followed by Jesus' use of it as a parable. He spoke of the true bread sent by his Father to offer life to the whole world and then claimed to be that source of spiritual nourishment himself:

*'I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never go thirsty... I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.'*⁴

The Jews then, and many other people since, have made the mistake of taking this literally. Yet when Jesus referred to 'eating my flesh' (and later in the passage to 'drinking my blood') he made use of picture language to point forward to his death. It needs 'double listening' to realise that he was not suggesting cannibalism! We have no film of him in action, but can imagine him pointing to his body when he mentioned the bread being his flesh, and stretching out his arms in the pattern of a cross as he spoke of giving his life for the world. His would be the only sacrifice ever needed to forgive the sins of those who understood, repented and accepted his offer. By it Jesus brought in a new covenant with God, doing away with the old sacrifices on the annual Day of Atonement (see chapter 7), which were just shadows pointing to the reality of his perfect sacrifice.⁵ His personal offering was once and for all, and by his forgiveness he restores the relationship with God that our sins have spoiled. Yet John reports that it was at this point many of his disciples found it all too hard to accept, and stopped following him. Like many today, they heard his words but did not grasp his meaning.

The bread and wine used during a communion service are not changed into literal flesh and blood, but are again pictures, or symbols, of Jesus' body broken and his blood poured out. Those who have understood this and accept his forgiveness, take this simple meal in thankful remembrance of his offering and the unity it gives with other believers worldwide. One future day he has promised to return, when the symbols will be needed no more. Meanwhile, as we look back with gratitude we also look forward with hope.⁶

Satisfied or dissatisfied?

We sometimes say, 'I'm dying for something to eat' or 'I'm longing for a drink'. It is easy to recognise our physical needs but not everyone identifies their spiritual needs, or that Jesus offers to satisfy both spiritual hunger and thirst.⁷ Yet needs must be recognised and admitted to before they can be met.

Travellers on the London underground often hear an announcement saying, 'Mind the gap', as they prepare to step from the train

to the platform. Many people have a God-shaped gap in their lives that is responsible for the hunger and thirst they try (and fail) to deal with by drinking too much alcohol, taking drugs, casual sex, money-making or even non-stop hard work. This can all be as dangerous to the spirit as it would be to ignore the warning voice on the train.

I recently heard someone tell how he had tried most of these distractions until, let down by false friends, he ended up in prison. There he was told of the great love of Jesus for the world, and learned that this included him. In responding to this good news, he met the Saviour who had bridged the gap separating him from God. As he accepted God's forgiveness he found the satisfaction he had been searching for all the time.

To learn more about this, let's think further about the story of Jesus.

For further thought

- Do you recognise the symptoms and signs of spiritual hunger in anyone?
- Is it possible that you still have a God-shaped gap in your own life?
- Take heart, there is hope.

References

1. Mark 4:2-20
2. Matthew 13:24-30; 36-38
3. John 3:3-8
4. John 6:35, 51
5. Hebrews 10:1-4, 10, 12
6. 1 Corinthians 11:23-29
7. John 7:37-39

