



## **Perspectives on the Parables—Glimpses of the Kingdom of God\***

ROBERT H. ALBERS

Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

### I. THE TEXTS IN RELATIONSHIP TO THE CHURCH YEAR

With the exception of the Easter to Pentecost period, the Series A lectionary for this church year has provided the salvation story from the Matthean perspective for the church's consideration. The Gospel texts for the Sundays after Pentecost have historically focused upon significant episodes from the ministry of Jesus as well as a rich and full offering of didactic material designed to assist the faithful in their growth in grace and faith as well as providing a compass to give direction for discipleship.

The Gospel readings for Pentecost 17 through 21 present us with the teaching of Jesus in parabolic form. At this time of year the rhythm of nature itself provides a powerful parable for the people of God. As we move from the heat and humidity of summer into the cool and crisp air of autumn, the countryside undergoes a metamorphosis as the collage of brilliant colors signals significant change. So also the gospel message is about the business of inwardly and outwardly transforming the hearts and lives of people. As the gospel indicative with its transforming message of God's grace in Jesus Christ is appropriated within the community of faith, the gospel imperative turns the face of the community toward the world to transform the world with its message of forgiveness, hope, and peace. The church year as well as nature becomes a living parable with its own appointed rhythm. As the church year draws rapidly to a close, it becomes an eschatological portent reminding us of the urgency of the message concerning the Kingdom of God. The perspective provided by the parables gives us a glimpse into the nature of that Kingdom and its working within us and within the world. An elementary hermeneutical maxim states that any text without a context is a pretext. It seems prudent before giving consideration to the individual texts assigned that attention be given briefly to the Gospel which forms the context for the texts.

\*This essay is based in part on a discussion in which the following participated along with the author: Arland J. Hultgren (who served as exegete), Dorris A. Flesner, and Terence E. Fretheim of the faculty of Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary and Ronald K. Johnson, pastor of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

### II. THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

Internal evidence (which will be noted later) suggests that the Gospel of Matthew was written sometime after A.D. 70, likely in the 80s either in Antioch of Syria or its immediate environs. Scholars likewise generally concur that the author was an anonymous Christian of

Jewish heritage who may reflect rabbinic connections. He wrote and likely spoke in Greek and directed his message most pointedly and poignantly to the most pressing problems which plagued the primitive church of his region.

It is generally agreed that Matthew used both Mark and “Q” as sources for his literary endeavors as well as traditions either in oral or written form indigenous to his own community and designated as “M” material. It is clear in exegeting the text that Matthew appropriates the material from his multiple sources within his own distinctive theological framework. Important issues emerge for the writer of this Gospel which appear like distinctive strands woven into the tapestry of his entire work.

The person of Jesus is portrayed as Messiah of God who comes not to abrogate the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them. The text of Matthew is replete with references to the words and actions of Jesus as being the ultimate fulfillment of the law and prophets under the rubric of the *promissio Dei*. For Matthew the message of the gospel is complete only when its ethical imperatives are taken as seriously as its indicative pronouncements. (Note particularly Matthew 7:21 and Matthew 25:31-46.) Discipleship is not only a claim to be made, but a task which is to be fulfilled.

The Gospel exhibits a strong ecclesiology as it is the church which exercises the office of the keys, exercises judgment with regard to relationships between people, and ultimately exercises the power and authority of the crucified and risen Christ who commissions the church to evangelize the world. The message of Matthew also reflects the existential concerns of the church. The delay of the parousia required an eschatological adjustment within the community with reference to its practices. The tension between Jewish and Gentile Christians threatened to polarize the community. The political and economic circumstances which prevailed in first century Palestine and its environs placed additional pressure on the community. The writer is concerned that the message not be jeopardized by legalism or libertinism. One gets the picture of the evangelist as one who wished to preserve the centrality of the Christ event while at the same time endeavoring to interpret that event in the most meaningful way for the community of faith.

One other important consideration must be addressed before considering the individual Gospel texts for these Sundays. Since each of the Gospel texts is a parable, it seems judicious that attention be given to that genre of literature.

### III. THE PARABLE AS LITERARY GENRE

The importance of the parable can hardly be underestimated as roughly one-third of the material attributed to Jesus by the Synoptic evangelists comes to us in the form of parables. Most scholars see the parables as the most primitive and perhaps even pristine of all the preaching and teaching of Jesus. There is a ring

of authenticity in the simplicity of these stories. For the most part they are both concrete and concise and form an important part of the tradition. Their simplicity does not detract from their profundity, nor does the concreteness of expression obviate the complexity of issues which are addressed.

Various definitions of the nature of the parable have been offered by New Testament scholars. C. H. Dodd defined the parable as “a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common

life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into action.”<sup>1</sup> Amos Wilder sees the parable as “an image with a certain shock to the imagination which directly conveys a vision of what is significant.”<sup>2</sup> Robert Stein states that “a parable is a figure of speech in which there is a brief or extended comparison.”<sup>3</sup> Definitions vary according to the perspectives of the persons who formulate them.

The purpose of the parables seems to vary within the synoptic tradition. Often they are picturesque portrayals of the truths of the Kingdom carefully crafted to clarify the message concerning the Kingdom of God. Luke indicates that on occasion parables were used in order to conceal rather than reveal the secrets of the Kingdom of God (8:10). Frequently the parables are a response to situations of controversy and conflict and result in an indictment of the religious antagonists of Jesus. The *Sitz im Leben* obviously shapes the thrust of a given parable if and when it can in fact be determined. When a parable was used by Jesus as a weapon against his antagonists, as was often the case, the story packed a powerful punch which struck a vulnerable spot. One quickly comes to realize that the parables are more than nice innocuous stories spawned by a creative Nazarene. J. Jeremias has astutely asserted that no one would ever be crucified for telling nice stories.

Apart from the issues raised concerning the definition and purpose of the parables, one enters a veritable maze when assuming the hermeneutical task. A variety of interpretations are available each claiming validity. Often the interpretations reflect varying legitimate levels of encounter with the text and its development.

At one level are the scholars who are concerned with the task of determining what Jesus may have actually said when uttering the parable in its original form. Jeremias, Dodd, Crossan and others are representative of this group of interpreters. An attempt is made to recapture the *ipsissima verba Jesu* or to hear the *viva vox Jesu* in the parables. For example, Jeremias—in an effort to get back to the original parable as Jesus might have spoken it—painstakingly sifts out what he considers to be later accretions or editorial emendations to the text. At the same time he also makes a valiant effort to translate the Greek text back into Aramaic, the language which Jesus spoke, in order to ascertain what the actual words were which Jesus spoke. The assumption operative is that if one can only isolate the words which Jesus likely spoke, then one can discover the real intention of the parable as used by Jesus.

<sup>1</sup>C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1961) 5.

<sup>2</sup>Amos Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric: The Language of the Gospel* (rev. ed.; Cambridge: Harvard University, 1971) 80.

<sup>3</sup>Robert H. Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981) 22.

A second level of interpretation concerns itself with the particular theology of the evangelist and the disposition of the community which he addressed. Careful consideration of the text, particularly those texts of double or triple tradition in the Synoptics, depict judicious alteration of the tradition to fit the theological or ethical thrust of the respective evangelist. This redaction critical approach views the parables primarily as the reworking of the tradition by the evangelist. This level of interpretation gives one a picture of both the life and the concerns of the evangelist and the community for whom he wrote.

More recently the parables have been interpreted from the perspective of “structural

analysis” which concerns itself with “the ‘deep structures’ of meaning which lie below the surface of the narrative.”<sup>4</sup> Believing that this deep structure is expressed in common codes of kinship patterns that operate in the author’s mind at an unconscious level, the structural analyst seeks to identify the meaningful units of a text and arrive at the deeper structure and hence meaning of the story.

Perhaps even more popular among recent scholars has been the attempt to interpret the parables from an aesthetic critical perspective. The parables of Jesus are artistic similes and metaphors which become language event (*Sprachereignis*) as termed by Gerhard Ebeling which engages the hearer both at a cognitive as well as an affective level. The parable proposes a decision on the part of the hearer/reader as he or she is confronted with the Word of God in the parable as judgment or grace. A further presupposition of the aesthetic approach is to suggest that the parables are autonomous or autotelic in that the meaning which they convey may be independent of the original intention. The genius of the parabolic form is that it engages the individual existentially at an intuitive level bringing the hearer/reader into an experience of the Kingdom of God itself. The parables are not limited to a single interpretation, but rather are polyvalent in nature and serve to interpret the hearer/reader rather than the hearer or reader interpreting the parable. The legitimate concern of scholars who have adopted this approach is that the parables not be viewed as anachronistic or as artifacts of first century life, but that the power of the parable is unleashed for all persons of all ages as they are engaged by the Word of God couched in metaphorical language.

Perhaps one cannot plumb the depths of the “mysterious parable.” The history of interpretation certainly is a strong witness to the fact that the parables are not easily placed within restrictive parameters and that legitimate concerns emerge at all levels of interpretation. No hermeneutical school has prevailed as being absolute or the final word on the parables. Perhaps the inability to absolutize the meaning of the parables is God’s greatest gift, for it insures the fact that the Word will remain alive in the community of faith.

Given this reality concerning the parables, it is presumptuous to suggest that an adequate interpretation can be given for the Gospel texts for Pentecost 17 through 21. This reality does not absolve us as interpreters and proclaimers of the word from enthusiastically engaging the text and mining some of its truths. As we examine these multi-faceted gems from varying perspectives, we can gain

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 65.

at least a glimpse concerning the message of the Kingdom of God in the light of the gospel which they seek to convey.

#### IV. GOSPEL TEXTS FOR PENTECOST 17-PENTECOST 21

##### *A. Matthew 18:21-35, Pentecost 17*

Jeremias classifies this parable under the general theme of realized discipleship and entitles it as the parable of “The Unmerciful Servant.” The general notion regarding forgiveness forms the context prior to the parable, but upon closer investigation it becomes clear that the specific understanding and application of forgiveness is different. Matthew 18:21-22 records the

dialogue between Jesus and Peter regarding the repeated nature of forgiveness.<sup>5</sup> Forgiveness is the rather thin editorial thread which links these two verses with the parable which deals not with repeated, but unlimited forgiveness.

The parable is peculiar to Matthew and is introduced by the characteristic datival opening, “It is the case with the Kingdom of God...” in this instance as is the case with a king who wished to settle accounts. The reckoning soon reaches a person who owes an almost incalculable amount. Computed on the wage scale of the day the amount is estimated to be the sum which an average wage earner could secure with about 200,000 years of work. The hyperbole is obvious and is intentionally enlisted to bring it into stark contrast with the second creditor-debtor encounter in the text.

The contrast in the parable is not only in relationship to the sum which is owed by each, but also with regard to the action taken by the king as compared with the subsequent action then taken by the forgiven servant in verse 30.

Since the astronomical sum could not be repaid to the king, 18:25 indicates that in lieu of payment, the servant and his family were to be sold in an attempt at partial restitution for the unpaid sum. (Precedent for such action can be noted in Exod 22:3; Lev 25:39; 2 Kings 4:1; Amos 2:6; 8:6; Neh 5:4.) The pitiful plea of the servant, coupled with his grandiose promise to repay everything, results in the subsequent remission of the debt by the king. The servant in turn seizes a fellow servant who owes him a paltry 100 denarii or approximately four months of wages. Even though he was within his legal rights to demand payment (Prov 6:1-5; 22:7, 27) his action is outrageous. Once again in stark contrast to his creditor, he not only wishes to exact instantaneous payment, but mercilessly executes an even more cruel punishment by having him put in prison precluding any possibility of payment. His failure to emulate the merciful action of the king extended to him results in incurring the king’s wrath, and he suffers the consequences of his unmerciful and unforgiving action. The poignant punch line of the parable is enunciated in 18:35 which makes it clear that the parable was intended to teach the community the importance of appropriating forgiveness for one another even as forgiveness in full measure has been granted to them.

Even though the designation of king in the Old Testament and in rabbinic literature is a symbol for God, and servants or slaves represent God’s people,

<sup>5</sup>Note Genesis 4:24 as an Old Testament reference for the numerical fascination with the multiples of seven.

one needs to avoid the temptation simply to allegorize the parable, even though such tendencies are intimated in the text. Matthew’s utilization of this parable in essence is a commentary on 6:12, “forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.”<sup>6</sup> The parable is particularly appropriate for a community which is not only divided over issues, but which is also relationally fragmented by hostility, isolation, and alienation. The gospel indicative which is represented by the figure of the magnanimous king whose quality of compassion is exemplified in his quantity of forgiveness is inextricably bound up with the gospel imperative which enjoins us as God’s people to go and do likewise. Failure to act in this fashion is indicative of the fact that an understanding of one’s own debt is obviously not fully comprehended, nor is the reality of forgiving grace with its limitless scope appreciated. An attitudinal change is enjoined which is

nothing less than a complete transformation on the part of the person who is forgiven so that a connection is made between the enormity of divine forgiveness and the necessity of freely forgiving one another in compassionate mercy.

Lest one moralize with the parable, its impact is to shake the hearer into some semblance of sanity regarding the necessity of practicing forgiveness within the context of the faith community. Forgiveness is not to be grudgingly given, but is to come from the heart (18:35). Forgiveness knows no bounds in terms of repetition (18:22) and knows no limit in terms of scope (18:27). In this parable one catches a glimpse of the Kingdom of God wherein the radicality of God's forgiving love stands ready to forgive any debt/sin irrespective of its magnitude and certainly prompts like action in the faith community where debts between persons are petty and paltry by comparison.

The Old Testament text assigned for the day (Gen 50:15-21) exemplifies in paradigmatic fashion the truth of the parable. The jealousy, resentment, and hatred of Joseph's brothers which eventuated in his being sold and exiled in Egypt might have easily resulted in a hardened disposition of unforgiveness in Joseph. But such is not the case. Significant in this scenario is the profound realization on the part of Joseph that forgiveness ultimately comes from none other than God (Gen 50:19). One is also reminded in this context of the words in 1 John 4:7-21, which is also a meaningful commentary on the love and forgiveness of God as it impacts the disposition and demeanor of God's people in relationship to one another. Forgiveness is the cornerstone of the Christian life in relationship to God and in our life together. This parable points poignantly to its power and purpose in the community of faith.

#### *B. Matthew 20:1-16, Pentecost 18*

Whereas the parable for Pentecost 17 emphasizes the graciousness of God's forgiving love via the negative example of the Unforgiving Servant, the parable of the Good Employer, which Jeremias categorizes as a parable emphasizing God's Mercy for Sinners, is cast in a positive light. The conversation between Jesus and his disciples (19:27 specifically notes Peter) constitutes the context which occasions the parable in Matthew's schema. The dialogue concerning discipleship begins already in 19:16 with the question concerning eternal life and then is continued with the focus of attention resting with the issues of what one

<sup>6</sup>Note also the references in Matthew 5:7; 6:14-15; 11:25 and James 2:13 in this connection.

must "do" and what one stands to "gain" as a result of giving up all to be a follower of Christ. Jesus seems to concur that the sacrifice of all gains its just reward (19:29), but there is another dimension which is outside the realm of human logic, and that is the radicality of God's grace. The nature of grace not only deems human endeavors as insufficient, but ultimately as unnecessary if viewed in the light of God's sovereign love which is finally decisive as noted by the point of the parable in 20:15.

The sequence of events in the parable is significant if one is to grasp how this story is a parable of the Kingdom. The householder hires laborers for his vineyard about 6:00 a.m. for a denarius, which would be considered as a fair day's wages. A preview of the householder's generosity is already hinted at in 20:3, 5, and 6 as he engages laborers at varying hours during the day. The implication seems to be that he has a compassionate concern for the unemployed and

their families as opposed to actually needing them for the harvest.

The radicality of the story parable (as influenced by 19:30 and 20:16) is noted in 20:8-9 as those who were employed not only receive payment in reverse order, but receive equal payment for their efforts. It appears that this arrangement heightens the incredulity of the situation as articulated by the laborers who have worked the entire day (20:12-13). The workers who were hired first appeal to common sense, fair play, logic, and reason. Their complaint is not necessarily that the last hired received a denarius, but that if the householder was that generous with the last, then certainly he might provide them with a “bonus” for having endured the heat of the day. Some interpreters have attempted to minimize this breach of fairness by logic and reason, indicating that perhaps the quality of work which was done during the last hour was equivalent to the work done the entire day by others. There is a rabbinic parable to that effect, but there is little reason to suggest that such a parallel parable has influenced the present text. Others use the rationale that a contract is indeed a contract, and therefore the laborers hired at the beginning of the day have no cause to quibble or quarrel. The fact of the matter is that they did have a legitimate complaint from the rational and logical perspective of human beings. However, this parable is not a paradigm of fair labor management, but rather is a statement about the radical nature of God and the Kingdom.

The perspective of the parable gives one a glimpse into the nature of the Kingdom. It accentuates the fact that participation in the Kingdom does not come about by works or by supererogation, but rather comes to expression in the unmerited and unmitigated grace of God. It is this element of complete surprise which astounds the reader/hearer when confronted by what Norman A. Huffman has termed the “atypical feature” of the parables.<sup>7</sup>

The response of the workers is not unlike that of the elder brother in Luke 15:25-32. It is not a matter of either the elder brother or the day long workers being cheated or rejected. Their sense of fair play and equity has been violated according to human standards, but the radicality of God’s ways goes beyond all expectation and human convention as we are constantly surprised by grace at every juncture. Grace is not conditioned by time, space, logic, equity, or any

---

<sup>7</sup>Norman A. Huffman, “Atypical Features in the Parables of Jesus,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 97 (1978) 207-220.

other contingency; rather it is a free flowing fountain which gushes forth without restriction or reserve.

The Old Testament lesson from Deutero-Isaiah in its description of Yahweh forms a powerful foundation for the Gospel text. The unfettered mercy and grace of God is extolled in this passage, and the radical nature of God’s way stands in sharp relief with that of human beings:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isa 55:8-9)

The theme of grace which is so strongly sounded in this parable is like the pealing of a bell on a clear day. It is a clarion call to the faithful to place their trust in the wisdom and

lovingkindness of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. No one enters this Kingdom by meritoriously laying claim to the grace of God as a right, but is rather to acknowledge that it is God who lays claim upon people who in turn are privileged to labor in the vineyard. Human logic is limited, human compassion circumscribed, but the mercy and grace of God knows no limits or boundaries.

Even though “grace” constitutes the central focus of Christian life and theology, communicating its reality so that it is not only cognitively acknowledged but experientially appropriated in the hearts of people is the most difficult task in the work of ministry. Deeply ingrained patterns of human behavior and experience simply resist the seemingly preposterous nature of grace as an expression of the sovereign love of God. The “Good News” which proclaims freedom from the requirement of the law is indeed too good to be true. Luther rightly reminds us that one cannot believe this on the basis of one’s own reason or understanding, for it defies every human convention. It is only by the power of the Holy Spirit’s working that one can in faith embrace the message of grace.

### *C. Matthew 21:28-32, Pentecost 19*

The Parable of the Two Sons, like the previous two parables considered is peculiar to the Matthean tradition. Given its Matthean setting—the confrontation between the chief priests and elders with Jesus over his authority (21:23-27)—the poignant and powerful point of the parable is made in 21:31 with brutal force. This perspective again affords a glimpse into the nature of the Kingdom of God and underscores its radicality when juxtaposed with the expectations of religious convention.

With relative simplicity, the parable presents the scenario of a father who asks each of his sons to labor in the vineyard. The first responds negatively initially, but then repents or has a complete change of heart and goes to work. The second with lip service acknowledges the request and accedes, but does not follow through on his promise. The indisputable answer to the question posed by Jesus concerning which of the two did the will of his father is obvious. Actions speak louder than words, and empty words are synonymous with broken promises. The climax of the parable is reached in 21:31b with the shocking statement that tax collectors and harlots enter the Kingdom of God *before* you. This prioritization of the sinful outcast over those in the religious in-group adds great irony to the story. Given the prevailing attitudes of the day with its

religious and social consciousness, it might have been less offensive to be excluded entirely rather than be in second position behind those who were despised.

The intent of the parable seems clear. C. H. Dodd notes that the parable is “clearly a comment on the rejection of the word of God by the religious leaders, and its acceptance by the outcasts, as the evangelist represents it.”<sup>8</sup> The *hymas* in the Greek text of 21:31 refers to the religious leaders who were the antagonists of John and Jesus, while both John and Jesus are represented as being protagonists for the repentant tax collectors and harlots. From the statement in 21:45, the intent of the parable found its mark, for the religious leaders perceived that Jesus was in fact talking about them.

It seems safe to assume that 21:32 is an editorial addition. The behavior of the religious

leaders does not parallel the behavior of either son. The leaders are not portrayed as refusing the request and repenting, nor did they initially accept the invitation and fail to follow through. Jeremias contends that the verse has been attached by association since the subject matter held in common by both verses is that of the tax collectors and harlots. The formula “Amen, I say to you...”—which normally signals the end of a parable or saying—appears in 21:31 followed by the principle point of the parable. The redactor’s hand seems evident as Jeremias notes that,

Again we are confronted by the fact that a parable whose original purpose was to vindicate the good news (God’s invitation, rejected by you, has been accepted by the despised ones, hence the promise for them!), has in Matthew, through its relation to the Baptist, received a soteriological application which is utterly foreign to it, and is akin to the soteriological interpretation of the parable of the Wicked Husbandmen and of the Great Supper in Matthew.<sup>9</sup>

The interpreter and preacher is faced with a choice of emphasis. It is clear that for Matthew the soteriological emphasis and linkage of the message of Jesus with that of John the Baptist—which results in the religious folks rejecting it and the non-religious folks accepting it—seems to be central.

Significant in this parable from another perspective is the fact that when it comes to the life of discipleship, people often honor the Lord with their lips while their hearts and manner of living are far from that expected by the Master (cf. 15:8).

Once again with the element and shock of surprise, the parable gives one a glimpse into the nature of the Kingdom of God with all of its radicality. Those who would otherwise be judged as outside the pale of salvation because of their rejection of the outward form of religion may in fact be those who are most sensitive to their need for radical grace and thus repent and serve the Master most meaningfully. This same strange and surprising way of God is lifted up in the second portion of the Old Testament reading for the day in which the ways of God and the ways of God’s people stand in stark contrast (Ezek 18:25-32).

The temptation for the reader/listener is to identify with the first son in the parable. However, for many whose vision of discipleship is limited to outward

<sup>8</sup>C. H. Dodd, *The Parables*, 93.

<sup>9</sup>Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1963) 80.

conformity to custom and religious ritual, the point of identification may more logically and painfully be that of the second son. Lip service which is an outward mouthing of polite promises and pious platitudes is empty by comparison with the inward acceptance of the message which prompts people to repentance and action. Curiously enough such action often occurs without them even being aware of it, as Matthew suggests in 7:21 and 25:31-46. The interpreter of the parable is once again confronted with a kind of literary O. Henry’s twist as the tables are turned by the radical claim of the Kingdom’s message. It might be noted that the tenor of this parable is on the same track which is continued in the next parable wherein the second son might be equated with the disposition of the tenants.

*D. Matthew 21:33-43, Pentecost 20 (Reformation Sunday)*

On the festival of the Reformation the Parable of the Wicked Tenants becomes an alternate lectionary reading from the Gospels. Many preachers will likely select the traditional text from John 8 which speaks of freedom in Christ on the festival of Reformation. However, this parable which follows sequentially in the Matthean tradition after last Sunday's text holds also a Word of God which is appropriate for the festival being celebrated. Selecting this text would facilitate the sequencing of Series A pericopes if continuity is a priority for the preacher.

C. H. Dodd maintains that this parable may have indeed been anchored in history even though at first reading the scenario seems preposterous. Since the revolt of Judas the Gaulonite in A.D. 6, political unrest and economic uncertainty prevailed. It was not unusual that large tracts of land were held by foreigners with the result that much discontent was experienced. Dodd writes,

We can then see that all the conditions were present under which refusal of rent might be the prelude to murder and the forcible seizure of land by the peasantry. The parable, in fact, so far from being an artificially constructed allegory, may be taken as evidence of the kind of thing that went on in Galilee during the half century preceding the general revolt of A.D. 66.<sup>10</sup>

Even given the possibility and perhaps probability that such a story may have historical anchoring, particularly as presented by Mark and Luke, one cannot help but sense that the alterations in Matthew's text are the work of the evangelist who is intent on using the parable as at least a veiled allegory to relate the story of salvation. Assuming Markan priority, Matthew alters the number of sendings from five (in Mark) to three. Mark 12:8 records the killing of the son and then his being cast out, while Matthew 21:39 has the son first being cast out and then killed.

The parable begins with the image of a vineyard planted by a householder. The appointed reading from the Old Testament for the day from Isaiah 5:1-7 provides this metaphor whereby it is made clearly evident that God is the owner of the vineyard and the people of Israel are the tenants:

For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, a cry! (Isa 5:7)

<sup>10</sup>C. H. Dodd, *The Parables*, 97.

The staging of the prophetic oracle provides the foundation for the parabolic scenario.

As noted earlier, the number of sendings has been altered. Given the fact that most scholars see strong evidence and marks of the parable being allegorized by Matthew, the shift in the number seems to indicate an attempt on the evangelist's part to link the first sending of servants with the former prophets, the second sending with the latter prophets, and the sending of the son with the coming of Christ. It is interesting to note that the Markan and Lukan versions refer to the son as "beloved" which indicates a Christological connection. It is curious that Matthew did not use this designation as a way of further making the identification of the son in

the parable with the figure of Christ.

The arrival of the son to collect the fruits of the vineyard does not receive the expected reception as envisioned by the owner, for the tenants cast him out of the vineyard and kill him. If the parable is anchored in history, as Dodd suggests, the land would revert to the original owners from whom it had been wrested by foreign invaders. That is not the critical issue, nor is it of particular concern to Matthew. He has altered the Markan rendition so that the son's first being cast out and then killed parallels the execution of Jesus outside the city walls, a motif which is picked up also in John 19:17 and Hebrews 13:11-13.

The obvious question posed in 21:40, "what will he do to those tenants?," finds its logical answer in 21:41, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons." While Mark and Luke represent the allegorization process in a more limited manner, Matthew has pushed the process to its fullness. J. Jeremias writes,

Matthew has gone much further along the same road (namely that of allegorizing the parable as did Mark and Luke to a lesser extent) in his version of the parable which has become an exact outline of the story of redemption, from the covenant at Sinai (for so he may have understood *exedoto* in 21:33), embracing the destruction of Jerusalem (21:41, cf. 22:7), the founding of the Gentile Church (21:43), and passing on to the Last Judgment (21:44).<sup>11</sup>

The story parable comes to a logical conclusion with 21:41, but the evangelist appends to the story the saying of Jesus in 21:42. The quotation of Psalm 118:22 has no formal connection with the parable proper as the imagery shifts from that of an agrarian metaphor in the parable to that of masonry in 21:42. Jeremias surmises that since this was one of the primitive church's favorite proof-texts for the resurrection and exaltation of Christ,

This Scriptural proof which is a literal rendering of the LXX, was probably inserted when the parable was allegorically applied to Christ, with the intention of finding scriptural grounds for the fate of the Son, and to add the missing mention of the resurrection.<sup>12</sup>

The judgment statement is succinctly written once again in 21:43 which is a reiteration of 21:41b. Even as the vineyard is wrested from the malicious and murderous tenants, so too the Kingdom of God is taken away from you (the

<sup>11</sup>J. Jeremias, *The Parables*, 76-77.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 74.

religious leaders) and given to a nation—tax collectors, harlots, sinners, and Gentiles—who will produce fruits which befit the Kingdom. One can sense the radicality of judgment as the people of the old covenant who reject the Christ are supplanted by the church. As indicated earlier, the point of the parable and its target are unmistakable as noted by 21:45.

The metaphor of the fruit tree as representing the people of God is not a new image in

Matthew (cf. 3:8; 7:17-20, as well as Luke 6:43-45 and James 3:10-12). The statement of 21:43b is exemplary once again of the importance of the gospel imperative being linked with the gospel indicative. It is not that fruitbearing is the prerequisite for participation in the Kingdom, rather participation in the Kingdom produces fruit befitting such a participant.

It is not only the old Israel which was in danger of forfeiting its birthright and heritage; the new Israel which is the church must likewise perpetually check its pulse to ascertain whether or not its fruits indeed bear witness to its transformed life in Christ. The church always runs the risk of fossilizing the message of freedom and grace in rigidity. We need to heed the Reformation imperative of *semper reformanda*. The gospel message of justification by grace through faith dare not become dead dogma, but must be constantly reinterpreted in the light of the current world.

There is a second Reformation principle which is also lifted up by this parable, and that is that faith must always be active in fruits of love; the people of God in fact do incarnationally become like little Christs to their neighbors. The haunting parable of Matthew 25 ought to be sufficient warning to the faithful that the life of faith is more than intellectual assent to a given set of dogmatic propositions. Discipleship is synonymous with servanthood and an active engagement with the world. The Reformation heritage of *sola gratia*, *sola fidei*, and *sola scriptura* stands in juxtaposition to faith active in love.

#### *E. Matthew 22:1-14, Pentecost 21*

The same presentation of choice confronts the proclaimer this Sunday as last Sunday. The decision is whether to celebrate the festival of All Saints with its appointed pericopes or to follow the sequence of texts from Series A designated for Pentecost 21.

This Parable of the Marriage Feast finds its parallel in Luke 14: 16-24, the Parable of the Great Supper. Jeremias places it in the same category as the Parable of the Ten Virgins under the general title, "It May Be Too Late."<sup>13</sup> With regard to this parable there are at least three distinct theories in relationship to its origin. Some interpret the Matthean rendition as an allegorized version of the Lukan parable. Others believe that the two versions are actually independent traditions, i.e., two independent parables which happen to capitalize on the same theme for diverse purposes. Finally, other scholars postulate that the evangelists have used a common source (Q), and each has utilized the story for his own theological purposes.

As attention is given to the Matthean version, one finds that it is fraught with several logical difficulties in its presentation. The initial five verses pose the

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 176.

least logical problems, although it is rather peculiar that the guests who are invited to a royal wedding proffer no excuses for not attending. The second round of invitations offers the weak explanation that the invitation is not taken seriously. Already the credulity of the reader is stretched if one is to think that persons on any level of society would make light of an invitation extended by a monarch.

The outrageous behavior recorded in 22:6 is beyond comprehension. As one reflects in retrospect upon the Parable of the Wicked Tenants in the previous chapter, they at least had something to gain by their behavior, but such is not the case in this story. To ignore or scorn an

invitation is one thing, but to seize and kill those who bear the invitation is preposterous and absurd.

A second problem occurs in 22:7 as the king retaliates by sending a whole army to raze the city and exact retributive justice on its inhabitants. This is likewise peculiar behavior given the fact that those invited presumably live in the same city as the king.

It is postulated that 22:6 and 22:7 were added by an interpolator and that 22:7 in particular represents a *vaticinium ex eventu* possibly denoting the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in A.D. 70. The elimination of these two verses from the text allows the story to flow more smoothly, but the evangelist has a purpose in mind with these interpolations.

The story logically picks up again in 22:8 in which the king deems those who spurned the invitation as not worthy guests and commissions his servants to go throughout the city and gather others to fill the wedding hall, irrespective of their status or moral character. The specific reference to the “bad and the good” is a motif noted earlier in Matthew’s Gospel (13:24-30, 36-43, and 47-50).

Matthew concludes the story of the Marriage Feast by conflating it with yet another parable, namely, that of the improperly attired wedding guest (22:11-14). Once again the reader is beset by logical difficulties. If it is intended that this parable be appended as a sequel to the prior parable, it is peculiar that the king should be surprised to find one who has just been picked up off the street not to be properly attired for a wedding. By the same token, one might be equally surprised to find that there is only one in this predicament, given the fact that all of the guests were literally picked up off the streets.

One comes to the conclusion that there are in fact two independent parables which are welded together. The first parable is that of the Marriage Feast (22:1-5, 8-10 with 22:6-7 editorially added). One can extrapolate from the story by inference its thrust even though no explicit conclusion is stated. The evangelist has judiciously juxtaposed these two parables for a purpose. The parable of the Improperly Attired Guest (22:11-14) appears to be appended to complete the scenario of the divine judgment motif which is introduced by the first parable. The second parable provides a conclusion to a narrative without providing a story line. One might say that the first parable is a narrative in search of a conclusion, and that the second parable is a conclusion in search of a narrative. Matthew combines the two apparently in order to emphasize the reality of judgment as well as to issue to the community a warning.

To the two parables is appended an independent logion (22:14) which at first appearance seems to relate better to the parable of the Marriage Feast. Logical inconsistencies are also evident here. Many were called, but of their own

volition they refused and paid the price. On the other hand, those who ultimately participated were indiscriminately and randomly brought off the street and not carefully chosen. One gets the picture that numerically there were not just a few, but many, off the streets so that the banquet hall was filled to capacity.

It is important that the interpreter not become too bogged down with the logical inconsistencies and miss the forest for the trees. Matthew appears to be interested in painting a larger picture by the manner in which he blends the traditions with which he is working rather than paying strict attention to detail. This pericope taken as a whole seems to present the

coalescing of Matthean ecclesiology (22:1-10) and eschatology (22:11-14). An allegorized story of salvation (as in 21:33-43) is painted with broad sweeping strokes on a large canvas. One must step back from detail and gain a larger and wider perspective on the total picture presented. In so doing the evangelist addresses some primary concerns of the community for whom he is writing.

The initial concern is to accentuate the fact that the called and chosen who represent the religious establishment have summarily disregarded the gracious invitation into the Kingdom and have suffered accordingly. As a result of the rejection by those deemed worthy, the socially and morally unworthy by sheer grace become the worthy recipients of the Kingdom.

A second concern is also lifted up by the sequencing of the two parables in this section. In the parable of the Improperly Attired Guest, the point seems to be that in this radically new community, libertinism is not tolerated either. Using the biblical imagery of attire (cf. Isa 61:10; Mark 2:21; Luke 15:22; Rom 13:12-14; Col 3:10-12), the participants and inhabitants of the kingdom are to be properly clothed with the works of both repentance and righteousness and thus bear fruit befitting those who have been incorporated by God's mercy (cf. 3:8; 7:17).

Matthew appears to be concerned that the community of faith be both orderly and responsible. Though the contemporary context of the church does not precisely parallel the problems of the primitive community, nonetheless many of the concerns at least in principle are issues which emerge in our day as well.

Taken as a whole, this particular pericope lifts up issues which involve both inclusiveness as well as particularity, judgment as well as grace, legalism and libertinism in relationship to the gospel message. The Christian community is constantly engaged in a struggle for self-understanding as it seeks to be an authentic witness to the world in which it exists.

## V. CONCLUDING COMMENTS TO THE STUDY

Preaching from the parables can be a creative and exciting venture as these stories provide us with glimpses and not only guesses concerning the nature of the Kingdom of God. One can speak only in terms of perspectives on the parables, since they are so multi-faceted. The inability to absolutize their purpose and meaning is what keeps the tradition alive in the faith community as new possibilities of interpretation open up with each new encounter and experience in life. Three things in particular might be cited from the conversation and study involved in examining the parable texts for Pentecost 17 to Pentecost 21.

First, the use of parables as stories by Jesus provides an important homiletical model as similes and metaphors are used in the interest of communicating the gospel. The parables functioned as a viable and vital tool in the preaching of Jesus whose genius for expressing profound truths in simple stories and images continues to fascinate the reader and hearer. Preaching on the parables should also enlist the creative and imaginative artistry of the contemporary preacher. One gets the sense even from just reading the parables as written by the evangelists that the stories were terse, but very alive. Often the original hearer was left to draw her or his own conclusions. At other times the evangelist provides an explanation of the story. Today preaching is often envisioned as providing explanations and answers. Could we be comfortable from time to time with preaching which allows the hearer to draw his or her own conclusions—or perhaps concluding with an open ended question which invites dialogue and

discussion within the faith community? The parables as a model for preaching open up for us the richness of language as expressed in similes, metaphors, and images. The creative preacher might look for corresponding contemporary images and metaphors which express the truth contained in the parables of the Scriptures. With regard to preaching style, far from ponderous treatises, the parables of Jesus represent a more playful approach and mode for preaching.

Second, the five parables sequenced in this section provide a wide variety of issues, topics, and concerns for the faith community. Whether the parable is kerygmatic or didactic in nature, hortatory or illustrative in purpose, critical issues for faith and life are lifted up. The message which one seeks to communicate may be explicitly articulated or implicitly suggested, but either approach is designed to elicit a response from the hearer. The parables thus provide us with solid content without stolid expression.

Finally, the parables provide the preacher with many perspectives both in interpretation and application of the text. Like the precious gem which reveals ever new beauty as the perspective and light are changed, so also the parables provide an endless mine of insights and truths for the preacher whose mind is open to the prompting of the Spirit. The parables represent a veritable storehouse of treasures for the community of the faithful. In the light of the gospel they come alive with radiant brilliance and power revealing glimpses of the Kingdom of God. As Word of God, they can transform the lives of those who truly appropriate the Word in all of its revolutionary and radical newness and power in each age.