

Over the next five Sundays we shall be looking at different parables taught by Jesus. For many people, the parables are probably the one aspect of Jesus' teaching that they most easily recall. Think, the good Samaritan, the lost sheep, the mustard seed and perhaps first and foremost, the parable of the prodigal son which we looked at in detail over four Sundays last year.

A parable literally means '*something laid alongside*'. It provides an illustration which offers a different insight or way of understanding what is being taught; usually using an example of likeness or in some instances, by way of contrast, to the main point of the teaching. Often, parables are thought provoking, teasing, multi-layered and sometimes they have a sting in the tail which makes the listener uncomfortable, particularly about their relationship with God.

All told, there are around 55 parables in the gospel accounts of Jesus' teaching and if we are to understand what Jesus was saying two thousand years on, we need to bear in mind three important things:

Firstly, Jesus' parables use every-day examples from the 1<sup>st</sup> century culture which would have resonated with his audience in a way that very few of us today have any experience of: how many here today hand dug the foundations of the house you live in? Or have herded sheep as a career, or worked for your entire life in a vineyard as a casual labourer?

The start of today's parable is a good example of what I'm talking about. Shame and honour were deeply embedded in the culture of the day. It was absolutely required for you to be hospitable to stranger and guest alike. If a traveller arrived needing food and shelter, you were honour bound to provide both. Full stop. Time of day or night was irrelevant. Failure to do otherwise would bring shame not only on the individual, but on the whole household or even the whole village.

That is why the man in our story has no hesitation in the middle of the night, to go and wake up his friend. Bread was always baked on a daily basis and the man had obviously none left from the previous day, yet the code and rules of hospitality dictated his actions. The threat of being shamed outweighed everything else and, as some translations put it, he shamelessly goes to his friend.

Today, there is less consideration of honour and shame, we would probably see this story more in terms of looking a fool or causing embarrassment. That was certainly the case for me and Jane in 2018 when we returned from our usual December sojourn to Madeira late one Saturday night. Our flight had been delayed, and we got home shortly before midnight. I put the key in our front door lock, and the door wouldn't budge. Repeated efforts merely caused the burglar alarm to go off. It was freezing. We were tired.

I tried calling one friend, who, having been woken up, basically said tough luck, he was over the limit and couldn't come to help. I didn't even get around to mentioning a bed for the night. After that one call I decided there was no way we would knock on any neighbours' door, or phone another friend asking to put us up for the night. That would be far too embarrassing, never mind having to admit to having insufficient nous to break into my own home.

Long story short, we drove to Bracknell and got the very last room available at the Premier Inn before going back home in the morning to sort out the problem. My ego might have been assuaged even if my wallet was badly bruised.

Secondly, things which seemed mysterious or extraordinary two thousand years ago are generally well understood nowadays. Think about the parable of the yeast, which Jesus told. We know yeast as a microscopic fungus capable of converting sugar into alcohol or carbon dioxide into making a more open textured bread. We can even manipulate its action in order to produce specific strengths of alcohol or different textures in bread. There's no mystery about what or how the yeast works. A very different mindset from the 1<sup>st</sup> century listener.

Thirdly, the parables invariably have a specific context. Remember, I said that a parable is something laid alongside the teaching and today's story immediately follows on from the disciples asking Jesus to teach them how to pray and, consequently, is adding to and expanding what Jesus was saying about prayer.

But the parable does more than simply illustrate how to pray; it also questions our very understanding of what prayer is.

In this parable Jesus gives the example of a friend who is reluctant to be disturbed but who gives in under persistent requests. That part of the message is a simple one: keep trying, persist until you get a result. That's an essential ingredient of prayer. How often do we give up on prayer? Asking for something for ourselves does not come readily to many of us. It can be easier to ask for a favour for someone else, but the dynamic still holds true so perhaps we need greater courage to ask for and the patience to await God's response.

Jesus is also saying he is not the sort of friend who will only give in under pressure. Yes, he wants us to persevere in our prayer requests, but whilst I might bring different intentions to my prayers as my priorities shift, God's priority is and always will be my needs. It's just that what he knows I need and what I think I need are not necessarily the same thing.

Jesus continues by showing that asking, searching, and knocking are the actions of someone in need. But there is a difference between needing and wanting. Jesus is asking the question of how strong my faith is. Do I believe that God the Father will give me what I want, if I ask? Or will he respond to my prayer by giving me what I need? 'Ask', 'seek', 'knock'. God will always respond, not necessarily as I hoped.

I for one can look back to times when I asked and was given. I celebrated my 11th wedding anniversary last month. I can look back to times when I sought and found. The look on the face of the bereaved telling me I had found the right words to say in their time of grief. I can look back to when I knocked, and it was opened to me. It's now over 3 years since I was ordained.

But I can also bring to mind many occasions when I was not given, when I did not find, and when the door stayed shut. Maybe I need to re-learn how to pray out of a deep and meaningful relationship with God, because isn't it the case that we can only trust someone when and after we have really got to know them.

For Luke, the message which comes out of his gospel is that the Holy Spirit is the supreme gift of God to believers; the source of all 'good things'. Maybe I need to take to heart the parable ending and pray more frequently for a greater outpouring of the Holy Spirit in my heart and in my life?

What about you? Has anything I've said struck a chord? What does the parable say to you? Do you need to re-think how you pray? Is there anything you need to learn or re-learn?

**Rev. Terry Ward-Hall, 1/5/22**