

Literary Forms In The Gospels

This lecture is about three of the literary forms used by Gospel writers. It's important for us to recognise these forms, because they have their own rules, which governed the evangelists as they first used them, and which ought to govern our interpretation of them as we read them; it is a means of aligning ourselves with the writers of the Word of God, bearing in mind the Church's principle that the primary meaning of the Scripture is the meaning that was in the mind of the human author at the time of its composition.

Miracles

These works are demonstrations that the world has reached the moment of irruption of the Kingdom of God.

Let me establish an important term: the word *empirical* means *based on observation or experience* (as opposed to theory or logical argument).

Modern minds, having been formed since the *soi-disant* Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, and the subsequent scientific revolutions, have largely accepted as absolute the empirical test for truth. That is to say, anything which does *not* pass the test of rational or measurable experience can be relegated to the rank of fable. This provokes a particular difficulty for the proclamation of Christianity, which takes the view that the ultimate truth is verified not *within the cosmos*, but in God himself, who is not susceptible to human scrutiny, comprehension, or regulation.

In a society which regards the words *true* and *empirical* as identical, there is much in the Gospel tradition which is difficult to read. Once we've identified the way in which truth is conveyed in first-century literature – and don't assume that's an easy condition to fulfil - we may well find ourselves challenged by the religiosity of the Gospels, and be tempted to seek a way of presenting the less empirically probable of their claims in some more empirically credible form. The presence of stories like the miracles challenges the theory that religious faith is compatible with an exhaustively scientific mindset. It is an axiom of ours that religious faith does not require illogicality or unreason in believers, even if we say with Hamlet, *there are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy*.

There are good *religious* reasons for taking especial care in this delicate situation. There's excellent reason to say that St Paul measured his proclamation to fit his audience, a practice he defines as "making myself all things to all men, to save some of them at any cost". Certainly we should avoid bringing the Gospel into disrepute by associating it with the irrational. *Superstition* may be defined as an excessively credulous attitude to the supernatural. Those whose task is the proclamation of the Gospel need to build up an opposition to this enemy of clear thought. The laying-open of Christian proclamation to the charge of superstition would be disastrous. We must find a way of reading – and proclaiming - these ancient traditions, which accepts the advances of empiricism over superstition, and does not reduce believers to the ranks of the credulous, or of those many people who set irrationality at the heart of their perception of truth. If we fail in this, we will not only accept an air of unreality into the atmosphere of the Church, which would do scant justice to a religion which has the Incarnation at its heart: we would also exclude from our Church all those who struggle at the holy task of finding meaning in the real world, whose rejection of superstition is a matter of mental hygiene. By such an exclusion

we should commit a grave sin against the Lord who became what we are in all things except sin, and against the Holy Spirit, who leads us into the fulness of truth, and against those who would thus be made unable to believe in Christ by their own self-respect.

Firstly, it's worth saying that, notwithstanding our reverence for the human mind and for its God-given power to discern truth, and despite our respect for the excellent advances made by scientific thought and invention, we aren't obliged to consider the historical progress of empirical science as in any way definitive or exclusive in its possession of truth. To consecrate our present world-view as definitive, or relegate all its predecessors to the lumber-room of history, would be as greatly mistaken as adopting (say) a medieval world view, simply on the grounds that it avoided raising modern difficulties. Previous world-views had genuine gifts to offer which we may have forfeited to our cost; and the joys of living in the modern world are by no means an unalloyed witness to the justice of its understanding of reality. This is a fact plainly acknowledged by the mass of people, who accept scientific discourse and its gifts, but who preserve an enormous interest in the undefined and unexplored realms unaddressed and unvisited by science, and who confidently assert their readiness to believe in the supernatural, the paranormal, and the miraculous. Scientists and rationalists have no exclusive grasp of truth, particularly those who exclude from their world-view whatever does not proceed from purely scientific sources..

Secondly, our respect for the traditions surrounding Jesus cannot allow us to exclude their constant assertion that *he worked miracles*. If we give our full assent to the traditions about what he *said*, they are no more venerable than these traditions about what he *did*: the two elements of tradition come with precisely similar weight and authority. His contemporary opponents do not deny his miracles, but attribute them to evil resources, demonic or magical. In a way that is not alleged of any other figure, Jesus is described as teaching and *then working miracles* in an intimately connected context. Those who would listen to the teaching must also cope with the account of the deeds.

It is disarming to recall that the earliest description we have of Jesus' miracles, in Mark's Gospel, seldom tells of them without adding his injunction to *secrecy*. The contribution of this element to the Gospel is to establish that *Jesus does not wish to be known as a wonder-worker*, and this excludes from the array of explanations open to us the allegation that Jesus wished to create a sensational atmosphere about himself. That such an atmosphere *does* arise is against his will and by failure of his strenuous attempts to avoid it. The functioning of the miracles is therefore other than their naming implies: *miracle* means wonder-work, whereas Jesus' works are deeds by which the power of God is made manifest, and they are properly called in the Synoptic Gospels *dunamis*, or *works of power*, and in John *semeia*, or *signs*. Healings and exorcisms are direct acts of power against Satanic dominion over individual people; the nature miracles like the calming of the storm at sea symbolise the same power over the world itself. They are deeds which disclose a truth: what truth?

Jesus himself teaches about these works that they are demonstrations that the world has reached a precise point of history: the moment of irruption of the Kingdom of God. This interpretation aligns the question about the deeds of power with the question of Jesus himself for the believer: do you believe that in him the power of God has entered the Creation in a definitive way? When Jesus expounded his first sermon-text in Nazareth, he reduced his preaching to a single line:

These words are being fulfilled now, even as you listen to them

That is what the deeds of power and the signs are saying. It's one thing to read out the words of Isaiah: *The Lord has anointed me to bring sight to the blind*; quite another to touch the eyes of a blind man and say *Receive your sight, your faith has saved you* (Lk 18:42). This oneness of word and deed is unique to Jesus, because it is based on the (unique) fact that he is divine and human; his word is like that of the Creator, executive of his meaning. He is the Word of God.

The telling of miracle-stories in the Gospel depends on the world-view at the time when they are written down. It was accepted by those who read them that the "reality" we see around us is a temporary and transient one, limited for a time by the power of its Creator. The irruption of the full power of the Creator's will is possible at all times, and would represent none of the "violence" to natural law which is perceived by modern minds. For first-century Jews the only natural law is the law of God, and the Creation itself is the consummate miracle.

The meaning of the works of power must be precisely apprehended. The most vital fact they embody is not the healing of the individuals concerned - which, in the great scheme of things, is of very limited significance. True, the eyes of a blind man of Jericho were opened, which was of huge significance for him: but only for a little time longer; along with Jairus' daughter, they have now been dust and ashes for nearly two millennia. What endures is the claim Jesus is making for himself, and the revelation of his self-understanding, as a person with a unique relationship to the plan of God for the Universe. That claim of Jesus' unique place in human history is the one we must sustain as we read these stories.

Parables

A parable is a putative story about a situation removed from the live encounter in which it is told.

There is little room for doubt that one of the dominant forms of Jesus' teaching technique was the parable. We need to examine its history, and come to some interpretative principles, so that we can read these important texts accurately.

There is shifting sand about the parables and their meaning. They occur in Mk, and in greater quantity in Mt and Lk; their sources are therefore diverse, with a diversity not exhausted by the shared document "Q" which contributes to Mt and Lk. For example, the most famous of all parables, the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son, belong to Luke alone. Jn has no parables¹. For the rest, Jesus in Jn speaks in terms of extended metaphors; these metaphors are, in a sense, directly opposed to the parable principle. A parable is a putative story about a situation removed from the live encounter in which it is told: it speaks in the market-place about a king giving a banquet, or during a theological argument it depicts an open field or a woman in a

¹ Unless we count the following tiny trace of a parable in Jn 5:

By himself the Son can do nothing; he can do only what he sees the Father doing; and whatever the Father does, the Son does too. For the Father loves the Son and shows him everything he himself does; and he will show him even greater things than these, works that will astonish you.

This could almost be the relic of a Synoptic parable about a father treating his son as an apprentice; if Jesus did teach this about his own relationship to the Father, it would be enormously significant.

kitchen. It demands the liberation of the imaginations of its hearers from their present circumstances, to consider a story which may seem at first sight to be far from present reality.² The moment of disclosure happens when the application of the story dawns on the hearers, and they see their present circumstances in a new light.

The metaphors in Jn do not operate in this fashion. Instead, they insist on an immediately-present revelation, evinced in their opening words, *I AM*, which render the truth embodied in the metaphor absolutely present, identified with the real Jesus who is standing before them. Where the parables leave their own application very much to the hearer ("*then they realised that the parable was aimed at them*", Mt 21:45), Jn's metaphors immediately place the hearer in confrontation with Jesus, as he claims to be the embodiment of his own teaching: in a real sense, Jesus proclaims *himself (I)* where other teachers speak of God (*He*). The fact that, in speaking of himself, Jesus finds his paragraphs beginning with *Ego eimi*, the name of God as revealed to Moses, is no coincidence whatsoever. So although both forms of teaching embody a challenge, the Johannine form is more blatant, and in a sense more dangerous.

It has been fashionable for a long time to question the authenticity of the parables as we now possess them, because of a rather rigid understanding of their nature and literary form. It was stated categorically, by the likes of Weiss and Jülicher, that all parables have only one or at the most two points, and therefore any interpretation depending on identifying meanings for the various details of the parable must be foreign to Palestinian custom, and thus not from Jesus. So *the seed as the word of God* can stand, but the interpretation of the fate of the seed in different circumstances is held not to be original, and cannot have been described by Jesus. As for the metaphors in Jn, they are completely foreign to the genre of parable, and therefore they must have been invented by the Evangelist, who is then suspected of having been educated in some *milieu* of Platonism or Gnosticism in the wider world of Hellenistic culture, rather than in Palestine.

We can in this context point to the presence in the New Testament of Paul, whose use of allegorical discourse is very prominent (cf the analogy of the body in 1Cor).

The distance between us and the Gospels in cultural terms is very great. One of the strangest passages to us is the one where Jesus says that his purpose in telling parables is so that people may *not* understand. This seems totally at odds with the way we think of Jesus as Word of God and Light of the World. But the simple fact is that people did *not* understand or accept Jesus, and the Bible does not allow such radical results to pass as some kind of accident. It is, instead, part of the inscrutable mystery of the will of God, just as Pharaoh's refusal to release the Israelites is due, not to his own wilful opposition, but to the fact that God hardens his heart to *prevent* a positive outcome for Pharaoh – and to enhance that which he has prepared for his own people.

The conclusion that God, or Jesus, is being deliberately obscurantist is not one that we can in plain terms accept. The explanation is that the human response offered to Moses or to Jesus is not one which was unexpected, nor one that can ultimately frustrate the design; its very presence in the story will eventually bear witness to the

² Franco Zeffirelli filmed the telling of the Prodigal Son very powerfully, putting Jesus into a banquet in a courtyard. One side of this yard was an open colonnade into the street, and the Pharisees are watching Jesus "eating with sinners" from the safety of this hygiene-zone. The conjecture is very credible, since the end of the parable is a perfect description of the scenario: Jesus and "sinners" partying, with the Pharisees refusing to come inside.

power of God to overcome all obstacles. Mark is therefore speaking in perfect harmony with the Old Testament in writing his Gospel. It is interesting to note that Matthew did not sympathise with Mark's presentation, and modified it accordingly: rather than saying that Jesus tells parables so *that* they may see and not perceive, hear and not understand, Matthew simply remarks that they already do so, but that those gifted with insight will receive more. He also adds a citation from the 72nd Psalm:

I will speak to you in parables, and unfold what has been hidden since the foundation of the world.

This is clearly placing parables in a *revelatory* context, rather than a *cryptic* one. But by this time we are getting used to Matthew's corrections of Mark.

There can be little doubt in some cases that the parables have been amplified, both from the point of view of their literary expression, and also from the point of view of their content. The highly *literary* quality of the story of the Prodigal Son as we now have it does not leave room for doubt that Luke, the most literate of the four evangelists, has applied considerable editorial talent to its production in written form. This is a literary performance by the evangelist, rather than any retailing *in ipsissima verba* of the story Jesus told. That conclusion is a matter of literary judgment. The actual contents of parable stories is also significant. We could ask about the parable of the unjust tenants (Mk 12), who abuse the messengers sent to collect the produce, and at last connive at the murder of the son and heir: did Jesus tell the parable as far as the rejection of the owner's *servants* (*doulos*, "servant", is frequently shorthand for "prophet"), and then stop, giving a simple diagnosis of the Jewish way of rejecting those God has sent to them? Or did he go on to include the dimension of the coming of the Son (which would have implied a very developed view of his own filial vocation)? Or did he add a further prediction, following the story of the Son's death with the consequence (the arrival of the king in person, to destroy those murderers, and give the vineyard to other tenants who would produce its fruit)? Or are these details in fact all added by the evangelist, or by those who first preached the parable in its remembered form, to accommodate it to the situation of the early Church, to the post-resurrectional Gospel and admission of the Gentiles, and finally to the situation after the fall of Jerusalem? You can argue either way, or accept a middle position on all or any of these details. Is your default position on this sort of question the immediate assumption that *Jesus knew the future and was revealing his knowledge*? Or are you more likely to say: *the Evangelist, with the advantage of hindsight, is infilling the details of later history to expand the dimensions of the parable of Jesus*? You can see at once that your principles are important. They affect your judgment of what depth the parable had at the time when Jesus told it, and the degree to which this part of the Gospel reveals Jesus' thinking.

Logia

It is absolutely certain that our collection of the things Jesus said during his ministry is a minute proportion and almost certainly very selective.

The understanding of those who heard Jesus' teaching, and who later had to recall it, is a limiting factor on our search for what its original content might have been. It is

absolutely certain that our collection of the things Jesus said during his ministry is minute and almost certainly very selective. How do we know that we have the *important* things in our collection? For example, did Jesus actually say huge quantities of other things that have been forgotten *precisely because no-one understood them when he said them*? Equally we can ask: how far do we have access to the pure words of Jesus, when every one of them comes to us as reported speech – much of it bearing clear evidence of polemic arguments which postdate the life of Jesus quite considerably? We have to accept that there was a magnificent period of about thirty years when no-one had a written Gospel to refer to, and forty-five years before any written Gospel embodied large volumes of teaching like the contents of “Q”, retailed by Mt and Lk.³

You might assume that the *sayings* of Jesus are absolutely reliable, especially when they are of central importance to the Church. If you test this assertion against the four Gospels, however, you find yourself challenged. Take the highly influential words Jesus spoke at the Last Supper over the bread and the cup (or alternatively over the wine). They have all the panoply and circumstance we should expect of sayings that are highly significant: for instance, we have four reports of them (Mk, Mt, Lk, and 1Cor). All four versions, however, differ among themselves. Clearly these words were of vital significance to the early Church, and have the advantage of being ritually enshrined in the liturgy from the beginning. Yet that does not guarantee them a transmission which is verbally exact. It seems that the agreement is one of substance rather than of verbal verisimilitude. If this is true of vital “words of institution” spoken at the Last Supper, and thus within the traditions of the Passion which are the most ancient and significant of all our traditions, how much more are the sayings of Jesus scattered throughout the early Christian soup likely to have been marked by “decades of liturgical adaptation, homiletic expansion, and creative activity on the part of Christian prophets” (J P Meier)? The variety of reportage accorded to texts like the Lord’s Prayer and the Beatitudes drive home to us that the *basic* content, and *the Church’s notion* of the Christian version, are the best we can hope for from the New Testament.

This complex of considerations widens the frame in which we read the sayings (in Gk the *logia*) of Jesus. Clearly, for a saying of Jesus to have been remembered at all, there has to be something about it which causes it to be remembered – usually a relevance to some situation in the early Church. This may be something in the context of its original saying: Jesus made a particular point of it, or it provoked strong reaction in its hearers, or it laid down a principle or caused a response which was of subsequent importance; all of this is at Stage One of the tradition. Maybe the importance of a saying was discerned only when subsequent events provoked its recall from the life of Jesus into the situation of the early Church: in Jn Jesus says of the Paraclete yet to come that

He will tell you of the things to come, and will remind you of all that I said to you

We have to acknowledge that this memory is likely to be coloured more or less heavily by the Stage Two situation in the early Church that provokes the memory. Finally, the sayings of Jesus pass through the whole gamut of operations proper to the Scriptural author when he comes to incorporate the material in his Gospel; it is perfectly clear, for instance, that Mark has gathered all the sayings of Jesus on

³ Another of the imponderables about “Q” is that no-one knows anything about its possible circulation before Matthew and Luke got hold of it, incorporating its material into their Gospels. It must have been widely available if they both had access to it: nevertheless we only know of its quality through them.

arbitrary principles of his own, and that many of them are placed near to each other simply because they happen to contain similar vocabulary. If Mt and Lk feel free to abandon this arrangement, it is because they have recognised that it is not based on unalterable principles.

The majority of scholars hold the theory that there are three basic major sources for the Gospel traditions of the New Testament: Mk, "Q", and Jn. To these are added the minor sources M (inherited material unique to Matthew) and L (inherited material unique to Luke). "Q" is tentatively reconstructed by examining textually close parallels between Mt and Lk of material not found in Mk. The remaining part of Mt and Lk, which is neither Mk or "Q", is either created by Mt or Lk as part of their authorial activity, or – where the vocabulary or style diverge significantly from that of the host document – ascribed to the special inherited material that is found in this Gospel alone. Even so, this does not give such material automatic candidacy for being considered authentic sayings of Jesus.

One is constantly hearing sayings purporting to be dominical sayings, which turn out to emanate from someone else. A Christian athlete, asked whether she thought her immense monetary rewards were reconcilable with her religious principles, pointed out that "Jesus said: *Run to win.*" In fact Paul used this analogy of himself, but certainly in the written Gospels Jesus never did. Again Paul speaks of his prayer to be relieved of "the thorn in his side", and says: "Three times I have asked, and the Lord has said: *My grace is sufficient for you. For grace is at its full stretch in weakness.*" Many would quote those words as a *logion* of Jesus of Nazareth, whereas they are a quotation from the meditations of St Paul. Is Paul's "citation" of Jesus, on this occasion, of a different order from the *logia* preserved in the Gospels? Instinctively we would say "yes", but when we recall the progress of the latter through oral tradition and preaching, we may like to think again: after all, both are now preserved in Scripture and revered as the Word of God.

It was for a long time fashionable to decry the Gospel of John as so worked-over by theological motives from its Evangelist that it could not be trusted to convey anything from the original sayings of Jesus. The title accorded to the latter, "John the Divine" (= *the theologian*) is not altogether complementary! That particular pendulum has reached its crest, and people are recognising the historical value of much that the Gospel says.

Outside the Gospels there is very little that even purports to come directly from Jesus. Only three times, when hard-pressed in pastoral situations, does Paul appeal to the teaching of Jesus directly: on divorce, on the mode of his own financial support, and on the Eucharist. Elsewhere he writes almost exclusively as a Christian teacher and Apostle in his own right (a status he hardly ever forgets to assert at the letterhead).

The sayings of Jesus have their own variety, based on their life-situation at stages 1 and 2. We could usefully examine one of the collections of pericopes which include some of Jesus' sayings: Mk 2:1-3:6.