

Riddle Me This (Matthew 13. 10-17)

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*'Tell all the truth, but tell it slant –
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise*

*As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind –*

'Tell *all* the truth, but tell it slant'. These words of American poet Emily Dickinson serve as a kind of commentary on Jesus' teaching about his teaching method. But do they really justify it? After all, what's so good about indirection? What distinguishes it from obfuscation, from being in some sense a controlling ploy used by those 'in the know' to withhold access to necessary truth from those less fortunate? 'To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given'. How is this fair?

Over these the last two weeks, we've been focusing on the way Jesus invites his contemporaries to recognise him more truly. More than a prophet, more than a miracle worker, Jesus explicitly identifies himself with divine Wisdom, understood as the presence of God's creating and recreating Word in our midst. This Wisdom is a power to heal and enliven – Jesus speaks of the blind being given their sight, the lame walking and the dead being raised. It's also a power to represent and teach truth, to communicate knowledge of God and of human being. But the problem is, very few people seem able to receive what Jesus says. And his pedagogical strategy seems almost deliberately unhelpful. 'Why do you speak to them in parables?', his disciples ask. And Jesus responds, effectively, it's because they don't get it, because they can't get it. But isn't it precisely the role of a good teacher to help people learn

how to learn? What's the use of being 'the Word of God' if no one understands you, if no one can translate you? So what's going on here?

Well, I suspect there are two things. The first has to do with what's seeking to be communicated. Our culture tends to assume that truth is best conveyed by straight-forward propositions. If you want to know and name reality, you have to focus on 'objective' statements of fact, chains of logical argument, empirical evidence and rational proofs. And of course these things are important – more important than ever in an age of misinformation and brazen 'post-truth' ideology. And yet, the recognised problem with a merely propositional way of knowing is that it can alienate us from what we seek to understand. It can fail to comprehend the fullness of things, because encourages a distancing of our knowing selves from the world we inhabit, and indeed from our own inner lives. It tends to a non-relational and often instrumental approach to our environment.¹

But of course there are all kinds of things you can't really 'know' in a distanced, objectivising way. The taste of strawberries, the power of harmony in music or dance, the gallant spirit of another soul, the presence of divine energy – animating life, enabling connection, seeking response. If you want to touch and begin to comprehend these realities, what's required is a much more participative, self-involving attunement and responsiveness. You eat the strawberry, you enter the dance, you love and pray. Likewise, if you want to talk about such realities, to communicate something of their meaning and significance, beauty and power, you require language that goes beyond the merely propositional statement of checkable fact. Rowan Williams notes that representation which 'does at least some justice' to the richness, interconnection and subtle energies of the world necessarily speaks in metaphor and symbol; it calls forth the activity of the artist and evokes response.²

All of this requires an expanding of our cognitive capacities, our imagination. According to Australian poet Les Murray, 'nothing's true that figures in words only'.³

¹ See Rowan Williams, 'The Embodied Logos: Reason, Knowledge and Relation' in *Looking East in Winter: Contemporary Thought and the Eastern Christian Tradition* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2021), p.86.

² Williams, 'The Embodied Logos', pp.78-79.

³ In his poem, 'Poetry and Religion' in Les Murray, *Selected Poems* (Melbourne: Black Inc, 2007), p.94.

For truth in both poetry and religion involves the ‘concert’ or coming together of ‘our daylight and dreaming mind, our emotions, instinct, breath and native gesture’ into what he calls ‘whole thinking’. This can take time, and may involve significant shifts in the self. Emily Dickinson writes of Truth’s ‘superb surprise’ being ‘too bright for our infirm Delight’, such that ‘The Truth must dazzle gradually, Or every man be blind’. And this echoes Jesus in John’s gospel telling his disciples they could not yet bear everything he had to share with them, but that he would send the Spirit to lead them into all truth (John 16. 12-13). And we all know the experience of not being ‘ready’ to hear certain truths – perhaps only years later recognising wisdom in a word we’ve received from a teacher or parent, grandparent or friend.

‘Why do you speak to them in parables?’, Jesus’ disciples asked. Well, what if the kind of truth Jesus is trying to communicate is not the kind of truth that can be put into a dogma, proposition, logical argument – but has to be resonated with, felt, embodied, lived into? And what if he knows that most of his audience presently lacks the capacity to receive this truth, to rhyme with and inhabit it?

Parables are a form of Wisdom literature. The wisdom of this literature is that it deliberately confronts us with difficulty. It forces us to slow down, take time, learn how to approach its meaning. We might think of the use of *koans* in Buddhist teaching, where the student is given a saying, a riddle, designed to confound their normal way of thinking. Ben Witherington writes: ‘Since so much of Wisdom literature involves indirect speech ... rather than straight-forward propositions or normal discourse, one is obligated not merely to read the Wisdom material but also to ruminate upon it’.⁴ And he goes on: ‘metaphor, simile, figure, image, and riddle “urge the mind to aftersight and foresight”’. This is discourse that sharpens intuition, our capacity to receive truth ... from the unconscious within, and our sensitivity to revelation from the Holy Spirit “that blows where it will”’.

⁴ Ben Witherington, *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (Minneapolis, MI: Augsburg Fortress, 1994), cited in Br. Keith Nelson, ‘The Vindication of Wisdom’, 5 July 2020, <https://www.ssje.org/2020/07/05/the-vindication-of-wisdom-br-keith-nelson/>

Isn't it precisely the role of a good teacher to help people learn how to learn? The Wisdom Jesus comes to share confounds settled expectations about who's good and who's not, about who's in and who's out, about the nature of God and the vocation of human being. How's he supposed to help people see and hear so radically differently? Because it's not just simple ignorance he's confronting. There's also something in them, in us, that doesn't really want to know in what he means – because if we did, who knows where that would lead. 'They have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn – and I would heal them'.

It's never any use just telling people what they're not ready to receive. So instead Jesus offers parables, stories described as 'crystallizations of how people decide for or against self-destruction, for or against newness of life, acceptance, relatedness'. Williams says: 'Repeatedly, as the kingdom of God is spoken of, Jesus simply presents a situation, a short narrative: like *this*, he says'.⁵ A sower went out to sow (Matthew 13.3), a man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho (Luke 11.30), the kingdom of heaven is like treasure buried in a field (Matthew 13.44), like a mustard seed (Matthew 13.31), like yeast that a woman mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened (Matthew 13.33). 'The riddle of the parables', says Williams, 'lies in making the connection with one's own transformation – that is, encountering God in the parable ... becoming open in a certain way'.⁶

For the Word of God, the Wisdom of God, incarnate in Jesus is not just information. It's an address, a call, an invitation to new life. We begin to comprehend it as we enter into relationship with it, with him; as we allow its strangeness slowly, sometimes painfully, to reconfigure our knowing and our loving. Blessed are we then who are learning to hear.

⁵ Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p.41.

⁶ Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p.41.