

HOW SHALL WE PICTURE THE KINGDOM?

St. Mark 4:30 – *Jesus said also, ‘How shall we picture the Kingdom, or by what parable shall we describe it?’*

This text* stands at the intersection of theology and ministry, of practice and theory, of the whole range of questions that we ask of the faith *and* the implementation of the answers we give to these questions. How shall we picture the Kingdom? This is the theological question par excellence. Shall we picture it as the coming of the King from above vertically downwards in trailing clouds of magnificent glory? Shall we picture the Kingdom as the slow movement of the Spirit, *quietly* within a man's spirit bringing forth the gifts of peace, joy, love, long-suffering, tenderness and meekness; or *noisily* with the speaking of tongues or the holy dance or the rhythm of clapping? Shall we picture the Kingdom as the revolution; as the realisation of our political hopes; as the completion of the number of the members of the club of the elect, the predestinated; or as the great, the final, consummating existential confrontation? What, in any case, is the reality behind and beyond or even within the picture? How are the sign and the signified related to one another? How and where does the parable connect with what it means? How are the bread and the body of our Lord, the wine and his blood related? These and a crop of others constitute the range of theological questions that crowd you out as you work at this text in St. Mark's Gospel.

But there are other questions that come to mind, particularly as we meet at this Communion, on this particular day, in the company of some for whom the theory of this College must earth itself in the practicality of ministry and teaching and service. These are questions concerned with the shape and pattern of the ministry in this Kingdom, what its presuppositions are, and its hopes, as well as its dangers and its frustrations. Questions, too, about what a sermon in the context of this Kingdom is and how you communicate through it, how you speak even, to others about the faith that is in you, as you work at a bench, or teach in a class-room, or nurse in a hospital. There are questions harassing us, too, about how you plan a caring ministry, related to this Kingdom. What the paradigm is that you must follow, about how you escape the charges of 'do goodism' and activism. Today, on this day particularly, we wonder a little, or perhaps more than a little, about personal allegiance,

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devotion and spirituality; and about how we can lay hold of the realities which are somehow bound up with the symbols of the faith and the visible form of the Word of God. These I describe as the range of practical questions, those to do with *praxis* of the faith that meet us today. I am suggesting that at the intersection of the theology and the ministry, of Word and Sacrament; at the intersection of faith and practice, there stands our text. How shall we picture the Kingdom, or by what parable shall we describe it? Few questions I know could raise more fundamental issues or suggest more far-reaching answers for the practicalities of ministry, sermon or faith. In a sentence, the relation of the picture to the Kingdom, of the parable to its meaning, is all important for these many practical questions which make up the tissue of a practical faith and a practical ministry, whatever shape that ministry takes.

Let me unravel what I have to say in four steps.

I

First, the picture is the indispensable medium of communication. When Jesus sets out to speak about the Kingdom he heaps picture upon picture, and image upon image (Mark 4:26). The Kingdom of God is like a man scattering seed on the land; . . . the seed sprouts and grows; as soon as the crop is ripe, he sets to work with the sickle (Mark 13:31). The Kingdom of Heaven is like a grain of mustard seed. (33) The Kingdom is like yeast which a woman mixed with flour till it was leavened. (44) The Kingdom is like a treasure lying buried in a field. The man who found it, for sheer joy, sold everything he had and bought it. (45) The Kingdom is like a merchant looking for fine pearls, who found one of very special value. (47) The Kingdom is like a net let down into the sea, when fish of every kind were caught in it; like a land-owner, hiring labourers (Matt. 20:1) early and late; like a King who prepared a feast; like girls waiting for the bridegroom, with whom to go into the wedding. Can you imagine a more heterogeneous collection of pictures? The mind has no sooner grasped one, before it has to shatter the image; and accommodate itself to the next. Confronted by this heterogeneity, by this profusion of pictures, we try to work out the HCF, and to conceptualize it into the theology of the Kingdom, or even, greatly daring, into our own eschatology. When we do so, two points escape us. One is that picture-thinking is an essential feature of the biblical-religious type of communication. Therefore if you conceptualize it, you turn it into a very different form of thought and expression. I would go further, and hold that there are certain things that you fail to say if you eliminate the pictures from your communication of the Gospel. The second point you miss is that the modernisation of

the message is not a process of progressive conceptualization but of discovery of new pictures, new imagery for the communication. We have spent far too much time looking for an accommodating metaphysic, whereas the true requirement for communication is an adequate imagery. When I speak of imagery I speak not just of the sermon, but of the picture we present of what it is to be a Church or a minister, or a Christian teacher or a caring agent!

The image is the thing.

II

My second step in exploring the significance of the image and the picture in our theology and ministry, in our word and sacrament, in our theory and practice – is to say that *the picture is power*; it imparts the reality which it portrays. Supremely the point is in evidence in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. There the bread and wine, signs and symbols of the body and blood of Jesus Christ, as one sort of theology would say, are in terms of most forms of theology the very power of the Living Christ, his body and blood to faith, his grace and redemption to the believing recipient of the Sacrament, the acted reality of his redemptive power.

But once you grasp this point in relation to the Sacrament you begin to realize that it is common to the whole structure of the Christian faith. The crucifix conveys the reality of the suffering of our Lord to many people who in their devotions hold before them the image of his death. But for those who do not have the crucifix, the mental picture of the crucified Christ, the imagery of the hymn 'In the Cross of Christ I glory', conveys something of that same powerful immediacy of the dying and redeeming Lord. Anyone who reads the parable of the prodigal son without apprehending its power to mediate the loving forgiveness of the heavenly father would be normally said to have missed the sense of the parable.

We have often used the phrase, 'a flat statement' of a sentence which is thought to say something, yet does so without emotion, commitment, promise to act, or any kind of involvement. But we know that there are very few 'flat statements' ever uttered in real life, and thank goodness for it. Life is not flat: it is full of ups-and-downs; full of commitments and emotions. So equally, there is no, what you might call, 'flat hearing'. Everything comes to us with a charge; and few statements or stories or parables are more charged than those of the Bible and of our faith. The power most of the time resides in the pictures, the imagery, the symbols. There is no finer example in the religious context of the way in which the picture has the power of the reality, than that of the story of the Cave of Adullam. When David received the water which the captains had

brought to him from the well by the gate of Bethlehem, he refused to drink it. He poured it out on the ground saying 'Can I drink the blood of those men who risked their lives for it?' The water had all the meaning, the force of the self-sacrifice and courage of the men who had penetrated the lines of the Philistines to recover it. The picture is power.

III

Thirdly, *the picture is motivation*. Particularly during Christian Aid week, we are reminded of the hungry of the world. But the tragedy, the hourly agony for so many of our contemporaries reaches us with impact and direction, not through yards of statistics, but through the picture of a single pot-bellied, liquid-eyed, starving child. The picture is motivation. It loosens the feelings of sympathy and caring which issue in generous giving. It attacks case-hardened indifference with a success denied to a dozen sermons and as many weeks' good causes. When Aristotle was analysing the way in which we think in ethics, he drew attention to the character of what he called 'the practical syllogism'. The 'practical syllogism' was like any other syllogism in that it had a major premise and a minor premise, (which subsumes some particular set of objects or cases under a more general classification.) But 'the practical syllogism' differed from the syllogism of logical deduction, in one important respect. Whereas in the latter you proceed to a logical proposition as your conclusion, in the practical syllogism of ethics you proceed to a specific course of action as your conclusion. The pictures of religion are like that. When you read the story of the good Samaritan, its meaning is not something you conceptualize in a sentence. Its meaning is something you *do*. You find out who is your neighbour or rather him to whom you are neighbour. When the Kingdom is described in terms of a pearl of great price, as a treasure in a field, or a King preparing a great feast, then you discover the meaning of the picture in its motivation of you also to seek for the pearl, or the treasure, or to accept the invitation of the King. When the word comes to you, that you are a city set on a hill, a light not to be hidden under the bed but put in a place where it can benefit others; then its meaning is its motivation to give you the courage to be an identifiable witness to the faith. Your picture of your ministry is your motivation. More seriously still, it may well prove to be the motivation of your people.

IV

So finally *the picture is the message*. The medium is the message. When I read the parables of the Kingdom and add to them the many

others scattered throughout the Gospels, two facts strike me. They both arise out of the sheer profusion of the metaphors, heaped as we say, one upon the other. The first is that while it is true that St. Mark notes that 'privately Jesus explained everything to the disciples', nevertheless only rarely is the content of such esoteric interpretation offered to us. One explanation is that the original interpretative lines have been separated from the parables and eventually lost. But it may be that even the disciples are not meant to have an explanation – more than 'go thou and do likewise'.

The second fact that strikes me is that in the gospels for the majority of people the parable is not so much a medium of interpreting some hidden message beyond the parable; for them the parable is the only message. The medium is the message. If so, that whole process of which homiletics has known so much, the explanation of the parable, is a mistaken effort. It treats the parables like the Fables of Aesop: stories with punch-lines. The parable is the message.

Your ministry is the grace of God brought to needy people in anxiety, fear, deprivation. Your sermon is God's word broken to the saving of souls. The bread and wine are the body and blood of Christ shed for the salvation of the world – here set forth for *your* salvation. How shall we picture the Kingdom or by what parable shall we describe it?

CORRIGENDA

The Author has indicated the following corrections to Plates 1-3 which appeared in Vol. II, No. 2 (Nov. 1972) – Barclay Church, Edinburgh.

Transfer caption Plate 1 to Plate 2

Transfer caption Plate 2 to Plate 3

Transfer caption Plate 3 to Plate 1

(Ed.)