

# Interpreting parables in different ways

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 16 July 2023

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Pentecost 7 A

Genesis 25: 19-34; Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

---

One of the particular spiritual sayings I often return to is from the Irish poet-priest John O'Donohue: *'When you see God as an artist, everything changes.'* We are so used to hearing about God as a law-giver, an instructor, and/or a judge, that we can so easily miss this central truth of living faith. Of course, law and specific guidelines and moral codes can help us in our lives. Yet we have often so over-emphasised the will, and judgement, of God to the almost exclusion of the imagination and creativity of God.

That is one reason to look at Van Gogh's great painting of the Sower at Sunset alongside the parable of the Sower and the Seed in today's Gospel. For we are helped by viewing the parable as art. Indeed, we might see Jesus' life and teaching as so much more a great artwork than a set of rules, never mind a clear blueprint for living. Like a great artwork, the parables particularly invite us into fresh perspectives, and encourage us to become artists of our own lives, sharing in God's imagination and creativity.

Today's reading is the first of a series of parables, or illuminative stories, in Matthew's Gospel. Such a form of communication was hardly invented by Jesus. Parables are common in rabbinic teaching and found in parts of the Hebrew Scriptures. Yet Jesus gave them a particular focus and, as parables form one third of his recorded teachings, they are clearly vital to Christian Faith. Considerable attention has therefore been given to them over the centuries, beginning in the very earliest church communities.

Indeed, it is obvious that the second part of our Gospel reading today is part of those initial interpretations. For this seeks to explain the first part, the actual parable, in order to turn its clearly artistic character into something more straightforward and functional. In the communities for which Matthew wrote, this would have brought much comfort and direction. Yet, as only one interpretation, it loses much in turning parable into another form of human communication, the allegory.

Let us come back to the value of allegory and figurative interpretations in a moment. What first needs recognising is that, from the very beginning, Jesus' followers were often perplexed by who he was and what he said and did. In today's Gospel the disciples therefore call out for help to understand. No wonder they, and we, struggle with this elusiveness of God, and Jesus as the God-bearer. For if God is indeed an artist, then sharing God has to be done as an artist. God simply cannot be pinned down, but is a mystery whose full reality always slips away from us. We can certainly glimpse and participate in God, in God's art works and our own artistry. Religion, philosophy, moral purpose and human art are helpful in this. Yet ultimately they can only reflect and point towards God in Godself.

This is why parables are key to the Way of Jesus. They too cannot be easily pinned down. Like a Zen koan, they seek to tease us into a different, and/or deeper, awareness of reality. Does this mean that interpretations are useless? By no means: they help us see things in the parables, and more importantly in God, which may enrich us. However, in this, as in other aspects of our spiritual journeys, we must not confuse the means for the goal. That is core to the nature of a parable. Unlike a myth, another form of powerful story that human beings use to convey meaning, a parable does not seek so much to bring order and meaning to our lives, as to break open our existing ordering of life so that new light and grace can come in.

Let us nonetheless not discard the insightful reflections on the parables made over the centuries. For we are fortunate today to have so many ways of looking at them. As we will have more parables in our worship in the weeks to come, it may therefore be good today to outline three main approaches.

The first, applicable to the parable of the Sower, but also to others, we might call the figurative approach. Despite the recent rise of biblical fundamentalism and literalism, this is the most ancient way of interpreting the Bible and the most prominent in Christian Tradition as a whole. This is seen in the second part of our Gospel today, in the attempt at explanation there. For, unlike religious and secularist literalists today, our faith forebears had no problem seeing multiple meanings in both texts and life more generally. It was not that they did not value more straightforward words or that they did not believe in specific events.

What mattered more were that to which they pointed. Allegories, symbols, and other figures of speech were therefore natural to them: not as extras to the ordinary but as embodiments of what really mattered. In this way of interpretation, the parable of the Sower is therefore drawn from everyday life but its real significance is an expression of deeper, eternal, truths. This approach can, and, at times in the middle ages did, get out of hand.

Reading everything in terms of something else can become both exhausting and misleading. The Reformation theologians in the 16th century thus rightly challenged the over-fanciful use of figurative interpretations, not least the application of allegory. However, qualified figurative approaches do enable us to see deeper into God's artistry in our holy texts, lives and world, just as expert art critics enable us to discern more in great art than surface impressions provide. Our first hymn today (*A Sower came to ancient hills*)<sup>1</sup> is a modern rendering of such an approach.

If the first, figurative, approach to biblical interpretation is about lifting us into fresh, and eternal, horizons, the second main approach seeks to ground us more fully in history. This is usually called the historical-critical method to understanding the Bible. It flows out of humanist and Reformation concerns to return to the texts and it seeks to tease out their original context(s) or *Sitz im Leben*, situation of life. This approach was particularly influential in the 19th and 20th centuries, and many of us are still shaped by it, for good and ill.

This approach understands the parable of the Sower, for example, in relation to first century agricultural practice, specifically the process of broadcasting seed. For on rough and rocky ground, especially where rocks and soil might shift, farmers had no real option but to scatter seed widely and generously, hoping that some would take root and flourish. This helps us see God as like a Sower, who scatters seeds of grace and love broadly and extravagantly, not with forensic planning and precision, including some and excluding others.

---

<sup>1</sup> [https://hymnary.org/text/a\\_sower\\_came\\_from\\_ancient\\_hills](https://hymnary.org/text/a_sower_came_from_ancient_hills)

Historical critical approaches, looking at the original context of Jesus' teaching, have therefore been rewarding, not least in helping us focus on growth and flourishing. This counters the religious tendency to use Jesus' teaching as a means of primarily ordering life, and directing behavior, with threats of judgement also creeping in; a process already happening in Matthew's allegorical interpretation of today's parable. Indeed, a particularly important turning point came with the scholarship of Adolf Jülicher, which not only exposed the weaknesses of allegorical interpretations, but encouraged us to view the parables as each carrying one main essential truth.<sup>2</sup>

In response, scholars such as C.H.Dodd and Joachim Jeremias pointed out how the parables are united by the common themes of the kingdom (reign, or dreaming) of God, particularly as this is revealed in the person, actions, and teaching, of Jesus. Each parable therefore calls us to live our lives in relation to those underlying and ultimate realities.<sup>3</sup>

The historical critical approach itself ran somewhat aground. Partly this is because its attempts to establish objectivity and an essential core of meaning do not easily stand up in the face of postmodern critiques, particularly where they offer insufficient spiritual nourishment for the multiple perspectives of people today.

A third main approach to Jesus' parables is therefore what might be called the contemporary contextual approach, or, as some put it, '*Readers Response*'. Building on the historical critical approach, but deepening the contextual application of the parables, this was opened up by scholars such as John Dominic Crossan<sup>4</sup> but has been much further broadened by the re-reading of the parables through the eyes of people of colour, and feminist, womanist, queer, and other liberationist theological lenses.

Typically, such responses to biblical texts include previously neglected questions related to power, identity, and purpose such as:

- what interests are at stake?;
- who do traditional interpretations of the story serve?; and, vitally,
- can we look at the story from the perspective of those previously passed over?

Let us not assume, for example, that a king, or a powerful person in a parable is necessarily good, never mind God. Part of Jesus' use of parables was after all to subvert.

Let me therefore bring our initial reflections on Jesus' parables to a conclusion today by returning to the Sower at Sunset painting. It would be the opposite of what I have been trying to say, if we tried to make straightforward sense of this by any one, or all, of the interpretative approaches I have sketched. Yet each might help us to read this great art work afresh, and to receive divine light through it, just as we are encouraged to do with the words of our Gospel reading today.

Firstly, Van Gogh is clearly interpreting Jesus' parable in a figurative manner. It is not only that the painting is not representational in form in a merely literal or straightforward manner. More importantly, Van Gogh, who after all, was a preacher in his early life, is seeking to express the transcendent beyond the everyday.

---

<sup>2</sup> Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 2 vols. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche, 1963).

<sup>3</sup> C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Scribner & Sons, 1961); and Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 2d ed. (New York: Scribner & Sons, 1954).

<sup>4</sup> For example Dan Otto Via, *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967); and John Dominic Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973)

For Van Gogh had a special interest in the sower throughout his life, painting and drawing at least thirty significant works on the subject. Consumed by his passion for the fullness of life, he invites us through this into a fresh and deeper awareness of reality.

Secondly, Sower at Sunset encourages us to consider the everyday context of farmers and others, in the past and present, who scatter seed in their particular situations of life: the extraordinary in the ordinary.

Thirdly, the painting is an encouragement to us to be artists of the spirit ourselves in our contexts, sharing in God's imagination and creativity. For a parable, like a painting, and any great work of art, is always open: both affirming and subverting what is, and inviting us to respond to grace, trusting in the power of ultimate growth.

It is no surprise that Van Gogh was drawn to Jesus, who, like Vincent, faced misunderstanding and conflict. Their art works and lives express that too. Yet above all they offer us a deeper relationship to the ultimate, reflected in the profound mysticism of today's parable and Van Gogh's visual re-rendering of it.

Can we get beyond our need to order all of this and receive the gift beyond?

Can we become parables of life, living works of art, ourselves?

For, as Don MacLean sang, in words applicable to Jesus as well as Vincent,

*'now I understand...  
how you tried to set them free...  
They would not listen,  
they did not know how.  
Perhaps they'll listen now.'*

In Jesus' Name, Amen