

The Lord's Parables (1): The Great Supper

One of the best-loved features of the teaching of Jesus, as we have it in the Gospels, is the use He made of parables to convey, illustrate and to confirm the different truths He wanted to impress on people. Though most of us can recall only a few of them at any one time - parables such as the parable of the Good Samaritan, the parable of the prodigal son, the parable of the sower, coming readily to mind - there are, surprisingly, some forty or more. We don't need to read very far in the Gospels to come across a parable. In one chapter alone, Matthew chapter 13, and unusual though this is, there is a succession of parables, one after another, some seven in all.

No one ever made better use of parables than the Lord. And though we might think that the explanation for His use of them is obvious, yet there are a number of reasons involved and, briefly, I would like to review these with you. As we've noted, the parables convey, illustrate and confirm the different truths the Lord wanted to impress on people. There is no question about that at all. But it is by no means all that was involved.

Indeed the more basic reason why the Lord used parables, as He Himself explained, is that whilst they could convey the truth to those who were ready for it, yet at the same time they concealed it from those who were not. Some would see the truth the Lord was getting at and others wouldn't. For some an underlying truth would be obvious. For others it would have been just a story. And it was better that it be this way. Better for people not to see a truth and to remain in ignorance rather than that they should see and acknowledge it and then profane it.

"The disciples" we read, "came and said to Jesus, 'Why do you talk to them in parables?' He answered and said to them, 'Because the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven are revealed to you, but they are not revealed to them'The reason I speak to them in parables is that they look without seeing and listen without hearing or understanding." (Matthew 13: 11, 13).

It was, then, the state which people were in at the time which necessitated the use of parables as vehicles both for conveying truth to those who would receive it and for hiding it from those who couldn't. Convey, illustrate, and confirm, as they do, yet this more basic reason lies behind them all.

I am commencing a new series of talks on the Lord's parables. Beginning tonight, and during the course of my talks over the next few weeks, I will be taking and examining one of the parables, looking at it in terms of what it can teach us and how it touches upon and applies to our lives. As for some of the parables the general meaning involved is fairly obvious and not difficult to see. The parable of the prodigal son would be one of these. Some we think we know well and understand fully though in fact, as is almost universally the case with them, the point is missed. The parable of the Good Samaritan comes to mind in this regard. With others the teaching seems clear enough; at least when we first come upon them, but when we stop and think about them we see problems and difficulties. The parable of the talents - five given to one, two to another, and one to the other - must be one of these.

All of the parables in some way relate to situations and circumstances as the Lord found them while on earth. There are obvious references to the leaders of the Jewish people at that time (the chief priests and the Pharisees), as in the parable of the wicked husbandman in Matthew chapter 21. But more than this, the parables relate to our lives today, and here is where our interest in them will lie. Everything within the Word of the Lord, though on the surface it seems to refer only to certain situations and circumstances such as arose in times long past, holds within it that which is of timeless relevance to us all. This is true of the laws of Leviticus and Deuteronomy; of the prophecies of Isaiah and Ezekiel; and the parables used by the Lord.

The parable I have chosen to speak about tonight is the parable of the great supper. It is in Luke's Gospel, chapter 14, and, for all that you may know it well, let me remind you of the details.

"A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.' But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, 'I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.' Another said, 'I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.' Still another said, 'I just got married, so I can't come.' The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, 'Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.' 'Sir,' the servant said, 'what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.' Then the master told his servant, 'Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full. I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.'"

Here the Lord speaks about a feast to which everyone in every age is invited. Here also He speaks about the invitation which is always there to come to that feast. And here is uncovered and brought to light the things which we allow to side-track, absorb and engulf us, and which cause in us the indifference which is so effectively characterised here. There are several places in the Word where heaven, or the life of heaven, is depicted as a feast and where the Lord promises what is clearly spiritual nourishment for hungry souls.

Isaiah chapter 55, for example, is one of these. "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare."

The very Word itself is a banquet, ever spread before us, from which we can fill our minds and nourish our spirits with every true thought and every unselfish and good desire. And the invitation is always there! The Lord unceasingly bids us to come to that banquet; to so fill our minds and to nourish our spirits; to partake of the life that leads to heaven. He sends His messengers, which are none other than the different truths and teachings of the Word such as appeal to us - or can appeal to us - in the different states, or the different situations and circumstances, we go through; truths which beckon and press us to come in and feast ourselves. Truths about marriage; truths about Providence; truths about forgiveness; truths that bring comfort; truths that strengthen and uplift. These come to us as the Lord's messengers and invite us to come in.

But our tendency, as we well know, is to plead inconvenience and to feel that we would be better able to respond some other time or in some other circumstance. Preoccupied, absorbed and centred as our thoughts and affections can be around self and the world, we find the invitation unwelcome and bothersome. Not that we intend offence to the Lord, but rather that His invitation might be issued some other time. In the three excuses which were offered there is represented the causes which lie at the basis of this kind of response; this kind of reaction. One man, you remember, had bought land and wanted to see it. And by this is represented a desire or tendency to cultivate a knowledge of the Lord's teaching without applying it to life.

Another man, had bought five yoke of oxen and wanted to 'prove' them; and since oxen are symbols of, or represent, natural affections, what is meant here is the yearning to want to try out, to prove, to find what kind of pleasure and satisfaction natural affections and selfishly-orientated delights can bring us. Marriage was the excuse offered by the third man as preventing his attendance and, in us, it means the marriage of evil and falsity, the joining together of the two, which in certain circumstances, and in particular areas prevents our response. And please note this point: what is spoken of here is not different classes of people, but the different kinds of response of which we as individuals are capable.

Mercifully, and though the Lord's invitation to us first of all meets with this kind of response, He does not give up or abandon His efforts with us. He sends His messengers again that they might find within us thoughts and feelings which, humble, even child-like they may be (poor and maimed and lame and blind), and despised by us as they can be, will respond and through which He can at last bring us to the life of heaven. For all that there is initial rejection from the leading thoughts and loves within us, yet they don't make up the total picture. There are, fortunately, other loves and affections which, though they have to be searched for, out in the highways and under the hedges, hold within them the hope of a more affirmative response.

The Swedenborg Program – Number 47.

<http://www.swedenborg.com.au>