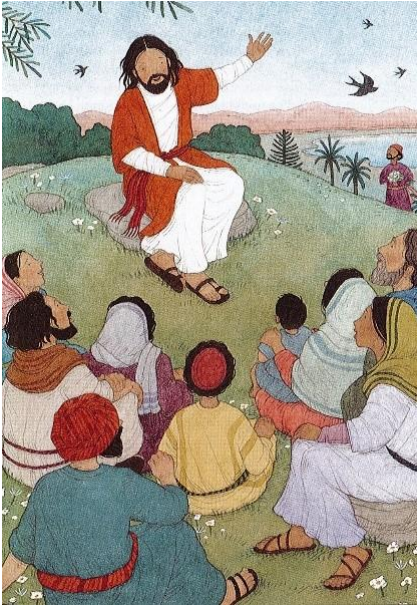


Jesus the Storyteller



In this first paper of the MWA year, I will introduce the theme with a general discussion of parables.

The word 'parable' comes from the Greek word for comparison which really tells us what parables are – they compare God's kingdom, action or expectations with something which is real or imagined in this world.

Parables were the main way in which Jesus taught the people who came to listen to him, eager to hear what he had to say about who God was and what was required of God's followers.

There are two types of parables – stories or narrative and comparisons; which often contain words such as 'is like' or 'is as if.' Biblical scholars debate about how many parables there are actually are, Some scholars argue that they only occur in Matthew, Mark, and Luke's Gospels and that there are none in the Gospel of John.

The parables follow the rules of popular storytelling which existed in the Ancient Near East in Jesus' time. The people of first century Israel loved 'picture' language; this is not something which is limited those people in that time only; I think we all love a story – I wonder how popular a children's address is in your Sunday morning service!

Storytelling in Jesus' day often followed 'a rule of three' – that is there are three main characters and the key person of the story is often the final character of the tale. Think of some parables and you will see evidence of this. Jesus' parables often contain a surprise at the end which was designed to make his listeners think and see something differently.

Jesus told parables about ordinary, every day life. His listeners didn't need previous learning, except that learning gained from everyday life, to grasp the story. That of course, is where the problem rises for us, here in the twenty-first century. What was familiar to Jesus' listeners is not, on the whole, familiar to us. This can sometimes make it difficult for us to understand what Jesus' meant when he told the parable. So sometimes we need to understand the historical background to the parable.

Jesus' parables describe God in a down-to earth way. God is seen as a father, a shepherd, a king. The parables make God seem more real to us. Because many parables are familiar to us, many of us probably heard them back in our Sunday School days, it is easy to read them as cosy, moral

stories like Aesop's fables. But the parables are stories of the Kingdom of God. With the coming of Jesus, came the rule of God. The good news of Jesus was that the longed-for reign of God was beginning. The aim of Jesus' teaching was to understand how his listeners could join in with the bringing of God's kingdom. Two thousand years later, the parables' message is just the same for us.

Discussion

1. Think of parables you know – can you see the 'rule of three' in them? Is there a surprise or twist in the story?

What do you think the parable means? – although parables can not mean just anything there are different ways of understanding parables.

Do you understand the parable? It's okay, if you don't!

Do you have a favourite?

2. If there is a particular parable you would like me to cover, let me know via my email:

janet.cooper@moravian.org.uk.