

Sermon Trinity II How to do Bible study

Let us do some Bible study and ask *What does today's Gospel reading mean?* There has been a fashion in modern biblical scholarship these last fifty years for saying that each of Our Lord's parables has a single meaning; that Jesus used each story to get across one point. So today's is interpreted to mean that the guests who were invited but didn't come are God's ancient people the Jews. So the people from the highways and hedges – that is the Gentiles – are bidden to enter heaven instead.

Perhaps that is part of the meaning but it is certainly not the whole of it. Not only do we not know the whole meaning of it, but we can't know this. I will go further and say that even the writer St Luke himself did not know its full meaning. I will borrow today some fine words from the gifted literary critic Frank Kermode. He says, *The meaning of a text goes beyond its author not sometimes but always.*

Anyone who has ever written a short story or a novel or a play or a piece of music knows that this is true. You start off with a few characters and a sketchy notion of a plot. But soon the thing takes on a life of its own and you're writing stuff you never thought you would. You can't *decide* what you're going to write and then write it. That's just diagrams. Plodding. You have to let the living reality of the thing reveal itself to your imagination. As the great Charles Sisson said, *No use filling books with what you know already!*

Back to today's Gospel then. There are many ways of understanding it. For instance, put it into the context of the whole of the rest of the Bible in which God wants to give us salvation and the joy of heaven. How does the Bible picture this salvation? Most frequently as a banquet or feast or as a marriage, as love between bride and bridegroom. The prophet Hosea for example likens God to a husband and the people of Israel as his wife. *The Book of Revelation* speaks of *the holy city...prepared as a bride adorned for her husband*. Saint Augustine said that when we want to imagine our relationship with God and the life he offers us, we best liken it to sex.

And what unites the image of the marriage with the image of the feast is sensuality. When God speaks about what form our reward will take, he doesn't promise to sit us down in rows and teach us New Testament Greek and biblical theology: he offers us ecstasy. *Ecstasy* literally means *standing outside yourself*. God promises us liberation from the tyranny of the self into a greater union and communion. This is the vision of the feast and of the marriage.

And the feast is not just the food and the wine – however sumptuous. Think back to when you sat down to a meal with your dearest friends. There is something delightful about the interaction, the communion which, as they say, *takes you out of yourself*. Or in the image of marriage, the heart of it is sensual. Like this: *My beloved spake and said unto me, Rise up my love, my fair one and come away. For lo the winter is past, the rain is over and gone...our vines have tender grapes*. It's better than New Testament Greek and biblical theology.

So the fact is that we cannot fully understand the meaning of the biblical stories. The Greek word sometimes used for these stories is *μυστήρια* - *mysteria*. And the mysteries are religious rites, sacraments. We have to *enter* them and become part of

them if we are to hope to partake of their truth. And the parables are inexhaustible because their subject is Almighty God. But we can *approach* the meaning and be thrilled by it. We can approach the ecstatic truth – but to do this you need to employ your imagination. The gospels often talk of a *secret* meaning which is hidden from those who are outside the Kingdom. The key to the Kingdom is your meditative, ruminative imagination. The gates of heaven are barred to the literal-minded.

Who are the literal-minded? Well, they include those preachers and professors who have taught generations of church-people and students that, for example, the parable of the Good Samaritan *means* that we should help those in need. But we know that already. And the first hearers of that parable knew it. They weren't stupid just because they lived a long time ago. May I quote again from the fertile brain of Frank Kermode who criticises *Scholars who seek to dissolve the text into its elements rather than to observe the fertility of its interrelations.*

So let's take another look at the parable of the Good Samaritan. What if... *The man who fell among thieves is the fallen human race, Adam who has left Jerusalem, the heavenly city for Jericho, the world. The Samaritan is Christ, the inn is the Church, the promise to return is the Second Coming.* That reading of the parable is actually by St Irenaeus in the 2nd century.

Or what of the loaves and fishes? *The five loaves are the five wounds of Christ, the two fishes are the Virgin Mary and the penitent thief; the twelve baskets of fragments are the twelve articles of the Creed or the twelve apostles. WHICHEVER YOU LIKE!* - adds the interpreter. And here the interpreter is St Augustine.

The preachers and professors, the dullards and groundlings, the literal-minded are those who try to find the meaning of a parable by standing outside it and subjecting it to a sort of forensic examination. Jesus is referring to these when he speaks of *them that are without which seeing do not see and hearing do not understand.* The disciples, by contrast, are *insiders* because they *belong* with Jesus. Frank Kermode again: *To divine the true, the latent sense, you need to be one of the elect, of the institution.* This is the meaning of all those words about *entering* the Kingdom. The Christian disciple is the illumined insider because he enters the narrative and himself becomes part of the Gospel story

Let me put it another way. You can only understand the Gospel if you submit yourself to it. There is no understanding without standing under. Or again the delightful Frank Kermode says: *Not that the interpreter illumines the text, but that the text illumines the interpreter – like a radiance.*

Let us then enter the radiance of today's Gospel. The feast, the great supper, is God's gift of himself to us in ecstasy – the only thing that will take us out of ourselves. But this gift, because it is God himself, is inexhaustible. It is something that will thrill us and lead us further into the depths of his being, into ever closer communion, into new and deeper revelations of his beauty and truth. But we don't want the inexhaustible God. We want something we can manage.

We want a piece of ground to go and see to it. We want our five yoke of oxen. The third image Jesus offers is amusing: *I have married a wife and therefore I cannot*

come – as if the *therefore* went without saying! As the music hall song goes: *My wife won't let me*

Imagine Adam, who also married a wife, who wanted to manage everything – even his relationship with God - so he ate of the Tree of Knowledge. By his knowledge, his technology, his spiritual life became earthbound. He was after self-sufficiency – which is fine in the realm of agriculture. But self-sufficiency is the one thing you can't have in your relationship with God.

But there is that other tree, The Tree of Life. Adam does not eat of that, because he is not yet invited. It is not yet time. Then in the fullness of time: *Christ his own self bare our sins in his own Body on the Tree*. The Tree of Life turns out to be the Cross of Christ. The Scripture promises: *I will give you to eat of the fruit of the Tree of Life*. So the other Tree in the garden – the one from which Adam could not eat - is the Cross of Jesus. And the fruit of the Tree of Life is the Body and Blood of Christ. Here on this table this morning.

So there, we have done our Bible study. In a few minutes you will be invited to walk forward, take and eat of the fruit of the Tree of Life