

John Oxenham, the Manchester novelist and poet, perfectly sums up the equality and oneness of all men in the sight of God, in his great hymn:

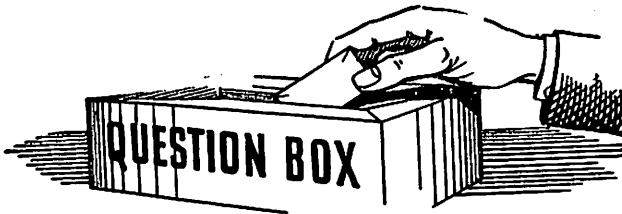
In Christ there is no East or West,
 In Him no South or North,
 But one great fellowship of love
 Throughout the whole wide earth.
 In Him shall true hearts everywhere
 Their high communion find:
 His service is the golden cord
 Close-binding all mankind.

Join hands, then, brothers of the faith,
 Whate'er your race may be!
 Who serves my Father as a son
 Is surely kin to me.
 In Christ now meet both East and West,
 In Him meet South and North:
 All Christly souls are one in Him
 Throughout the whole wide earth.

(John Oxenham, 1852-1941)

NEXT MONTH: HOME AND FAMILY

EDITOR



Conducted by
 James Gardiner

"In Mark 4:12 Jesus gives the reason why He spoke in parables. Could you please comment on this verse."

THE questioner is referring to the time when the disciples asked Jesus why He spoke in parables, and the answer is contained in verses 11 and 12: "Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God; but unto them that are without, all these things are done in parables: That seeing they may see and not perceive, and hearing they may hear and not understand, lest at any time they should be converted, and their sins should be forgiven them".

To most of us, at first reading the Lord's answer is very perplexing, for it seems that He is saying that He spoke in parables so that some would find the kingdom of God and that most would not. Most of us think that Jesus spoke in parables in order to make the message simple to understand, and so it comes as a surprise to us to hear it suggested that parables were used to wrap the message in mystery; some would be able to decode it, and some would not. On the face of it this would seem to be the position in Mark 4:11-12. But is this really so?

This incident is dealt with not only by Mark but also by Matthew and Luke (Matt. 13 and Luke 8) and I suggest a study of all three accounts. Indeed, I suggest that Matthew 13 provides a more comprehensive account of this conversation between Jesus and His disciples on the parables.

Teaching by parables

With a few exceptions, especially in John's gospel, the word "parable" is

simply the English word in Greek letters, and it comes from a verb which means "to throw or place side by side for purposes of comparison". It is used by the sacred writers both in a wider and a narrower sense: in the wider sense to mean an adage, a proverb, a dark saying, or sometimes to describe a lesson which is confirmed by a simile drawn from nature. In the narrower sense it is the name given to a connected narrative, whether of events in human life, or in the process of nature itself, by which some great spiritual truth is illustrated or enforced. The little girl in Sunday School wasn't very far wrong when she said a parable is "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning". Parables, of course, are to be found in the Old Testament as well as in the New. Jesus is not the only one in the Bible to speak in parables, but of course He used many and, as parables, His are incapable of being surpassed.

What were the advantages of speaking in parables? First of all they were invaluable in attracting attention — in Jesus' case He constantly had to address multitudes. Jesus spoke beautiful parables and people flocked to hear them. Nothing can be more difficult than inventing a suitable parable. Let anyone try it and he will see how difficult it is! We take Christ's parables for granted, for we have read them so often. Yet at the same time they are ever new and we constantly discover new beauties in them. The Lord's choice of the simple plot and the things of everyday life in His parables, was probably why "the common people heard Him gladly". The sower going forth to sow; the fisherman casting his net into the lake; the woman kneading her dough, or sweeping her house for the lost coin; the shepherd going after his lost sheep; the father and his long-lost son; the marriage procession; the hiring of labourers in the market place — all daily events or circumstances of life to which the people, rich or poor, could respond, and to whom these subjects had a ready appeal.

Parables also made a deeper impression on the mind and memory than any simple, bald statement of fact. "Who is my neighbour?" was a question which could have been answered by a few words yet Jesus spoke the parable of the 'Good Samaritan' which, I am sure, would never be forgotten by the questioner. The parable of the 'Good Samaritan' still has the same powerful effect. No one today asks, "Who is my neighbour?"

Reception by the Hearer

Yet other reasons why Jesus spoke in parables was to forestall violence against Him and to prevent his hearers from being too soon repelled by too sudden a revelation, either of His purpose or of His message. By and large the audiences to whom Jesus spoke were hostile to His message and intentions. His hearers were largely prejudiced against the truth and this "new" conception of the kingdom of God, and so Jesus spoke in parables to disarm their antagonism. This is not to say that Jesus was sheltering behind confusion caused by himself by making the message so vague by parabolic utterance that his hearers did not know that He was reproving them. Indeed, Jesus did not hesitate to call His enemies "Blind leaders of the blind", "vipers", "hypocrites", "whited sepulchres" and so on. Now however by His parabolic form of teaching He was placing a time-fuse alongside truth. By a process of *delayed action* truth now *filtered* through to the minds of the hearers of the parables, depending upon how perceptive and spiritually minded they might be. They were less likely to reject the message without properly hearing it; and less likely to do violence to the bearer of the news that they were hypocrites, if they were not told it in one word, but became gradually convinced of it by reflection upon a story they had been told. No one could take exception to the beautiful story, but men with bad consciences would soon perceive that Christ spoke the parable against them.

Nathan did the same thing to David (2 Sam. 12:1-7) in accusing him of great iniquity. Had the prophet gone in to the Psalmist and directly and immediately denounced him and pronounced sentence upon him, it is questionable if David would have listened to him, and it is almost certain that Nathan would have provoked David to anger rather than have led him to repentance. But Nathan, by telling the touching parable of the ewe lamb, awoke the better nature of king David, and when, after David had given his judgement in a burst of honest indignation, Nathan turned and quietly said, "Thou art the man" the effect was tremendous. Any anger or resentment David might have shown was completely defused and all he could humbly say was, "I have sinned" — words which struck the theme of the 51st Psalm and which began a lasting penitence of pure sincerity. Unhappily penitence was not produced in everyone who heard our Lord's parables and (in Matt. 22:33-36) in the parable of the wicked husbandmen, the chief priests and Pharisees at the end (but not till then) perceived that He had spoken of them. They sought to lay their hands on Him, but were prevented by fear of the multitude. However, He obtained his objective, for He had so held up the mirror before them that they recognised themselves and were *self-condemned*.

"Take heed how you hear"

This brings us to the reason Jesus gives of why He was at this time employing parables. It was *to test the character* of his hearers. A new value had been set on truth by making men take pains to find it. We lightly value what we lightly get. In parables Jesus does not so much teach us as to get us to *apply* the lesson, and thus teach ourselves. The parabolic form of teaching attracts only the thoughtful and spiritually discerning — those who have ears prepared to hear and eyes disposed to see: "There are none so blind as those who will not see." The parables thus both *attracted* and *sifted* the crowds.

To the eager childlike heart the parable was a challenge and an opportunity. To him that hath (such a mind) would be given. To the self-satisfied, proud and indifferent the parable was stupid and passed unheeded.

We notice from all three gospel records of this incident that Jesus, after relating the parable of the sower, said, "He that hath ears to hear let him hear". It was an *open invitation to all* to reflect upon the parable and learn. It was not a question of only the disciples being able (by some process of predestination) to understand and the rest unable. *All* were able to understand if they wanted to. The parables are easy for us to understand because we know the solution, but it would be difficult for the original hearers. Indeed *the twelve* rarely understood the parables. In Mark 4:13 Jesus chided the disciples for not being able to comprehend the parable of the sower and said, in effect, "If you cannot understand this one how will you understand the others?"

Having given the invitation to *all* to hear His parables Jesus points out that He spoke in parables so that the message would be more clear to those keen to learn and more veiled and mysterious to those who had closed their ears and eyes to the truth. *Mark's* account leaves us with the impression that *God is concealing* the truth from "those without" and thus preventing them from being "converted". This is a false impression for, in Matthew's gospel, we are told that the people have closed their ears and their eyes, lest God should heal them (v. 15). Their condition was similar to that of the people in Isaiah's day (Matt. 13:14). "Their heart had waxed gross (fat) their ears were dull of hearing and their eyes *they* have closed, lest at any time they should see and hear and be converted." *God* was willing, but they were not. Many people today are in a similar condition — they don't want to know. Jesus says that *by thus speaking in parables*, those keen to learn receive wonderful lessons, and those not keen to learn receive nothing at all. The parable was

designed to have such an effect, To the eager the truth is revealed; to the indifferent the truth is concealed — all done by the parabolic form of teaching.

The desire to learn

It was the habit, after Jesus had related a parable, for those keen to learn its meaning to remain behind after the throng had dispersed (like the extra-keen student after a college lecture) to question Jesus. These were *not just the twelve* (see Mark 4:10). *To all such* Jesus imparted the great spiritual lessons concealed in the parables. Those who did not enquire went home in ignorance (although further opportunities to ask were no doubt given). Those who *never* enquired died in ignorance. Thus mention is made of the principle (of God's) that to him who has shall be given, and from him who has not is taken away even that which he has.

In the closing verses of the discourse (Matt. 13:17) Jesus points out how privileged the twelve and the others were in hearing these things: not so much because they were privileged people but because they lived in the privileged age of the New Testament. May we feel equally acutely the privilege conferred upon us, in being able to share with them those things which prophets, kings and righteous men of bygone ages have desired to see and were not able.