



Parables of Jesus

The Hidden Treasure & The Pearl

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Proverbs 8: 11–21 Matthew 13: 44–46

It is a great pleasure to be here, and to worship with you in evensong tonight. The theme for Lent term, the parables of Jesus, is also very interesting indeed. In my address I will dwell first more generally on this phenomenon that Jesus was speaking in parables, in figurative speech, before zooming in on tonight's parable – the double parable of the finding of a hidden treasure, and of the ultimate pearl.

The very word parable (παραβολή), which is a loanword from the Greek term that is used in the Gospels, means 'something that is thrown beside something else' (παραβάλλω), and hence a parable sets up a comparison between two things. A parable involves a comparison, and draws an analogy. It has been pointed out by some scholars, that analogical reasoning is very important even in science, as we so often learn by drawing comparisons, quantitatively, between measures, numbers, and weights,¹ but also qualitatively. Although we use the idiom in a rather negative meaning, in science, what we should indeed do, is *comparing apples and oranges*, because we learn so much from doing so. Is light a particle or a wave? The use of such comparisons is highly stimulating and heuristically very helpful. Scholars such as Douglas Hofstadter, have emphasized the importance of drawing analogies, as it helps us to get from the surfaces to the essences of things.² Our thinking is highly dependent on analogical, parabolic, figurative thinking. And it allows us to employ not only our reason, but also our intuition.³ Analogical, parabolic thinking, thus, is very important.

Interestingly, however, according to the novelist H.G. Wells, in *The Time Machine*, it is his time traveller who travels to the utopia of the far future, who finds that those who have progressed so far in science, and live in, as he calls it, 'feeble prettiness', have by then entirely lost their figurative speech: '... their language', the time traveller found, 'was excessively simple – almost exclusively composed of concrete substantives and verbs.

¹ Cf. the book of *The Wisdom of Solomon* in the Septuagint (the Greek Jewish Scriptures): 'you have arranged all things by measure and number and weight' (11:20).

² Douglas Hofstadter and Emmanuel Sander, *Surfaces and Essences: Analogy as the Fuel and Fire of Thinking* (New York 2013).

³ Cf. the views of my brother, the neurologist Barend van Kooten, <http://www.heteffectievebrein.nl>.

There seemed to be few, if any, abstract terms, or little use of figurative language.⁴ Not only is there, in the comfort and ease of the future, no longer any interest in the past, and the London museums, even the Natural History Museum, are in an entirely dilapidated state,⁵ but also language itself is no longer figurative, because – mistakenly – there seems to be no need for it.

Against this background, it is highly interesting that Jesus spoke in parables. According to Matthew, from whose Gospel we have been reading tonight, Jesus told the crowds all things ‘in parables; without a parable he told them nothing.’⁶ Jesus is not the only one in Antiquity to speak in parables. In this he resembles Socrates, who is also always taking his starting point in common, every-day language and using them for drawing insightful analogies,⁷ and hence Socrates visits the everyday meeting-places of Athens, the Agora and the money-changers’ tables, where many of the Athenians heard him.⁸ According to Aristotle, the sayings of Socrates are parables, which, together with fables, are invented examples that illustrate something.⁹ Similarly, Jesus searches for all types of humankind, and prompts their response through parables that draw analogies, and by doing so also draw the hearers into the message. In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus even quotes the Greek fable-writer Aesop, when Jesus addresses the unresponsiveness of his audience by quoting from Aesop: ‘But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market-places, in the agoras, and calling to one another, “We played the flute for you, and you did not dance”’.¹⁰

The purpose of the parable is exactly that it not only draws an analogy, but that by doing so it draws the hearer into the story. It throws us too into the equation. This is exactly what happens in the two short parables that we have read tonight: the parables of the finding of the hidden treasure, and of the search for, and finding of the pearl, which are both unique to the Gospel of Matthew, and are not reported in the other Gospels. Matthew had a keen interest in reporting them, as he is so much interested in searching – a dominant theme in his Gospel. This is indeed what links both parables. It illustrates the nature of the kingdom of heaven by telling these parables. In the parable of the hidden treasure, we probably have

⁴ Oxford World’s Classics, 2017, 39. The reason for this, according to Wells, is that their intelligence is no longer challenged and that the human intellect ‘had set itself steadfastly toward comfort and ease’, attaining all its hopes; ‘There is no intelligence where there is no change and no need of change. Only those animals partake of intelligence that have to meet a huge variety of needs and dangers’ (73).

⁵ See chap. 11.

⁶ Matthew 11:34–35; cf. Mark 4:33–34. So there are already Markan parables (cf. the symbolism and figurative speech in Hebrews 9:9, 11:19) and also figures of speech / comparisons in the Gospel of John (παραομία, 10:6; 16:25, 29; no occurrences of παραβολή).

⁷ See Plato, *Gorgias* 491a (trans. Loeb Classical Library, LCL):
call. ‘How you keep repeating the same thing, Socrates!’
soc. ‘Yes, and not only that, Callicles, but on the same subjects too.’
call. ‘I believe, on my soul, you absolutely cannot ever stop talking of cobblers and fullers, cooks and doctors, as though our discussion had to do with them.’

⁸ Plato, *Apology* 17c (trans. LCL): ‘And what’s more, men of Athens, I do very much beg and implore this of you: if you hear me making my defence using the same arguments that I normally use both in the Agora at the money-changers’ tables, where many of you have heard me, and elsewhere, don’t be surprised and don’t heckle me because of this.’

⁹ Socrates, *Testimonia* (LCL), Part 2, Doctrine: D57 (I B16 G2) Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 2.20 1393b3–8: ‘an example of analogy (*parabolē*) are the sayings of Socrates (παραβολή δὲ τὰ Σωκρατικά)’.

¹⁰ Matthew 11:16–17 (cf. Luke 7:32), Ἡὐλήσαμεν ὑμῖν καὶ οὐκ ὤρχήσασθε. See *Aesop’s Fables* (translated with an Introduction and Notes by Laura Gibbs; Oxford 2002), #290: ‘The Fisherman and His Pipe’ (Herodotus 1.141 = Perry 11).

a farm labourer or perhaps a rambler, who stumbles upon a treasure in a field, and in order to secure it legally, first sells everything he has in order to buy that field and acquire the treasure.

It's an example that is still familiar enough. Every year treasure hoards are found across Britain, and the Treasure Act of 1996 sees to it that, although everything that is declared a treasure officially belongs to the Queen, the finders are entitled to a reward. In 2012, for instance, the largest hoard ever was found by metal detectorists in Jersey – a hoard of nearly 70,000 Roman and Celtic silver and gold coins.¹¹ No wonder that detectorists have recently been recognised by the British Museum as the ones who have helped us find Roman Britain. Previously derided as nerds and cultural vandals who disturb archaeological sites, they are now hailed for 'having transformed knowledge of Roman Britain by finding and reporting the vast majority of more than half a million artefacts'.¹²

The finder in tonight's parable, however, unlike the metal detectorists, did not search for his treasure but stumbled upon it. That is exactly the difference with the second parable: whereas the farm labourer or rambler stumbled upon his treasure and did not search for it, the pearl merchant is an expert, a connoisseur, who is in search of fine pearls. But like the farm labourer/rambler, when he has found the finest pearl he has ever seen, he sells everything he has in order to acquire this pearl.

I will now dwell a little on this second parable, because it might well be that we tonight more readily identify with the merchant-pearl searcher than with the rambler who stumbles upon his treasure. More easily with the searcher than the stumbler, with the scientist, the scholar than the lotto-winner, with the expert rather than with the amateur, although in tonight's parables it the stumbler who is said to have found his treasure *with joy*, rather than the expert – could it indeed be that we as scholars, as specialists, have lost our wonder and joy?

The real opposites of this inquisitive pearl-merchant in the Gospel of Matthew are the swine, who are utterly uninterested in pearls. As Jesus said earlier in the Gospel, '... do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you' (7:6). Actually, this statement is very similar to the Fables of Phaedrus, a Roman contemporary of Jesus, the fable of the cockerel, the young male chicken, on a dunghill, which 'while looking for something to eat, found a pearl. "What a fine thing you are," said he, "to be lying in so improper a place! If only someone who coveted your value had seen this sight you would long ago have been restored to your original splendour. But my finding you – since I'm much more interested in food than in pearls – is of no possible use either to you or to me."¹³ Whether swine or cockerels, neither animal is appreciative of pearls. And this comparison brings home the point that in order to be appreciated, pearls need those who appreciate their value.

Matthew's sustained interest in Jesus' statements about pearls is really remarkable. Pearls were a relatively recent discovery. They do not occur in the Jewish Scriptures, the Old Testament, even not in the Septuagint, its Greek version. The Greek name for pearl is *margaritēs* (μαργαρίτης), from which the name Margaret has been derived. Pearls become only known in the time after Alexander the Great's conquest of the East, when pearls from the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea make their way to the Mediterranean

¹¹ *The Times*, 3 February 2020.

¹² *The Times*, 6 February 2020.

¹³ Phaedrus, *Fables* 3.12: The Cockerel and the Pearl (trans. LCL).

and their trade becomes established by the 1st century BC.¹⁴ There are also pearls here, in the British isles, and – according to Roman historians – Julius Caesar ‘was led to invade Britain by the hope of getting pearls, and that in comparing their size he sometimes weighed them with his own hand’.¹⁵ Yet according to Tacitus, whose father-in-law was commanding a Roman legion in Britain, the British-Scottish pearls are of an inferior quality, as they are ‘somewhat clouded and leaden-hued’.¹⁶ Despite all this, pearling in Britain continued till it was banned in 1998. But the real quality pearls in the Roman empire came from the East, and so our pearl-merchant in tonight’s parable who sells everything, his entire collection, when he has found that great pearl, is in search of very rare and expensive objects, the value of which is regarded three times as valuable as gold.

So what does the value of that great pearl in Jesus’ parable stand for? First of all, it is remarkable that Jesus implicitly acknowledges that the gospel is not the only pearl there is. It may be the most beautiful pearl, but it isn’t the only pearl, and there is actually that stringing of an invisible chain of pearls, where the possession of one pearl leads to the quest of that greater pearl. This is exactly what Augustine writes in his *Confessions* when he refers to this parable of the pearl when he reflects on his own gradual conversion as a rhetor, first to a philosopher, and then a specific type of philosopher, and finally to a Christian.¹⁷ So Christianity is never in mere opposition to philosophies, but operates within a ring of convictions. Neither however does it endorse a sceptical type of post-factual post-modernism,¹⁸ where all positive convictions are seen as equally unfounded with the exception of the post-modern suspension itself. There is, according to the parables, swinish behaviour, just as there are ignorant chickens; there is muddiness; and there are pearls; and there are different qualities of pearls.

So what kind of pearl is the kingdom of heaven according to Matthew? What does make it shine? It is the nature of this kingdom, which is not a political kingdom, but a kingdom of a different type, a kingdom of heaven, the constitution of which is given in Jesus’ famous sermon on the mount in the Gospel of Matthew. It is about peace, it is about justice (6:33), it is about The Golden Rule – not in its prevalent negative form: ‘Do *not* treat others in ways that you would *not* like to be treated’, but in its emphatically positive form: ‘In everything do to others as you would have them do to you’, Jesus says (7:12). The kingdom of heaven is about inclusivity across political borders. In a time of strong political tensions between Rome and the East, between Rome and Parthia, Jesus’ kingdom of heaven embraces Romans *and* Parthians: not only Romans who stumble into the kingdom of God, as a Roman centurion who meets Jesus when Jesus enters his town,¹⁹ but it also – Matthew makes

¹⁴ For all information, see the Loeb Classical Library and the relevant lemma’s of the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* and *Brill’s New Pauly*, all digitally searchable.

¹⁵ Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars* 1. *The Deified Julius* 47 (trans. LCL).

¹⁶ Tacitus, *Agricola* 12.6 (trans. LCL): ‘Britain produces gold and silver and other metals: conquest is worthwhile. Their sea also produces pearls, but somewhat clouded and leaden-hued. Some people suppose that their pearl-fishers lack skill; in the Red Sea we are to imagine them torn alive and still breathing from the shell, while in Britain they are gathered only when thrown up on shore: for myself I could more readily believe that quality was lacking in the pearls than greed in Romans.’

¹⁷ Augustine, *Confessions* 8.1 (2).

¹⁸ For a critique from within, see Susan Neiman, *Widerstand der Vernunft: Ein Manifest in postfaktischen Zeiten* (Salzburg/Munich 2017).

¹⁹ See the Roman Centurion at Galilean Capernaum in Matthew 8:5–6.

clear – embraces the Magi, the kingmakers of the Parthians,²⁰ who do not stumble into Jesus, but *search* for him, as the pearl merchant does. T.S. Eliot's portrayal of the Magi, after their return from the West, is brilliant. As he describes them in his *Journey of the Magi*, once they have met Jesus and have returned home in their Parthian kingdom,

We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation ...²¹

That great pearl means that we are no longer at ease in divisive political realities. The laws of political realms only take care of their own citizens and their own interests, and perhaps must do that. Civil laws mainly prohibit particular disruptive, anti-social behaviour and regulate society. The non-political kingdom of heaven, however, positively encourages values such as justice and peace. It encourages us to search and find our rest in the values of its new lawgiver, Jesus, who says 'learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will *find* rest for your souls' (11:29).

And so does this parable of the pearl draw us into the equation, of whatever conviction we presently are. To some extent, we are all stuck in our positions, and need a parable, an analogy, a metaphor that allows us to reflect on our position, on our quest in life, on our stumbling and our searching. We are all often stuck in our literal, colourless positions, and in our unimaginative beliefs, whether they are agnostic, atheistic, or religious. All too often our convictions have become our dogmas. We become idolaters of literal, fixed positions. And in a sense, we all need that confession, and that prayer that C.S. Lewis offers in his poem on metaphor, called *Footnote to All Prayers*:

And all men are idolaters, crying unheard
To a deaf idol, if Thou take them at their word.

Take not, oh Lord, our literal sense. Lord, in Thy great,
Unbroken speech our limping metaphor translate.²²

²⁰ On the Magi as Parthians, see George van Kooten, 'Matthew, the Parthians, and the Magi: A Contextualization of Matthew's Gospel in Roman-Parthian Relations of the First Centuries BCE and CE', in: Peter Barthel and George van Kooten (eds), *The Star of Bethlehem and the Magi* (Leiden/Boston 2015), chap. 20, 496–646.

²¹ Cf. Eliot's own commentary in a letter (Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue, eds., *The Poems of T.S. Eliot*, London 2015, vol. 1, 760): '... the Magi were drawn by a power which they did not understand, and I used them as types of a kind of person who may be found at almost any period of history.' And a report that Mr Eliot explained that the poem 'showed the Three Wise Men, having gone on the quest for the infant Christ, alienated from and lost among their own more materialistic people.'

²² C.S. Lewis, *Collected Poems* (London 1994), 143: 'Footnote to All Prayers'.