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Sermon at Thanksgiving Service, Keble College Chapel, 23rd August 1992

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Sermon at Thanksgiving Service, Keble College Chapel, 23rd August 1992

Fr. Robert Murray

With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them without a parable (Mark 3:33-34).

It is with feelings of deep gratitude that I stand before you this morning: gratitude to God for the life and gifts of J.R.R. Tolkien, to himself for his friendship, and to his family for wishing that I should preach at this memorial service.

I do not know of Tolkien's ever being asked to preach a sermon, but he had a high ideal of what a good sermon should be.

Good sermons require some art, some virtue, some knowledge. Real sermons require some special grace which does not transcend art but arrives at it by instinct or "inspiration"; indeed the Holy Spirit seems sometimes to speak through a human mouth providing art, virtue and insight he does not himself possess: but the occasions are rare.

(Tolkien, 1981, p. 75).

Tolkien recognised this gift in his parish priest, Douglas Carter, one of whose sermons inspired a long and theologically rich letter to his son Christopher (Tolkien, 1981, pp. 99-102). That was in October 1944, just about the time that I, newly arrived in Oxford, was discovering the joy of friendship with the Tolkiens. Less than eighteen months later, when they realised that I was being drawn to share their faith, they introduced me to Father Carter, which led to a lasting friendship with that wonderful man and preacher.

But sermons should not be overburdened with reminiscences; and Tolkien, though he enjoyed being honoured, would not have wanted a sermon to be focused on him, but only on the things of God. Yet it seemed right to choose a text on which we can usefully bring some of Tolkien's ideas to bear. As far as I know, he left few if any writings directly on the Bible; yet if we consider the text I have chosen, about how Jesus taught through parables, we can find in Tolkien's writings not only many passages bearing on the nature and power of this art in which Jesus excelled, but also wonderful examples of the art itself, though Tolkien never claimed the term parable for any of his own stories.

"With many such parables", says Mark, "[Jesus] spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it." In this sentence, clearly, "the word" stands for what Jesus intended to communicate, while "parables" are the means which he adopted. "The word", of course, means the Gospel, the Good News. As for "parable", today it is probably often thought of

as a kind of story implying a meaning, but this is rather *allegory*, which is only one of the many verbal arts covered by the biblical terms (Hebrew and Greek) which we translate by "parable". The primary sense is "comparison", but also included are allegory, proverb, satire and almost any verbal image, metaphor or paradoxical saying. Starting from the modern sense we might wonder if it is true that Jesus never taught except in parables; but if we realise that the term includes all his vivid images – "the lilies of the field [which] neither toil nor spin", or "blind guides" – then the statement is seen to be more broadly true.

Why did Jesus use parables? Mark says that Jesus spoke the Word to the people "as they were able to hear it", implying that he chose the medium of parable so as to temper his message to their capacity. But the question can be looked at in two ways: parable can be viewed in its attractive and stimulating power, or in its comparative obscurity as a mode of communication. The evangelists take the second viewpoint, and connect Jesus' use of parable with the fact which deeply troubled them, as it did Paul, namely that a large proportion of the Jews had not accepted Jesus as the Messiah and his teaching as the Word of God. Today, however, I would like to consider Jesus' parables rather in their art, as the method used by a wonderful teacher.

Mark's phrase "as they were able to hear it", though only a brief hint, is relevant to both aspects of the question why Jesus used parables. Mark implies that Jesus took account of the capacity of his audiences, realising how they varied both in education and in openness to him; he therefore chose not to confront them all immediately with a challenge for which many might not be ready, but rather to use a medium which could first attract and then fascinate and tease the mind, even for a long time, till the hearers might form their own response.

Parable, in its biblical range of meaning, is a skilful use of the arts of speech so as not to impose or compel, but to invite a response in which the hearer is personally active. One of the most instructive examples in the Bible is the parable by which the prophet Nathan brought David to repentance for his adultery and virtual murder (2 Sam 12). He tells the king a touching little story of a powerful rich man who forced a poor man to give up his one beloved ewe lamb. David erupts with a rage which betrays his inward turmoil, for his reaction is out of proportion to the circumstances in the story, but much more appropriate to his own sin. In itself the parable expressed no personal accusation; yet it so played on David's

imagination and feelings that it awakened his benumbed conscience and prepared him to discover and face the truth about himself. Only when the parable had done its work did Nathan turn the naked light of reality on David: "You are the man . . ." Since then, for every reader, this whole episode in the story of David has itself become a parable – for the power of stories to act as parables depends not on whether they are fictitious or factually true, but on whether they possess that potential universality which makes others find them applicable, through an imaginative perception of analogy, to other situations.

At this point you will all have picked up one of Tolkien's memorable words, "applicable". He used it often when discussing the power of stories to suggest more to the reader than they say, without their being artificial allegories. He always insisted, of course, on the autonomy of story as an art in itself, which needs no other justification than to arouse delight. A good story need not have a "message", yet Tolkien often acknowledged that most great stories, whether as wholes or in many particulars, abound in morally significant features which are applicable to the experience of readers far removed in time and place from the story-teller. In other words (though I do not think he ever said so), many stories partake of the nature of parable. There is, however, one species within the genus parable which Tolkien did discuss explicitly, and with an ambivalent attitude to it, namely allegory. He often expressed dislike of it, both in general and in C.S. Lewis's use of it. In his Foreword to *The Lord of the Rings* he said about allegory:

I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers. I think that many confuse "applicability" with "allegory"; but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author

(Tolkien, 1968, p. 9).

Tolkien could not, however, refuse allegory some place, provided it were kept in it. It could serve in an argument; there he was quite prepared to make up allegories and call them such, as he did twice in two pages of his great lecture on *Beowulf* (Tolkien, 1983, pp. 6-8). But even when discussing story he could be more tolerant of allegory, and allow that

any attempt to explain the purport of myth or fairytale must use allegorical language. (And, of course, the more "life" a story has the more readily will it be susceptible of allegorical interpretations: while the better a deliberate allegory is made the more nearly will it be acceptable just as a story.)

(Tolkien, 1981, p. 145)

All this is relevant to the interpretation of Jesus' parables, for it has long been a critical dogma that none of them is an allegory or may legitimately be interpreted as one. Yet allegory was part of the biblical parable genre; the prophetic books contain many examples, especially as a way of meditating on the history of Israel and other nations. Must Jesus be protected from the imputation that he ever told a story as an allegory, or that this may be among the possible

modes of "applicability"? Let us look at an example or two.

Mathew, Mark and Luke all begin their presentation of Jesus' parables with the Sower. This starts with a simple picture from ordinary life. It could have remained just that, a natural symbol, the potency of which to produce metaphor Jesus might have released poetically by a few hints. But he goes on, describing the kinds of place where the seed might fall and its fate in each, ranging from frustrated germination to the greatest fruitfulness. There Jesus stops, with his habitual call: "He who has ears to hear, let him hear". (Even this is metaphor, for physical hearing has ended; "hearing" now means inward perception and response.)

Now the disciples ask for an explanation. (Here the evangelists insert their discussion about why Jesus' teaching was not accepted by so many of his own people.) The interpretation which is then presented as Jesus' own is fully allegorical, in terms of different human responses to the Word. Now modern scholars are almost all agreed that this comes from early Christian reflection, not from Jesus. They may well be right in their linguistic arguments; but if an interpretation is given in the words of a hearer, that need not mean that he misunderstood the speaker's drift or imposed his own ideas. What shall we conclude? It is clear that Jesus left the people with an open-ended picture of seed sown with various results; but he and his audience shared a tradition of teaching through images, and he was a preacher proclaiming a radical message about God of which many of them must have heard rumours. They could hardly fail to see in the sower an image of Jesus himself.

As for the meaning of the rest, he left them free, but he had baited a whole string of hooks. Allegory is woven into the fabric of the parable, but with a delicacy which does not spoil the joy of working it out for oneself. And for *that* reason I believe that the interpretation which is given is not precisely from Jesus. Not that it says what he did not mean, but that it says less than he may have meant. It focuses the application on many kinds of hearers in their various situations. But the parable can be applied by *an individual* to his or her varying situations or states. On another occasion Luke tells us that, when Jesus was picturing some scenes of servants behaving responsibly or not during their master's absence, Peter asked him "Lord, are you telling this parable for us or for all?" (Lk 12:41). A perceptive question; but Jesus answered only by another question, still within the imagery of his parable, which could lead Peter and every reader to realise that the answer is "both".

Tolkien's "applicability" is a better, because more flexible, key to understanding Jesus' parables than any rigidly-defined set of categories. Let us look at the Good Samaritan. In its context the story is spoken to help an inquirer, who has shown good will, to answer his own question "who is my neighbour?" Jesus provocatively pictures a most hated kind of neighbour who does a most truly neighbourly action. The inquirer is forced to realise this. But then Jesus turns the question round: it is now no longer "how should I define (that is, limit) the category of neighbour?", but "how should I behave, now that I have had to recognize that *anyone* can be my neighbour?" Now in its own context this is a story which

seems to function not allegorically, but by virtue of what each character actually does or suffers. It is an invented story, not history, but it *could* have happened. Each character is significant in himself, not by symbolising someone else. What the story suggests is applicable to many other situations, but by the force of the good and bad examples it contains, not by allegory.

And yet it has been read allegorically. The church fathers developed an interpretation which makes the whole story and every detail into an allegory of the drama of sin and redemption. To give only some main points, "he fell among robbers" refers to the Fall caused by Satan. The Samaritan, interpreted as meaning "guardian", symbolizes Christ; his mount, the incarnation; the inn is the Church, and so on. The whole thing is amazingly ingenious; it edified generations of Christians. But beside a straightforward reading of the parable in its own context, it seems simply perverse. And yet. . . ? Is there not something about the Samaritan's compassion and taking trouble which almost irresistibly makes a Christian reader think of Jesus? This thought can then easily lead the reader to identify with the wounded man, and then to universalise him. And there you have the germ of a reading which is allegorical. In fact we find a simple form of this kind within a century after Luke.¹ Is *this* perverse, or is it another possible aspect of the story's "applicability"?

Once again I cannot do better than quote Tolkien:

Of course, Allegory and Story converge, meeting somewhere in Truth. So that the only perfectly consistent allegory is a real life; and the only fully intelligible story is an allegory. And one finds, even in imperfect human "literature", that the better and more consistent an allegory is the more easily can it be read "just as a story"; and the better and more closely woven a story is the more easily can those so minded find allegory in it. But the two start out from opposite ends. (Tolkien, 1981, p. 121)

"From opposite ends". This exactly expresses the difference between, on the one hand, the development of natural symbolism by metaphor, simile or parable and, on the other, the artificiality of allegory. The one starts from things and human life in the actual world, seeing them as charged with natural symbolic potency; a flash of imaginative insight perceives how this potency can engender new meaning in another context, and so *meta-phora* occurs, the transference of a symbol's power so as to illuminate something else; but it is offered freely to whoever can respond. Jesus' greatest parables work as complex forms of this way of "sub-creation", which we might call "nature-based"; and so, of course, do Tolkien's own stories – though we must note that the material on which his imagination worked was as much

human languages and words as the world and nature.

On the other side is allegory (of which poetic riddles may be regarded as singular specimens). The functioning of allegory is powered not so much by the symbolic potency latent in things or in human life as by a plan or message which the author conceals under artificially constructed symbols, with clues to lead the reader to discover what is the intended solution in the actual world. All this, I believe, is implicit in those short phrases in which Tolkien says that story and allegory "start out from opposite ends", and that [the applicability of] "the one resides in the freedom of the reader and the other in the purposed domination of the author".² But it is also important that he recognised that, in the greatest stories and allegorical narratives, the qualities of both modes of sub-creation may overlap and mingle. And so they do in at least some of the parables of Jesus.

One more feature of Jesus' parables, and a very important one, is signally illuminated by Tolkien's literary insight. Many of the parables represent persons coming to a moment of decision, the outcome of which has all-important consequences. Undoubtedly Jesus intended, by picturing vivid examples, to confront people with a challenge to realise the reality of God in a new way, and to change their values and way of life. Everything would depend on how they took this turning-point. You can guess what, among Tolkien's ideas, I see as bearing on this feature of the parables: it is his focus on the climax and outcome to which a "fairy-story" leads. In Greek literary theory this was called *katastrophe*, but to designate the diversity of outcomes, happy or unhappy, he coined the pair of terms *eucatastrophe* and *dyscatastrophe*. As a Christian, Tolkien saw "the *eucatastrophic* tale" as "the true form of fairy-tale, and its highest function" (Tolkien, 1988, p. 62).³ At this point the human sub-creative art of story becomes the "far-off gleam or echo of *evangelium* in the real world" (Tolkien, 1988, p. 64), the supreme Good News in human history. As well as in the essay *On Fairy-Stories*, Tolkien expressed this relationship powerfully in the poem *Mythopoeia* (Tolkien, 1988, pp. 97-101).

Time allows me to allude only briefly to examples of Tolkien's own "sub-creation" which (though he would have been embarrassed by the suggestion) could be compared with biblical stories. The Bible contains traces of various poetic creation myths besides the accounts in Genesis, especially in Job and the Psalms. But in all literatures since the formation of the sacred books of humankind, surely there is hardly a creation myth to equal, in beauty and imaginative power, the one with which *The Silmarillion* begins (Tolkien, 1977, pp. 15-22).⁴

¹ The simple allegorical hints come in Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* III, 17, 3. The complicated development was chiefly due to Origen (*Hom. on Luke* 34), and was summed up by Augustine (*Quaest. Evang.* II, 19). There is a brief summary of this at the beginning of C.H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (1935; Fontana Books 1961).

² Cf. note 1.

³ and cf. Tolkien (1981, pp. 101-2). Tolkien's formations from the Greek *katastrophe* were a useful (as well as elegant) development because, whereas the Greek word was ambivalent, in English it has only a "bad" sense.

⁴ Cf. Tolkien (1981, p. 195): "So in this myth, it is 'feigned' (legitimately whether that is a feature of the real world or not) that He gave special 'sub-creative' powers to certain of His highest created beings: that is a guarantee that what they devised and made should be given

I will say little here about *The Lord of the Rings*. Two of my quotations from Tolkien refer to his wish that it should not be read as an allegory. It is, of course, a monumental example of sub-creation of a Secondary World; its plot is woven with strands of *dyscatastrophe* and *eucatastrophe*. That he hoped it could stand as “a far-off gleam or echo of *evangelium*” is revealed in his published letter to myself, who had spoken of the concealed “order of Grace” (Tolkien, 1981, p. 172), and by the deep feeling of his reply to another correspondent, who had sensed in *The Lord of the Rings* “a sanity and sanctity which is a power in itself” (Tolkien, 1981, p. 413). How could he have dreamed that, within thirty years of its publication, readers in Russia would be drawn to the Christian faith by reading it?

Two stories of Tolkien’s, however, stand out as so rich in “applicability” that it is not improper to call them parables, though entirely in the form of pure creations of fantasy: I mean, of course, *Leaf by Niggle* and *Smith of Wootton Major*. Both of them abound in those qualities of parable, of *eucatastrophe* and *evangelium*, which we have been considering. But we must remember the words of Roger Lancelyn Green about *Smith of Wootton Major* which pleased Tolkien: “To seek for the meaning is to cut open the ball in search of its bounce” (Tolkien, 1981, p. 388). In place of comment, I would like to let play on them some lines from two poets, utterly unlike each other and unlike Tolkien. The first passage is a stanza near the end of Browning’s “Abt Vogler” (1864, stanza 10); it is more exalted than the simplicity of *Leaf by Niggle*, but I think that it says what the story hints at:

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All that we have willed or hoped or dreamed of good shall exist;
 Not its semblance, but itself; no beauty, nor good, nor power
 Whose voice has gone forth, but each survives for the melodist
 When eternity affirms the conception of an hour.
 The high that proved too high, the heroic for earth too hard,
 The passion that left the ground to lose itself in the sky,
 Are music sent up to God by the lover and the Bard,
 Enough that he heard it once: we shall hear it by-and-by.

My other choice is a short poem by R.S. Thomas (1972). Though Tolkien held that a product of creative fantasy could reflect “a far-off gleam or echo of *evangelium*, he never went so far as to suggest that “Faërie” could be an image of the Kingdom preached by Jesus. Perhaps he was too conscious of its unbaptised roots. And yet . . . Just listen:

THE KINGDOM

It’s a long way off but inside it
 There are quite different things going on:
 Festivals at which the poor man
 Is King and the consumptive is
 Healed; mirrors in which the blind look
 At themselves and love looks at them
 Back; and industry is for mending
 The bent bones and minds fractured
 By life. It’s a long way off, but to get
 There takes no time and admission
 Is free, if you will purge yourself
 Of desire, and present yourself with
 Your need only and the simple offering
 Of your faith, green as a leaf.