

PARABLES LIKE STONES

by Alberto Maggi

Presentation

Jesus made a great use of parables to convey his message. These are not a lesser teaching, like fairy tales, for simple people; they are a very important means that Jesus chose to teach the novelty of God's kingdom.

Parables may be defined the good news revealed through images, rather than through concepts. This is why in parables there are no speeches, but concrete realities.

The parables that the Evangelists handed down to us, are short stories whose true meaning can be fully understood and accepted by those who agree with God's intentions about man: to make every man his son. (cfr. Jn 1,12; Rm 8,15.23; Ep 1,5; Ga 4,5)

For those who are hostile or against any proposal of life, a parable is simply a story that does not influence their lives.

A parable conveys good fruits in those who listen to it, if they do not only understand it, but also accept it. In fact, many of those who understood the parables of Jesus, turned against him, because what he had said was against their interest. The hostility of the authorities was due to the fact that many parables that Jesus had taught, were like stones flung against the powerful display of a religious institution which had always been against the action of "*God with us*" (Mt 1,23): "*When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them and tried to arrest him*" (Mt 21,45-46); "*The Jews took up stones again to stone him*" (Jn 10,31).

By means of his parables Jesus tried to make the listener pass from the world of religion to the world of faith, from the Law to human love. For those who accept Jesus' message, his parables are stones useful to build the community of God's kingdom on the rock, which is the faith in Christ: "*Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house upon the rock; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon the house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock*" (Mt 7,24-25).

IF YOU DO NOT UNDERSTAND THIS PARABLE...

The parable of the sower (Mk 4,1-20)

In Mark's Gospel there is a parable that is different from all the others, because it suggests the way to understand all parables. When Jesus realized that his disciples had not understood the parable of "*The sower*" (Mk 4,1-20) he asserted: "*If you do not understand this parable, how will you understand all the other parables?*" (Mk 4,13).

For the Evangelist the right understanding of the first parable helps to understand all the other parables of the Gospels.

Context

To exactly understand parables, like any other part of the Gospel, it is always useful to observe in which context they were announced and to what kind of public Jesus wanted to address his message.

The context of the parable of *the Sower* is the first public teaching of Jesus after leaving his own country and even his own family, that considered him a fool. (cfr. Mk 3,21)

Jesus proclaimed the message of God's kingdom (cfr. Mk 1,14-15), but the effect was that the Scribes, who were the highest theological authorities in Israel, sentenced that Jesus was a blasphemer (cfr. Mk 2,6-7) and therefore could be condemned to death (cfr. Lv 24,16) (cfr. Mk 14,63-64). Also the Pharisees and the Herodians had already decided how to destroy him (cfr. Mk 3,6), and his family went down to Capernaum to seize him (Mk 3,21-34).

In this dramatic situation the only positive fact was that the crowds still followed Jesus, though religious authorities had defined him a demoniac possessed by *Beelzebub*, the *prince of demons* (Mk 3,22). And Jesus addressed the crowds with the parable called "*The Sower*".

The setting of this and other parables in an agricultural context is not only due to the culture of that time. The message of Jesus, when it is accepted, can free all human vital energies; this is why, in the Gospels, the images of the cycles of nature are widely employed to explain the process of transformation that takes place in those men who accept God's word (cfr. Is 55,10-11).

Mk 4, 1 *Again he began to teach beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea; and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land.*
2 *And he taught them many things in parables and in his teaching he said to them:*
3 *"Listen!*

Jesus again started teaching. In Mark's Gospel the verb "*to teach*" means to explain a message that is contained in the Old Testament. This teaching, which is addressed to mainly Judaic listeners, could be carried out only by Jesus, who knew what was still valid in the Old Scriptures.

His disciples, who were still conditioned by the nationalistic ideology of the supremacy of Israel over other peoples (cfr. Is 60,12), were not authorized "*to teach*" but "*to preach*". It means they could announce the message without making use of any subject from the Old Testament (Mk 3,14).

Here again the Evangelist hints at the first time, when Jesus taught the crowds, when, like in this occasion he was "*beside the sea*" (cfr. Mk 2,13). Actually it is not a sea, but a lake "*The Lake of Galilee*" (Mk 1,16). The Evangelist expressly chose the word sea rather than lake to recall "*the sea*" that the people crossed to escape from the Egyptian slavery (Ex 14,2). Besides the sea marks the border between Israel and heathen peoples.

If religious and civil authorities refused Jesus and even his family was shocked by his behaviour, yet the crowds kept on following him because in his words they recognized the teaching coming from God himself (cfr. Mk 1,22.27).

Jesus spoke to the crowds with the same words Moses used to let people know God's will: "*Listen, Israel!*" (Dt 5,1; 6,3.4). But though Jesus recalled Moses' formula, he did not mention "*Israel*", because his message was addressed to all those willing to accept it, and not only to the people of Israel. God's kingdom does not belong to a single people but to all mankind.

A sower went out to sow.
4 *And as he sowed some seed fell along the path and the birds came and devoured it.*
5 *Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it had not much soil and immediately it sprang up, since it had not depth of soil,*
6 *and when the sun rose, it was scorched and, since it had no root, it withered away.*
7 *Other seed fell among thorns; the thorns grew up and choked it and it yielded no grain.*
8 *And other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold".*

With these words Jesus described the way of sowing in the Palestinian world, where the seed was first sown and then the ground was ploughed.

The seed was thrown by the sower on the ground, that showed four different aspects: *a path, rocky ground, among thorns, good soil*. On the path the seed was devoured as soon as it was sown; among the rocks it withered away while it was springing up; on the thorns it was choked while growing.

Only in the last part of the ground, the good soil, the seed brought forth such rich fruits to pay back the sower for the losses he had suffered. The abundance of the harvest is the sign of God's blessing: "*Isaac sowed in that land and reaped in the same year a hundredfold, because the Lord blessed him*" (Gn 26,12).

In the other grounds the lack of the growth and of the harvest was not caused by the seed, but by the lack of the necessary conditions to make it develop and grow.

In the action of the sower, that sows the seed everywhere, even where it seems hopeless, Jesus saw the action of the Father who does not distinguish those who deserve his love from those who do not (Lk 6,35) and gives his love and his creating word to everyone without any distinction.

9 And he added: "*Those who have ears to listen, must listen!*"

The parable that had begun with the invitation to listen (v. 3) ends with an exhortation that reminds Moses' reproach to the people that had not wanted to listen to the Lord's voice, though they had seen so many wonders: "*To this day the Lord has not given you a mind to understand, or eyes to see, or ears to hear*" (Dt 29,3).

In the narration of the parable, the invitation to listen is repeated three times (vv. 3.9.23) to emphasize its importance.

10 When he was alone, those who were about him, with the Twelve, asked him concerning the parables.

The *Twelve* are the disciples that Jesus appointed "*to be with him and to be sent out to preach and have authority to cast out demons*" (Mk 3,14). The number twelve, like all numbers in the Bible, has not an arithmetic, but only a figurative value. It wants to remind the people of Israel that, according to tradition, it was made up of twelve tribes (Gn. 49,28).

The question of the Twelve and of the others who were there concerns both the contents of the parable they had not understood and the reason of speaking in parables and not clearly.

11 He said to them: "*To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God*"

The novelty of God's kingdom was so shocking that it could be told the crowds gradually, only by means of images that helped them to understand it little by little. An open and clear announcement could only provoke in the crowds the same negative reaction it had had with the Scribes, the Pharisees and even with the family of Jesus.

The “*mystery of God’s kingdom*”, that the disciples should have already known, is that God’s love is universal and for “*all nations*” (Rm 16,26). This is why it does not recognize the limits that religions, races, morals want to impose on it.

The disciples, witnesses of Jesus’ actions, should have already understood the mystery of the Father’s universal love, that Jesus had revealed in his previous actions.

In the cleansing of a leper, Jesus had proved that no man could be considered impure and abandoned by God in the name of religion (Mk 1,40-45). When the paralytic was forgiven for his sins, also the pagan humanity, dying owing to their sins, was admitted to God’s forgiveness (Mk 2,1-13). When Jesus called the publican, this proved that also those who were not to be saved, were invited into God’s kingdom (Mk 2,14).

Finally, after Jesus had repealed the precept of the sabbath, the privilege that distinguished the Jews from the other peoples came to an end (Mk 3,1-5). Israel considered itself “*the first among nations*” (Am 6,1), but God had warned them that, for him, the Jews not only were like the other peoples, but also like their historical enemies such as the *Philistines*, the *Egyptians*, the *Assyrians*: “*For me aren’t you, Israelites, like the Ethiopians? The word of God. Haven’t I let Israel leave Egypt, the Philistines leave Caphtor and the Aramaics Kir?*” (Am 9,7); “*The Lord of hosts shall bless them: Blessed be Egyptians, my people, and Assyria, the work of my hands*” (Is 19,25).

But the disciples could hardly understand that the privilege of Israel had come to an end. God’s kingdom remains a mystery, because they are awaiting the kingdom of Israel (cfr. Ac 1,6).

Those outside, instead, are receiving all this in parables.

With the words “*those outside*” Jesus means his mother and his brothers who had come from Nazareth to Capernaum to seize him, as they thought he was beside himself. When they came where Jesus was, seeing him among the crowd, “*standing outside*”, they sent to him and called him: “*His mother and his brothers came and, standing outside, they sent to him and called him*” (Mk 3,31).

In the behaviour of Jesus’ family, the Evangelist represented both all those who had refused him, and those who would reject the new kingdom, judging it true madness.

The only possibility they had was a radical change in their mentality; to this purpose Jesus quoted a famous passage from the Scriptures, where the prophet Isaiah invited the people to a conversion:

12 though they see, they do not perceive, though they listen, they do not understand, unless they become converted and are forgiven.”

The necessity of a conversion is the main condition to accept the new Kingdom. That is why the Gospel of Mark starts with John the Baptist’s appeal to conversion for the forgiveness of sins (cfr. Mk 1,4). After John was arrested, Jesus began his preaching in Galilee and, he too, invited people to change their behaviour: “*The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel*”(Mk 1,15). The necessity of a conversion will be also the subject of his disciples’ preaching (cfr. Mk 6,12).

13 *And he said to them: "Didn't you understand this parable? How will you then understand the other parables?"*

Jesus realized that his people did not understand. They were waiting for a Messiah who would free them and change the situation of Israel; they did not understand that it was their duty to change.

God's kingdom shall come if the message of Jesus is accepted and can transform men, not by means of signs and wonders from the Messiah (cfr. Mk 13,21-22).

The parable proposed by Jesus invited to remove the obstacles that prevented God's word from bearing fruits. If the necessity of conversion was not understood, it would be impossible to understand all the other parables. For this reason Jesus himself started to explain it to his disciples:

14 *The sower sows the word.*

The rabbinical tradition taught that God sowed his Law among men (cfr. 4 Ex 9,30).

Jesus replaced the Law with his word. The Law was only for Israel. The word of Jesus was proposed to all men without any condition. But the answers are different.

15 *Among those along the path the word is sown, but, while they are listening to it, the satan comes and takes away the word sown among them.*

In the popular belief the world was inhabited by many satans that hindered men's different activities. One of them, *Mastema*, was the enemy of farmers and prevented them from sowing: *"And Prince Mastema, to destroy the soil, sent crows and birds to eat the seeds that had been sown, thus robbing men's children of the fruits of their fathers' work (and sent them) so that the crows picked up the seeds from the soil before it was ploughed"* (Jubilees XI, 11).

Jesus recalled these popular traditions to explain the action of the satan that immediately plunders the word as soon as it is announced.

In Mark's Gospel the satan was the image of power. While the whole message of Jesus suggested a God who served men (Mk 10,45), the satan that prevented the message being received, was, on the contrary, the impure spirit of the power and of the dominion exerted by the Scribes, the Pharisees and by the Herodians, and, at the same time, wished by the disciples (Mk 8,33; 10,35).

The warning of Jesus was clear: God's word and men's power are incompatible; in fact all those who hold power, aim at it or yield to it, are against a message that they consider a threat to their interest, their authority and their safety.

In the Gospel the categories that exerted their power were identified with the Scribes, who held the religious teaching, with the Pharisees who had the spiritual control and with the Herodians who had the civil power.

When Jesus declared the complete incompatibility between the word and the power, he denounced that the holders of the religious power, when they proclaimed God's word, taught something they did not know.

The disciples too, since they aimed at power, could not understand Jesus' saying: *"They did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it....on the way they had discussed with one another who was the greatest"* (Mk 9,32-34).

In the Gospel of Mark the *satan* was identified in one of the disciples of Jesus, Simon called Peter (cfr. Mk 8,33). Jesus had openly announced to his disciples that in Jerusalem he “*was to suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the Scribes and be killed*” (Mk 8,31), and Peter had rebuked him vehemently, because he did not agree with his master’s programme. With the same quickness employed by the *satan* to take away the sown word, Peter had reproached his master as soon as he had started teaching (Mk 8,31-32).

The Evangelist pointed out that Peter did not accept the word of Jesus because he did not want to follow a defeated Messiah, but only a victorious one. Not the one who would be killed by power, but the one who would get hold of it.

But not only those who exerted or aimed at power were indifferent and hostile to the message of Jesus. Against his message were also those who voluntarily yielded to power, bartering their freedom for safety, like the crowd that, after applauding Jesus with “*Hosanna*” (Mk 11,9-10) obeyed the orders of the religious authorities (the *satan*) and cried “*Crucify him!*” (Mk 15,13).

16 *Those sown in a rocky soil are the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy.*

17 *and they have no roots in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away.*

The message of Jesus is not an external code of behaviour, that a believer must comply with, like with Moses’ law, but a word that, when it is accepted, inwardly transforms man till it becomes his own word. In fact Jesus, when sending them to the mission, did not order them to announce his word, but also their word: “*I do not pray for these only but also for those who will believe in me through their word*” (Jn 17,20).

The word of Jesus and man are destined to become one only thing. The word is revealed in a man and this man becomes God’s word (cfr. Jn 1,14).

With the image of the sowing in the rocky soil, Jesus kept his distance from all those that were enthusiastic over his message, from those that accepted the Lord’s teaching with joy, because they found it corresponding to their needs and wishes, but later did not allow his word to transform their lives.

Jesus pointed out that, when his message did not deeply affect the believer’s life, changing his behaviour, (*does not root*), his acceptance of the Lord would inevitably be weak and short-lived. In fact Jesus said that those who do not take up their cross, cannot follow him (cfr. Mk 8,34).

This is what will happen to the disciples of Jesus.

The Lord had warned them: “*You will all fall away*” (Mk 14,27). In fact, when his followers realized that the acceptance of the message of Jesus endangered their safety, they did not think it any more profitable to follow their master and, as soon as he was seized: “*They all forsook him and fled*” (Mk 14,50).

The disciples had accepted Jesus because they had the ambition to sit one at his right and one at his left in his glory (Mk 10,37), but, when they realized that following Christ meant to face persecution and death, they stumbled upon their ambition. The word that Jesus had copiously sown among them had remained sterile and had given no fruits.

Jesus compared persecution to the action of the sun. The action of the sun on a plant is vital. If the plant withers, it is not the sun’s fault, but the fault is the lack of roots.

When the message is deeply rooted in the believer, a persecution becomes a spring of life, instead of being a factor of destruction; it can release vital energies unknown to the man himself (cfr. Mk 13,11).

18 *And others are the ones sown among thorns; they are those who hear the word,*

19 *but the cares of the world and the delight in riches and the desire for other things enter in and choke the word and it proves unfruitful.*

The third category is the most tragical. According to the biblical conception, when a ground brings forth thorns, it is a cursed ground (cfr. Heb 3,7-8; Gn 3,17-18).

Here the ground is deep and good; the seed immediately sprouts up, the plant growth is going to give fruits; but the ground was also occupied by weeds that had grown together with what had been sown, and, at the end, choked the plant.

With these images Jesus warned about the sorrowful consequences that will be met by those who, in the attainment of riches, saw the only solution to their economic problems. Wealth has never satisfied man, but on the contrary it has aroused in him new desires and needs, that have made him continuously feel economic worries, in a vicious circle that will never come to the end (cfr. 1 Tm 6,10; Qo 5,9; 4,7-8).

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus, hinting at the “evil eye”, which is the traditional image to suggest stinginess (Dt 15,9), warned: “*The eye is the lamp of the body. So if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is not sound, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!*” (Mt 6,22-23).

For Jesus the value of persons lays in their generosity, because everyone can be generous.

Only one category of people cannot be generous: the rich. If they were generous, they would not be rich. A person, who always wishes to be in possession of riches, is always worried about his economic conditions and so he is prevented from being generous. That’s why Jesus categorically left out the rich from the community of his kingdom (cfr. Mt 19,24).

Jesus invited to pay attention to the allurements of riches, because their progressive action (*they penetrate little by little*) can, in the end, stifle the message and man is left sterile, fruitless (cfr. Pr 11,28).

20 *But those that were sown upon the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit: thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold”.*

The ideal ground for the growth of the seed is a good soil, without any obstacles (*rocks, thorns*) that prevent the plant from growing. In this soil fruits are certain and the progressive and continuous growth (*thirty... sixty... a hundred*) fulfills man, leading him to his greatest development.

This fullness reached by a man, is not only due to his commitment but is the fruit of the action of God who helps his growth. Accepting God’s word does not lessen man, but makes him stronger, because following Jesus does not mean to sacrifice one’s life, but to fulfil oneself (cfr. Mk 8,35).

GOD'S PRESENT

The parable of the lamp (Mk 4,21-25)

Mk 4, 21 *and he said to them: "Is a lamp brought in to be put under a bushel or under a bed and not on a stand?"*

After speaking of the seed that grows and bears fruit, now Jesus compared this manifestation of a full life to light: it must not be hidden (to be put under a bushel), but be fully visible through the gift of itself (Mt 5,16).

Moses' law was presented by the biblical tradition as the light for men (Is 51,4) (Ps 119,105).

This law is now replaced by the word of Jesus.

While the observance of the "*incorruptible light of the Law*" (Ws 18,4) helped to light up the steps of men, the acceptance of the Lord's word changes men into light, and they are called by Jesus to be like him "*the light of the world*" (Jn 8,12; Mt 5,14).

22 *For there is nothing hid, except to be made manifest, nor is anything secret, except to come to light.*

For the time being, Jesus taught the crowds with parables and he clearly announced God's plan for men only to his disciples. It will be the task of his disciples to announce openly the good news of God's kingdom to all men: "*Go all over the world and preach the good news to all creatures*" (Mk 16,15).

23 *If any man has ears to hear, let him hear!*"

For the second time Jesus invited them to carefully listen to his message, repeating the warning he had already given at the end of the parable of the four grounds (Mk 4,9).

24 *And he said: "Take heed what you hear!"*

By repeating the verb *to listen* three times, the Evangelist wanted to draw attention on what Jesus was going to say. The insistence of Jesus on their listening to him is justified by the difficulty for everyone sent by God, to speak to those who "*have ears to hear, but hear not, for they are a rebellious house*" (Ezk 12,2).

The measure you give, will be the measure you get, and still more will be given you.

The “*measure you give*” is the quality of wheat to fill a bushel. The bushel, rather than hide the light of the community, is used to show generous love.

The love man gives is repaid by God with as much love (*will be the measure you get*). This doubles in the believer his capacity of loving, like the seed that had been sown bears at the beginning *thirty* fruits and then *sixty*.

God not only gives life to the ones who give life (*more will be added*) but this gift gives man a full life, just like a grain, at the summit of its process of growth, can yield a “*hundredfold*” (v. 8).

With this image Jesus assured the disciples that their growth did not depend only on their commitment, but on God’s love that came before them (1 Jn 4,10), accompanies them, strengthens them and transforms it into good (Rm 8,28).

The experience of God’s love kindles in man the same capacity of loving freely as he himself is loved, and to the extent that man’s love grows, he becomes more and more similar to God himself (Mt 5,48).

25 for to him who has, will more be given, and from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away.”

Jesus reaffirms what he had said before. The man who gives love, will be given an even greater and endless capacity of loving, because the man is inserted into the life itself of him who “*gives the Spirit without limit*” (Jn 3,34).

On the contrary, the man who does not love, has no life and is destined to total sterility: “*Those who do not love remain in death*” (Jn 3,14). The vital seed that was sown in them, is *taken away*, as the satan *takes away* the word (v. 15), and they end up by finding themselves in the same situation of those who did not accept the message of Jesus owing to their ambition for power (Mk 4,3.15).