WHY SPEAKEST THOU IN PARABLES?

I

THE New Testament records of the life of Jesus explain the fact that Jesus felt constrained to speak in parables in at least three different ways. We are told that He used them in order to fulfil the prophecy: "I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden from the foundation of the world"; in order to maintain the principle that those who had should have more and those who had not should lose what they had and, finally, in order to hide the truth from the crowds "lest haply they should perceive with their eyes . . . and turn again and I should heal them".

It is curious to note that among these reasons we never find that given by the modern apologist—the argument that Jesus spoke in parables in order to make the truth plainer; that He chose apt illustrations which to an Eastern audience would make His meaning far clearer than a mere literal presentation of the truth. Indeed, as we have seen, the Gospels make it abundantly clear that the parable was intended to hide the truth, not to make it plain for all to see. "Lest haply they should perceive with their eyes . . . and turn again and I should heal them" is a hard saying. Indeed, perhaps it is here that there lies one of the greatest stumbling-blocks of the Christian faith to the modern mind. The man and woman of to-day likes to see the truth put in a straightforward manner. He hates the shuffles and dodges of those who can never give a straight answer to a straight question. He admires Jesus in many ways, but he cannot understand why it is that when Jesus was asked a straight question, He so often gave an answer which, at first sight at all events, seemed to have little to do with the matter at issue—why, for instance, when the disciples ask: "Are you speaking this parable for our benefit, or for the benefit of all?" Jesus should reply with further parables instead of helping them to understand what He had already said.

Yet, whatever the answer to this difficulty may be, one thing at least is plain. Jesus used these indirect ways of speech so frequently and so consistently, that they are obviously a fundamental feature of His teaching. If we could but understand His reason for the use of parables we should get a far clearer idea of His outlook.

II

Before turning to see what can be said in favour of the parable, let us examine the arguments of its critics. To-day we are often reminded by modern writers, Professor J. B. S. Haldane for instance, that science hates mystery of all kinds. The scientist demands plain, clear-cut facts and equally plain statements of the conclusions which are to be drawn from those facts. He has no use for mystery and parable, he seeks only for information which can be placed in the crucible of criticism and evaluated for what it is worth. He rejects all statements which, no sooner have they been disproved, leave the way open for the retort that the original wording had been misinterpreted.

This scientific attitude, we are told, is or should be the attitude of all who love truth; who honestly want to know the facts of the world in which they live. It is the attitude which has come into the mind of mankind as a result of the teaching of science, and it is an attitude which is now spreading far beyond the realm of science in its narrower sense, and is being applied to every branch of knowledge.

Such are the criticisms of some of those who make science their profession. But many an ordinary man, too, has criticisms to add. He finds parables annoying in the extreme. He wants to know what a man is " getting at " as quickly as possible, and he cannot afford to waste time. Moreover, he has a suspicion that parables are connected with prevarication. Any one, be he knave or sage, can avoid every difficulty by refusing to answer clearly and giving utterance instead to a dark saying which, for all the majority of his hearers may know, has nothing to do with the question at issue. In the past it has been only too easy for men and women to gain reputations as prophets and seers by imitating the ambiguities of the Delphic oracle.

A little thought will convince us that the analogy upon which these criticisms chiefly rest is not altogether a happy one. It by no means follows that because a particular method is the best

for the sciences, therefore the same attitude should be adopted in attempts to teach men about moral and spiritual matters. The two spheres of knowledge differ chiefly in the fact that science is far less closely connected with emotional issues than are questions of rights and wrong and the relation of man to God. And it is curious to notice that those who are most inclined to exalt the scientific attitude are sometimes the first to relinquish it in their matrimonial affairs. The case of Ernst Haeckel is a well-known instance of this.

When we come to examine the matter more carefully we find that it is not altogether true that the scientist has no use for mystery. Indeed, it is rather the other way at times. It would probably be true to say that no research worker begins to investigate a problem without a hope that the thing he is studying will turn out to be something mysterious and beyond the ken of present-day ideas. If he is young and ambitious he fears nothing more than the possibility that all his work will turn out to be mere drudgery, mere repetition and continuation of what others have done before, and that in consequence he will never make a name for himself. Indeed, it is well worth drawing a parallel between the realm of unknown mystery which the scientific researcher in some new field of knowledge feels to be ever ahead of him, and the parables which Jesus left His hearers to puzzle out for themselves.

This parallel has not been altogether unobserved in the scientific world, even in modern times. Not long ago Professor R. S. Mulliken described what he calls " the scientific virtues " in words which bear a close resemblance to some of the sayings of the Gospels. " Nature," he writes, " plays the perfect Sphinx and is completely adamant to every clumsy attempt to force the locks that guard her secrets. Yet to the man who finds the correct combination for one of them, i.e. the truth, she yields without the slightest resistance. Further, the devotee of science, that is, if I may change the metaphor, the man who woos nature for her secrets, must develop enormous tolerance, in seeking for ideas which may *please* nature, and enormous patience, self-restraint and humility when his ideas over and over again are rejected by nature before he arrives at one to please her. When the scientist does finally find such an idea, there is often something very intimate in the feeling of communion with nature."

What is true of nature is true of the parable. Neither nature nor the man who uses a difficult parable seeks to throw facts in our faces, nor to persuade us against our will. In each case if, as it were, we begin to see the light through mists of darkness, we find that light becoming clearer and clearer: we are led on from truth to truth. If, on the other hand, we can see no ray of light, no explanation of the facts of nature or of the meaning of a parable, the chances are great that we shall remain in darkness. If we abandon the struggle, if we say, as men have said before now, that the facts are self-contradictory, that we cannot even hope to understand them, then we resign ourselves contentedly to the prison dungeon and deny that there is any world of light outside.

III

Yet despite the closeness of this analogy, it is still true that the scientist does not expound his views to others in the form of dark parables. He aims at the maximum of clarity in all that he says and, as we have already seen, he often detests obscurity in every form. Nature, he thinks, may indeed be obscure and difficult to understand but man is neither nature nor Deity that he should treat his fellow human beings in such a manner.

At first sight, therefore, we may still be apt to jump to the conclusion that teaching by parables is an unwarrantable method, wholly inconsistent with the scientific attitude. Yet, were we to do so, we should undoubtedly be wrong. We have as yet failed to draw an important distinction between the professional man who seeks to impart knowledge to his fellow professional men, and the same man when he is trying to win the interest and elicit the enthusiasm of one who at present knows nothing at all of the subject in question. Or, to put it shortly, we have failed to distinguish between the function of the professor and the teacher of children.

When this distinction is made, the apparent contrast disappears at once. Many able scientists have advocated the indirect or heuristic method of teaching science throughout their lives. Many of those in the teaching profession, indeed probably a majority, would adopt this method were it not that it requires too much individual attention. They maintain that the right way to teach children is not to tell them in black and

white what others have discovered, but to make them do experiments and find things out for themselves or, where this is not possible, to tell them of experimental facts which others have established and to encourage them to build up their own theories on the basis of these facts. They believe, in short, that the principle of " cast not your pearls before swine lest they turn again and rend you " is one which ought to be applied universally in the teaching of children, and that, despite the difficulties, science allows of this method rather better than do other subjects.

There can be little doubt that this is the right point of view. It usually happens that the direct way of teaching produces little incentive in a youthful mind. Indeed, it often creates a profound feeling of depression when a child realizes what vast masses of information others have acquired and reflects on the many years of arduous study which it will be necessary for him to undertake before he will be competent to make any contribution of his own to the world's stock of knowledge. And feelings of this kind are more creative of harm than good.

IV

Thus there is a very real sense in which the world, and the scientific world in particular, is coming round to see that a method of imparting knowledge essentially identical to that employed by Jesus is the only one which is satisfactory. Indeed, it is just because this method has not been applied in the past that the results of education have been so disappointing—that boys and girls leave school with no incentive to learn more about the subjects which they have been taught and too often feel that the days of bookwork are over. In some cases they even become actual enemies of education—thus rending the very people who imparted knowledge to them, as did the swine in the parable.

The heuristic method, of course, should only be used for the benefit of those, be they young or old, who are beginning to learn a new subject. It is a way of catching the fleeting interest and of calling forth some creative activity in the minds of those whose knowledge is limited. No one ever proposed that the heuristic method should be employed in scientific journals where it would be wholly out of place. In the same way, although Jesus often used parables to obscure the truth

to the crowds, He explained things fully to His disciples in private.

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Important as it is, this is not the whole story. A study of the New Testament clearly shows that parables were a late development in Christ's ministry. It is true that in such passages as the Sermon on the Mount we find an abundance of short parables—perhaps we had better call them analogies—and a few of these may have proved difficult for the multitude to understand. Yet it was only later that Jesus made the parable into His chief tool for teaching the multitude. There was evidently a time when the change was made very suddenly, for we read that the disciples were surprised at the time, and at once asked for an explanation. "Why speakest Thou in parables?" Clearly, then, Jesus did not intend from the start to use the elaborate parables of His later ministry. It appears rather as if the change was forced upon Him by the attitude of His hearers.

Nor is this difficult to understand. At the beginning all men were musing in their hearts whether John were the Messiah, and John had pointed the multitudes to Jesus. At that time, without doubt, interest in His teaching was widespread. But later, it would appear, Jesus was influenced by a widespread opposition to His teaching which developed particularly among the Pharisees. It was then that He changed His method.

After this Jesus went out of His way to obscure His teaching. It would seem that at times He feared, not that He had made His meanings too obscure, but that they were not obscure enough. Thus, in the parable of the sower, He drew attention to the great danger that many who heard His word would understand it too easily and so it would fall, as it were, on the surface of their minds. True, they would receive it with joy, but when once persecution or ridicule came their way as a result of the word, they would give up their faith and go the way of the world around them. But it was not disciples of that calibre that He sought.

In the explanations which Jesus gave as to the reasons why He chose the method of the parable, we find a deep understanding of the results of the heuristic method of teaching. In the account given to us by Matthew we read that in answer to the disciples' question, Jesus replied that He was using

parables in order to maintain the principle that: "Whosoever hath, to him shall be given and he shall have abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that which he hath." This is, of course, exactly the effect of the heuristic method of teaching. The child who begins to get in the way of discovering truth for himself is in a far better position to discover more truth than is another child whose knowledge consists only of what he has been told. The former pupil will possess an undying enthusiasm, the latter will soon find his interest flagging, and may ultimately forget all that he has learned. Moreover, the use of the parable and all forms of indirect teaching will only serve to hasten the process—it will actually repel those who are not prepared to think for themselves. And so it happens that: "Whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that which he hath."

V

Though Jesus used the method of the parable, it was clearly one which might create a good deal of misunderstanding. Of this misunderstanding He certainly had His fair share.

It is only too clear that ordinary men and women often fail to distinguish those who employ the method of parables in order to teach genuine truth from the mere charlatan. It is likely that Jesus was deeply conscious of this fact. It is easy for one who has an authoritarian position, such as a master at a school or the minister of a church, to escape all suspicions of this kind, for he is known to have degrees of a well-known university or training college and to have reached a high standard in his subject. But with Jesus it was otherwise. He did not come as a master of others but as a servant of all. Those who accepted Him as their master did so only of their own freewill, and if they wished to do so they were free at any time to leave Him. No wonder, then, if Jesus acutely realized that He often appeared as a charlatan—a mere mystery monger who avoided direct questions by using parables from which people would draw whatever meaning they pleased. Doubtless it was with a deep feeling of this kind that Jesus said on several occasions: "Blessed is he whosoever is not offended in Me."

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Before closing, let us turn from the parables of the Gospels to a sphere in which something akin to parables is of great importance to modern men and women—as indeed it has always been. We are too apt to suppose that allegorical ways of speech belong to ancient times, and that none of us can ever be called upon to interpret new puzzles to-day. But this is very far from being the case. Modern psychology has thrown a wealth of light upon the parable: it has shown us that many of our dreams are parables of our lives—parables which we often do well to understand.

Indeed, we are so made that scarcely a forgotten evil thought, scarcely a forgotten doubt, can pass our minds but that it casts its reflections into the land of our dreams. There we see parable upon parable in a realm where our friends are disguised as animals or precious possessions and our own mistakes and follies appear under the strange guise of missing trains or even the fear of indescribable horrors. There, too, our inmost faith will often assert itself and give us courage to face events which before had filled us with foreboding.

These parables of our dreams bear an almost unbelievably close resemblance to some of the parables of the Bible—both Old and New Testament. To take one such parable—almost at random—here is a man who has left his first love of God and has wandered away, squandering the precious years of his life. At last the joys of his youth fade and flee and he is left despondent and sick of soul, while even godless friends forsake him. Then, ashamed of his behaviour, he remembers the joys that were his when he loved and trusted the Heavenly Father. Hardly knowing whether God will receive him, he says to himself: " I will arise and go to my Father, and will say unto Him: Father I have sinned against heaven and in Thy sight and am no more worthy to be called Thy son, make me as one of Thy hired servants."

Thus, in his conscious mind, the prodigal is saying: " God may, perhaps, receive me—as a favour—if I promise to be His slave, at least, *if* He can forgive my years of sin." But deep down in the unconscious he knows what in his conscious mind he hardly dares to think—that the love of the Heavenly Father surpasses all the sins of man. And then, perhaps, he dreams, and in his dreams he pictures the long, weary road back to the Father's home; he dreams of his fears lest His Father is

justly angry and then—just at the climax—the truth bursts forth in all its glory: "Bring forth the best robe and put it on him." That surely is a dream which any man or woman might have to-day.

In the light of these considerations we begin to see how modern and sensible was the method used by Jesus. Indeed, perhaps one of the greatest faults of religion to-day is that it takes so little heed to Christ's example in the use of parables. In our religious education we teach creeds and catechisms, whereas one would have thought that this was contrary to the method of Jesus. It is possible that although meaning well we are actually creating boys and girls who are indifferent to the teaching of Jesus, just because we are for ever trying to tell them *what* is true instead of trying to help them to find out the truth for themselves.

If this is indeed so, is it any wonder if young people often turn again and rend us? Is it any wonder if they receive the ideas about God which we implant in their minds and then in later years give them up with as little compunction as they received them? Is it any wonder if much of the best intellect of our day is being diverted into science, while few feel called upon to spend their lives presenting the things of God to the modern man in a palatable way?

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