

# JESUS'S USE OF IMAGERY

By MICHAEL WINTER

THE PREACHING of Jesus as enshrined in the gospels is an invitation to belief. It is not an abstract statement of a theological opinion which was presented for its pure academic interest. The hearer or reader is invited with some urgency to take it up and live by it. If he agrees with the message he must answer it with real assent (in Newman's terminology) as opposed to merely notional assent. This practical response means the kind of assent which engages the whole personality with a view to action. In semitic terminology we can say that it is destined to influence the heart of man, which means not just his intellectual judgment but his emotions, free will and love. In short it will govern his life.

For this purpose graphic, dramatic imagery is far more satisfactory than clear and distinct ideas, which by definition confine themselves to the sphere of the intellect and do not necessarily require any practical steps in the realm of real life. It is difficult to exaggerate the power of images in the first apprehensions of religious truths in infancy. The earliest pictures and stories with which a child comes into contact are likely to stay with him for life, influencing all his subsequent theology, although they may have been forgotten at the conscious level. It has been suggested that Italian children are fortunate in that they frequent churches in which the mother of Jesus is always depicted as a woman of exceptional beauty.

Passing from the consideration of the purely pictorial, it is useful to reflect upon poetic imagery. Its necessity in some spheres was revealed a few years ago when British television showed a film about the persecution of the Jews in Nazi Germany, culminating in the concentration camps. At the time it was remarked that the subject was simply debased by presenting it in what could be called at best a documentary, but which had many features of a soap opera. Similar things have been said about prose descriptions of the Holocaust. In fact a tragedy of those proportions must be presented through a vehicle such as poetry. The most profound experiences of the human heart cannot be conveyed adequately by prose; they must have something like poetry as their vehicle, where symbolism and imagery can evoke what plain words cannot do. It is clear that religious truths come into this category, not only as we perceive

them, but also as God offers them. The richest and deepest truths of religion exceed the bounds of definition in prose or in logical categories; they too require a more comprehensive medium.

In the teaching of Jesus these requirements are fulfilled by the various kinds of imagery which he employed. The concept of the kingdom of God is a useful example. Its existential richness is portrayed vividly in a variety of ways, and it has evaded the restrictive categories which would have impoverished it. By contrast the theology of the Church has suffered through lack of this protective imagery. Because it is a community it has yielded easily to institutionalization, and this can be categorized all too easily in narrowly juridical terms. In this way the science of ecclesiology constricted the mystery of the Church in the period between Trent and Vatican II. The kingdom is less vulnerable to this reductionism, not least because its ideals, objectives and components have been presented in rich poetic imagery.

### *The parables of Jesus*

The best known examples of imagery in the teaching of Jesus are his parables. It is significant that virtually nothing similar has been discovered among his contemporaries. Joachim Jeremias has drawn attention to one similar kind of story in the teaching of one rabbi who was roughly contemporary with Jesus.<sup>1</sup> Other cultures are equally deficient in the idiom. It is said that the exception proves the rule. The allegory of Meneneus Agrippa which likens civil society to the limbs of the body is reproduced in Livy's *History of Rome*, and turns up again in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Its rarity highlights the absence of this kind of story from virtually all the teachers of antiquity apart from Jesus. It is a strong argument in favour of Jesus's own authorship of these stories.<sup>2</sup>

One feature of their didactic appeal is the conscious use of picturesque exaggeration which extends to the area of sheer impossibility as well as to that which is morally reprehensible. The camel is quite incapable of passing through the eye of any needle, but the image sticks immovably in one's memory. The unforgiving creditor of Matthew 19,23-25 is dealing with the improbable sum of about three million pounds in modern values. The unjust steward was a criminal (Lk 16,1-8), but, since the story is not an allegory, we are not urged to imitate the venality of his conduct. Misunderstandings on that point have led to great but unnecessary agonizing in the past. One lesson is proposed in each parable, and the artistic amplification is

not offered for imitation at every point. Less obvious but no less real is the deceitfulness of the man who finds the treasure in the field (Mt 13,44), yet it is clear that he bought the field for far less than its real value in view of its contents (known only to himself and not to the vendor). Singlemindedness is commended to us and nothing more.

It is reassuring to reflect that the cultural gap of time and place makes virtually no difference to the appeal of these stories. I wish that some of the New Testament demythologizers would stop exaggerating the alleged impossibility of our entering into the thought processes of the palestinian rustics of two millenia ago. Their imagery is so powerful that it has entered the conceptual patterns of modern English. The good Samaritan has become a familiar proverb as well as the name of a social welfare organization. The parable of the talents (Mt 25,1-30) gave a new word to our language. Talent is the transliteration of a Greek word relating to a sum of money, and the fact that we apply it to skill in music, athletics, drama and the intellectual life shows that our ancestors had understood the message accurately. Jesus was referring not just to religious or 'spiritual' qualities.

Clearly the parables of Jesus and many of his other sayings reflect the rural world of ancient Palestine, but only occasionally is that puzzling. The activity of the sower (Mt 13,4-23) becomes intelligible when we appreciate the simple fact that sowing came before ploughing in those days. When the seeds had been scattered on the surface subsequent ploughing was needed to dig them in, at a period when anything like a drilling machine had not been invented. Their availability to the birds was inescapable, but scattering them on the path was not really wasteful because the said 'path' was destined to vanish under the plough soon afterwards. (Perhaps the absence of a militant Ramblers' Association is the only real point of cultural difference!)

The labourers in the vineyard were hired casually, but it is not difficult for us to envisage the system. The London docks had something similar within living memory. The imagery of the vine in John 15 is familiar to anyone who has cultivated the plant in any climate, even in Britain. In December it must be cut back to the main stem. It looks as if it is being killed. In April or May the new shoots appear, and some of them have tiny bunches of grapes. These too must be pruned ruthlessly, cutting away all but one on each twig (so that they may produce yet more fruit). If this is not done the grapes will remain so small as to be useless for making wine.

From the very nature of a story it is clear that some of the parables in the gospels are so short that they are no more than a summary. Professional story-tellers have vanished from our society, and indeed they had gone long before television and radio. However, they are still to be found in other nations, in Morocco for instance. There the narrator will keep going for as long as he chooses, and perhaps until sufficient coins have been thrown into the bowl. It is the idiom of an illiterate and also an unhurried society.

Even the appearance in a parable of full-length treatment, as in the good Samaritan, may represent no more than an abridgement down to the essentials, although it retains the elements of a complete narrative. Other parables are little more than an *aide memoire*, perhaps for a later recitation by another teacher. Consider the sentence of Matthew 13,45-46: 'Again the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls; when he finds one of great value he goes and sells everything he owns and buys it'. This is just one sentence, which can be said easily in one breath, but with such brevity it cannot possibly have been the original form of the story. Clearly we have no more than a summary. This phenomenon may account for other sentences retained from the teaching of Jesus, which keep the vivid imagery of the parables, yet seem no longer to be even the summary of a story. We can see it in Matthew 6,28-30:

And why worry about clothing? Think of the flowers growing in the fields (lilies of the field, in older translations); they never have to work or spin; yet I assure you that not even Solomon in all his regalia was robed like one of these. Now if that is how God clothes the grass in the field which is there today and thrown into the furnace tomorrow, will he not much more look after you, you men of little faith?

Was the description once longer? Was it part of an elaborate story which took twenty minutes to relate in detail? It is impossible to say. What is important for this article is to note that the vivid rural imagery is there, inspiring confidence in God's providence far more persuasively than many purely theological treatments of the matter which one could recall.

It seems that this vivid imagery was so much part of Jesus's teaching idiom that it appeared not simply in well-constructed stories, but also in his moral exhortations which were delivered in the style of wisdom sayings. Perhaps it is pointless to make clear distinctions between parables and other exhortations. The idiom is the same,

and is equally forceful, as can be seen in another saying about trust in providence (Mt 10,29ff):

Can you not buy two sparrows for a penny? And yet not one falls to the ground without your Father knowing. Why, every hair on your head has been counted. So there is no need to be afraid; you are worth more than hundreds of sparrows.

One of the best examples, indicating just how powerful is this imagery, can be read in the encouragement to petitionary prayer (Lk 11,9-13):

So I say to you, ask and it will be given to you; search and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you. For the one who asks always receives; the one who searches always finds; the one who knocks will always have the door opened to him. What father among you would hand his son a stone when he asked him for bread? Or hand him a snake instead of a fish? Or hand him a scorpion if he asked for an egg? If you then who are evil know how to give your children what is good, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?

The imagery of daily life, and more particularly rural life, was so deeply embedded in the consciousness of Jesus that he employed it even in the unlikely context of his diatribes against the Pharisees:

Alas for you scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You who pay your tithe of mint and dill and cummin and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice, mercy and good faith. These you should have practised without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining at gnats and swallowing camels (Mt 23,23-24).

The choice of animals in the contrast is graphic even to those who do not know the palestinian environment. When we realize that they were respectively the smallest and largest animals with which the Palestinians were then familiar, the comparison gains more exactitude, but the lesson is vivid even before that final clarification is appreciated.<sup>3</sup>

Not only is the imagery well chosen to make the point convincing, but the underlying lesson is as necessary today as it was two thousand years ago. Recent history in the Catholic Church has provided the perfect illustration, with the disputes about family

planning. The principle is accepted, but the morality of different methods has been debated with such animosity that the quarrel has overshadowed every other ethical issue. The moral consequences of indiscriminate area bombing in World War II, the Nazis' treatment of the Jews, the economic exploitation of the third world and the build-up of arsenals of nuclear and biological weapons, have all provoked restrained condemnations couched in general terms. Priests have never been suspended for 'incorrect' opinions on these matters, nor have the laity been denied the sacraments for their views or actions. But when it comes to the pill, the full severity of spiritual penalties is brought to bear.

I have dwelt on that example at some length because it shows the perennial relevance of Jesus's teaching and the medium in which he couched it. The psychology is just the same in the human psyche today, both in religious matters and mundane affairs. Human beings can become obsessed with trivialities and ignore the gigantic issues. Psychologists have advanced convincing explanations for this all too human failing, but nothing has pin-pointed its moral deficiency as accurately as 'straining at the gnat and swallowing the camel'.

### *Apocalyptic imagery*

Whereas all of us can enjoy and understand the rustic imagery drawn from the farming villages of Jesus's homeland, there is another kind of imagery which is much harder to understand. I refer to the apocalyptic style. In his eschatological discourse Jesus speaks about the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the world, using imagery such as that the stars would fall from heaven and the powers of heaven would be shaken (Mt 24,29). In speaking thus he was making use of a style of imagery which he had heard but not invented, and which was well known among his contemporaries. It is the apocalyptic style. The first and greatest book in this idiom which has survived is the canonical book of Daniel written about 165 B.C. The style was employed in many Jewish religious works up to the second century A.D. The only other book written consistently in this style, and which is in the bible, is the Apocalypse of John, although the idiom occurs occasionally elsewhere as in the eschatological discourse of Jesus recorded in the Synoptics. According to D. S. Russell<sup>4</sup> about twenty books are to be included in this category, all but two of which are non-biblical. The class as a whole is approximately equal to the canonical New Testament in length. They are all

religious in character and include works like the *Testaments of the twelve patriarchs*, and the *Martyrdom of Isaiah*. What they all share in common is not their message but their medium, namely the apocalyptic style which Jesus used in his eschatological discourse. For the most part they were destined to be read privately and not declaimed in public. They did not form part of the Jewish liturgical collection used for worship in the temple and the synagogues. They are esoteric in character, giving heavenly secrets to a select band of the elect. Quite often a visionary is taken up to heaven where he receives the communication which he will then divulge to his coterie. In the recounting of the secrets he uses extravagant imagery, often of a cosmological character. This is exactly what Jesus uses in the passage in question. Sun, moon, stars and clouds will behave dramatically, and the normal course of nature is depicted as undergoing violent change. All this is difficult for the modern reader to appreciate, still less to enjoy. It has led to many disastrous misunderstandings, the worst of which is over-readiness to calculate the date of the end of the world. What is really at stake is something much simpler. It is the employment of this magnificently extravagant idiom to signify the transcendence of God and the greatness of his power.

At an earlier time in Israel's history they had come to know the true God as if he were a warrior deity of the desert, stronger than the gods of other tribes, who could thus ensure the success of Moses's compatriots in battle. From this humble beginning the prophets gradually unfolded to the nation just how great was their God. Eventually they came to realize that he was unique and that no other gods existed. The final stage of this development was to make it clear that the true God was not merely superior in power to Antiochus Epiphanes, the second-century persecutor, but that his power was of a totally different order. How best could this be conveyed except by the use of this gloriously flamboyant imagery? Personally I make no secret of the fact that I love it. I relish the vivid character and the extravagance of the imagery. Once again, as with the parables, it is an imagery which fires the imagination and moves the heart. It is an idiom which does not require the comprehending of a difficult philosophical system. In the long discourse in Matthew 24, Jesus employs this imagery to speak of his own second coming in glory, when his messianic status will be plain to all. Nothing could be more dull than the previous sentence in which I have described these world shattering events in plain prose. To do justice to them, and to

convey their urgency to the hearer, they must be described in an idiom which is literally and graphically world shattering. The Jews understood this, and Jesus made use of this well-known medium in order to convey this part of his message convincingly to his contemporaries.

For those of us who live out the pilgrim vocation of the Church in history the appeal to God's power is no less relevant today. For instance, the apparent impossibility of producing peace in the political arena is a case in point. We read of proposals and counter-proposals at the United Nations and at Geneva, about the parallel phased-out reduction of nuclear weapons. It meets with so little success that it is not unrealistic for us to look elsewhere for a possible solution. For Christians it is by no means unreasonable to seek for the establishment of world peace by looking for something of a totally different order. Something much more powerful is needed than the activities of well-intentioned diplomats trying to work out feasible compromises. Surely it must require the power of God. To convey the urgency and inspire confidence, we can do no better than to meditate on the imagery which Jesus and his contemporaries used in more or less the same situations. We need to be convinced of God's transcending power, and we must employ an idiom which does justice to it. Viewed in this perspective, we can see that the apocalyptic imagery which Jesus employed preserves its relevance even for our culture.

### *The neglect of Jesus's imagery*

It is said that nature abhors a vacuum, and the realm of imagery is no exception. If Christians do not employ satisfactory imagery, then a plethora of unworthy substitutes crowds in to fill the void.

For example, it is difficult to exaggerate the damage done to the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus by a mass of sentimental pictures, statues, prayers and hymns. The medieval and ancient artists who kept close to biblical imagery seemed to have the unconscious knack of getting things right; a knack which conspicuously evaded the Victorians. Their pictures in stained glass, on church walls or in the illuminations of manuscripts were always dignified and beautiful, even if perspectives were lacking and if their proportions were wrong. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries, instead, produced shocking examples of pictures and statues which are not exactly ugly, but just nondescript (like the representations of our Lady from the time of the Lourdes apparitions onwards). When



Epstein's Mother and Child was first displayed in Cavendish Square, London, viewers were profoundly shocked for it broke out of the pattern of depicting the christian heroes as insipid.

I do not wish to become too serious about this phenomenon of widespread lapse into bad taste. One german writer went so far as to classify it as blasphemy. I am not sure if I would go that far. However, I sympathize with his contention that, since it debased the dignity of God, the sentimentalism was not just a matter of bad taste but theologically offensive too, because it diminished in our eyes the greatness of God. The Church has been vigilant in the censorship of books, but since many people do not read much (even if they are literate), it is the pictures rather than the books which will more powerfully influence their ideas.

As I write this article, I have in front of me a photograph of the second-century statue of Christ the good shepherd taken from the roman catacombs. It shows a young roman shepherd boy with a sheep across his shoulders. It is beautiful, dignified, virile yet tender. By contrast the average repository at any pilgrimage centre contains pictures of the same subject which are insipid in every respect. Is it symptomatic of a correspondingly insipid presentation of religion in general?

Having despaired over the effusions of Catholics and Protestants of the last hundred years or more, it is with relief that one turns back to the classical portraits, the medieval windows, the ancient greek icons and the early christian imagery. They had retained the freshness and vigour of the imagery presented by Jesus himself. Much remains to be done if we are to put the record straight. The first step must be for us to immerse ourselves in the gospels in order to absorb fully the imagery which Jesus himself employed.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Jeremias, J.: *The parables of Jesus* (London, 1972), p 12.

<sup>2</sup> Jeremias, J.: *op. cit.*, p 12.

<sup>3</sup> Jeremias, J.: *op. cit.*, p 195.

<sup>4</sup> Russell, D. S.: *The method and message of jewish apocalyptic* (London, 1964), p 37.