

# In conversation with the Scriptures

## Already, but not yet

Cherryl Hunt explores how we read Scripture, in conversation with John Parr.

### Introduction

Matthew's Gospel is structured around five blocks of Jesus' teaching, sandwiched between narrative passages. The early readings in this issue are drawn from the introduction and content of the second block, which deals with Jesus sending out his disciples on their mission. The later readings continue with a little more narrative before covering all of the third block, which contains the parables of the kingdom. So, there is a clear focus on communicating the good news that the kingdom has arrived, but the parables point out that its fulfilment is still to come – it is 'already, but not yet'.

The selected readings from Paul's letter to the Romans explore some of his understanding of the gospel: Christ was crucified for sinful humanity and raised to life so that believers – who are united with Christ – might live for God. Paul speaks of this in terms of release from slavery to sin, so that we might become slaves of Christ, and of being part of God's family; those who walk in the Spirit of Christ are alive in him and are children of God. Here again, we can see the idea of 'already, but not yet', as believers wait for the full culmination of their adoption by God.

## Q How do these readings help us deal with the tension between how the texts speak of God's kingdom and our everyday experience?

### Cherryl

There were various expectations in Jesus' time: a military leader to end the Roman occupation; a religious leader to purify Israel. People looked forward to the 'end of the age' when God would usher in the new age, drive out evil and raise the dead, judge everyone and pour out God's Spirit. Jesus' ministry raised expectations, but not everyone received his message and things seemed to be going on as they were before. Even after the resurrection and Pentecost, there was a tension in the Early Church as people waited to see the fullness of the age to come, and struggled with temptation and persecution. These readings speak to those expectations and tensions. Jesus tells his followers to expect it to take time; the kingdom was not an instant event but a process of growth and enlargement. Meanwhile good and evil coexist. Paul speaks of what might be termed an 'already-but-not-yet-ness' where believers are adopted as children of God and yet await the fullness of that adoptive process. They are dead to sin and alive in Christ, but have to choose to live that way, and offer themselves to God as slaves of righteousness. That tension between what is and what will be is with us still, and the readings help us remember that this is normal Christian experience.

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### John

Tensions between 'what is' and 'what could be' encourage us to develop vision to guide and energise us. The 'kingdom of God' symbolised Jesus' vision of God's future, taking shape in his words and deeds. This edition's Gospel readings reveal Jesus' impressions of 'what is'. His world is like fields of shepherd-less sheep, preyed on by wolves (Matthew 9.36; 10.16); groups of children complaining at each other's behaviour (Matthew 11.16ff.); soil that promises abundance and scarcity, crammed full of wheat and weeds (Matthew 13.1ff., 24ff.). Jesus saw beyond 'what is' to 'what will be' in God's kingdom. Present and future will be as different as tiny seeds and great shrubs (Matthew 13.32), or the flour transformed into dough by hidden yeast (Matthew 13.33), or the treasure now buried then dug up (Matthew 13.44). Jesus' poetry more often suggests disturbance and disruption than peaceful progress. As he welcomes human actions that make the ground fit for God's future, he warns against the idolatry of identifying them as one and the same. His tension-driven vision combines hope with healthy realism.

## Q How do we understand parables, and how do we communicate their messages in the present day?

**Cherryl**

Stories are a powerful means of communication, and parables are mini-stories that shed light on something that they represent. Our contemporary situations differ in many ways from the life and times of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments. Therefore, we sometimes need to learn about the cultures and communication styles of those times in order to hear them speak to us. Once we have identified what we feel the message of the parable was back then, we can consider how to communicate that message in language that makes sense to our contemporaries. That may involve constructing a new parable, using modern language and images. We can also allow the original parable to speak directly today – what are people hearing from these verses? If the message they hear is different from the original content, that is not necessarily wrong, so long as what is heard is consonant with the rest of the Bible's overall message to us. The Spirit who inspired the parable and its record in the Gospels can use it today to speak to people's hearts.

**John**

Vision appeals to our capacity to imagine the world becoming other than it is. Parables are the poetry of this imagination, the stories and sayings that shock us out of those habits of seeing from which imagination has been evacuated. When Jesus pictured God's ways of engaging with the world, he refused to go beyond his parables' metaphors. God is only ever 'like' the farmworker, the householder, the shepherd, the landowner and the rest. Jesus' teaching was always a call to understanding and action, yet its imaginative appeal asked audiences to work out for themselves what he meant. Parables allowed Jesus to articulate a universal vision – God's future – without confining its shape to the circumstances of any of his particular hearers. They are the genius of a gospel for all times and all places, an invitation to be guided by past wisdom without feeling the need to be constrained by it.

## Q What can we learn from these readings about communicating the gospel in our culture?

**Cherryl**

The various books of the Bible present a (mostly) coherent story of God's ways with humanity using various media, including poetry (the Psalms and parts of the prophetic writings), histories (Kings and Chronicles), biographical accounts (Gospels), other narratives (Ruth, Job, and other ordinary folk and their dealings with God) and letters (Epistles). Similarly, there may be different ways in which we can bring God's message so that our neighbours and friends can hear it. Some may respond to a direct account of Jesus, his actions and teachings, while others may initially identify with a story – ours or another's – that resonates with their own experience. Some may find that a dramatic presentation touches them while others find Christ in the loving kindness of neighbours, where actions speak truths more deeply than words. Some may wish to explore the historical background to Jesus' story and think through the evidence, while others find answers to prayer or encounter God through seeing the body of Christ in its everydayness. The diversity of communications here encourages us to think creatively about how the overarching story of God's redemptive work through history, culminating in Christ, might be told afresh in twenty-first-century Britain.

**John**

Jesus' announcement that 'the kingdom of heaven is at hand' (Matthew 4.17) connected his Scriptural inheritance with the aspirations of people in the occupied territories of Galilee and Judea. Paul used the impulses of the Jesus story to extend their Jewish inheritance into the heady cultural mix of Greco-Roman cities. They both communicated the good news of God's end-time renewal in more than words. They combined the creation of boundary-crossing communities with sensitivity to the experiences of their audiences. Their legacy is a gospel with deep roots in the stories of Israel, Jesus and the Early Church. Its concerns are broad enough to create the widest possible communion with God, among people, and with the rest of creation. Its curiosity is engaged enough to embrace complex cultures in the name of Christ. Readings from Matthew and Romans don't simply tell us what to say. They also show us how to extend the gospel into worlds that their authors could hardly have imagined.

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