

1 Kings 3:5-12

Romans 8:26-39

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

LOGGING IN

When the disciples asked Jesus why he taught in parables, he quoted the prophet Isaiah: "You will indeed listen but never understand; and you will indeed look but never perceive."

We cannot learn from what is right in front of us, it seems, and parables work so well for us because they are indirect, because they come at things from somewhere unexpected.

The writer C H Dodd¹ gave the classic definition back in 1935: a parable is "a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought."

And so to describe the kingdom of God by talking about yeast is to take the hearer's mind on a journey that starts with the strangeness of the idea and ends with recognition of its power and clarity. Yeast? Yes – yeast is mixed into flour. A small active ingredient transforms a large inert mass. It's a very short and efficient metaphor.

If it were not for metaphors, theology would be impossible. If I am called upon to describe God, I can't: all I can do in the end is to say what God is like.

"The Lord is my shepherd," says the Psalmist David, but he means the Lord is "like a shepherd to me," leading me and looking after me. In the same way, from Jeremiah, God is like a father, or God is like a potter; from Isaiah, God is like a judge, or like a king. And from Isaiah chapters 42 and 66, God is like a mother.

Metaphors work because they grow out of our experience. A successful religious metaphor allows us to approach some great transcendent truth that is hardly knowable through something we know very well from our everyday lives by making us look at it in a new way.

It's interesting, then, to consider the language we will be using in our prayers and hymns at Harvest at the end of September, and how persistent that language is all year round. We will be ploughing, scattering, reaping, harvesting, shepherding; being fishers of men; and all the time keeping our lamps full of oil.

Much has happened since the golden age of Christian hymn- and prayer-writing: the Industrial Revolution; migration to the cities; mechanisation and mass production; steam; electricity; technology; electronics. Most of us in the world – and all of us here this morning – live very different lives from those of Thomas Cranmer, John Keble or Christina Rossetti.

In that case, isn't it strange that the language of faith changes so little? You would expect that, as our society changes – and the range of experiences open to us changes with it – our metaphorical language would change as well. But God remains a shepherd, not a social worker; a potter, not a welder or a programmer.

I tried to make a list of hymns written within my lifetime that have expressed worship in images drawn from my own daily life, but there aren't many.

In the 1960s, the book *100 Hymns for Today* included *God of concrete, God of Steel*, which I have to say I don't remember singing more than once or twice. *God of concrete, God of steel, God of piston, God of wheel...*

The 1983 revision of *Hymns Ancient & Modern*, included the hymn *Life is great, so sing about it*. The first verse talked about *shops and buses, towns and people...* That brief attempt at a connection with the daily life of the people who might be singing those words is all I remember about it. That imagery had as little lasting impact on me as did the *God of concrete*.

A 1968 collection of Christmas music called *Faith, Folk and Nativity* had a few carols that at least set out to put the Nativity story in a more contemporary frame:

- *The Workers' Carol* included the lines: Fiercely the blast-fires burning/Ceaseless the wheels a-turning/Have you no room who labour/On the assembly-line?
- *Love to a stable low* asked what would have happened had the message about the baby's birth come through a television screen.
- The carol *Away Away* related the flight into Egypt of Joseph and Mary to the experience of refugees from the then-current conflict in Vietnam.

There must have been others, but if I cannot call them to mind from many years of singing and listening to Christian music, they evidently made little impact. Incidentally, none of those I have just listed are to be found in the current editions of the major hymn books.

It's the same story with liturgy. For all the experiments of the 1970s and 1980s, for all the work done on the Church of England report *Patterns for Worship* in the 1990s, we address ourselves to God in much the same way as did Thomas Cranmer.

Patterns for Worship seemed to promise much: “Worship is a door open to the rhythms of life... the whole of life... our hopes and fears, politics and problems, families and finance.” But in the book’s new prayers there was very little that tried to address God by drawing on the secular experience of the material world.

In the 20th century, the spiritual seemed to be continuously under threat from the material. I believe that was a false contradiction, for at the centre of Christian faith is something very material indeed – the incarnation. But it could be that a defensive posture towards materialism has made us cling to modes of expression and explanation that we regard as more spiritual (or, at least, that invoke experiences so remote from us that their real physicality can successfully be overlooked).

Otherwise, why have the material products of 20th century industry and technology not served more often as metaphors for the presence and the providence of God? The power that melted steel; the power released by the splitting of the tiny atom; the speed of communication between distant people and places; the drugs developed to fight diseases that had once been certain killers. If such metaphors are used, it is as sermon illustrations, not in published liturgies and hymns.

I do not mean to suggest that the established language of our worship should have been thrown away. I mean that if we do not re-examine and refresh our metaphors from time to time, there is a danger that they will no longer work. Worse still, they may stop being metaphors altogether and take the place of the things they are supposed to stand for. That would be a kind of idolatry.

If the 20th century was the century of materialism, then the 21st looks like being the century of disembodiment. The explosive growth of computers and the internet, or the World Wide Web, offer us new ways of relating to each other in cyberspace. This is such a radical and fast-moving change in the nature of human society that it is hard to know where it will go. Indeed, anything I say about it today will be out-of-date tomorrow. Some find that exciting, others find it frightening.

The web – I’ll call it that for short – makes it possible for millions of people to read the same text, hear the same sound, or see the same image almost simultaneously. It overcomes so many of the limitations of time and space we have been used to that all the new legal questions of privacy, ownership, responsibility, identity and anonymity that it creates are only slowly being tested and resolved.

The web must raise new questions about our faith, because our faith is so bound up with other people and how we relate to them. The web could surely *answer* questions for us too, by supplying some fresh and fruitful metaphors we can use in thinking and speaking about God.

It is almost twenty years since the American psychologist and MIT professor, Sherry Turkle², suggested that people using the Internet might see the web itself as a new metaphor for God – God being like a network *to* which and *through* which we are all connected.

Charles Henderson³, a Presbyterian minister in the US, picked up the idea and pointed out that new metaphors don't drop from heaven, they come about just like the old ones did: "God speaks from the mountain tops to people living near mountains; God is spoken of as King when real kings rule the nations of the earth; likewise, in the information age, God will be perceived as being present in and through the network which connects us with each other and with the world in which we live."

I am certain there is a generation of young Christians who already use web language naturally amongst themselves, who are already logging on to God, uploading, downloading, web-chatting, tweeting and tagging and so on. But it's more than a question of the ever-changing jargon.

I don't yet see the influence of that big idea foreseen by Charles Henderson in commonplace, mainstream Christian thinking.

It will come. How could it not, since the web – not so much a machine but an ever-expanding organism – is an innovation that so transforms the way we live?

- Every time I connect to the web, it has changed and grown.
- It has a life of its own.
- It is not absolute but responsive, adaptive, self-healing.
- It does not grant me complete freedom, but within its rules I can give what I want and take what I need.

We used to think of a spiritual dimension transcending the physical dimension. We have yet to work out how the spiritual relates to the **virtual**. But God is there too – of that we can be sure.

AMEN

¹ *The Parables of the Kingdom* (revised edition: Scribner & Sons, 1961)

² *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (Simon and Schuster, 1995)

³ *The Internet as a metaphor for God* (Cross Currents, Spring/Summer 2000)