



Matthew 13:34–35

34 Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable. 35 So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet:

“I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world.”

Reflection

Jesus is the greatest preacher to have ever lived and so it comes as no surprise that Matthew's gospel contains five major discourses, or speeches, given by Jesus: The Sermon on the Mount (in chapters 5 to 7); the Missionary Discourse (in chapter 10); the Parabolic Discourse (in chapter 13); the Discourse on the Church (in Matthew 18) and the Discourse on the End times (in Matthew 23 to 25). Each of these speeches ends with the words 'when Jesus had finished speaking' which mark them out as distinct sections. Many find in them the key to the whole structure and shape of Matthew's gospel.

Today we find ourselves in the middle of Jesus' Parabolic Discourse found in Mat-

the chapter 13. It marks an abrupt change in Jesus' preaching style. Previously, his sermons have always been filled with illustrations, but in this chapter his sermons become illustrations, or as they are known in the bible, they become 'parables.' A parable is an illustration taken from daily life that has a deeper spiritual meaning, a bit like a riddle or a fable. But while illustrations are designed to shed light on something and make it clearer, parables often leave you uncertain about the point being made, they can remain elusive, challenging you and unsettling you in ways that are difficult to pin down.

Jesus' disciples have noticed this sudden change in Jesus' preaching. You can imagine them asking themselves, 'Why move from such clarity to these enigmatic sto-

ries?’ And so in verse 10 of Matthew 13 they come to Jesus privately and ask just that:

“Why do you speak to the people in parables?”

Several reasons for Jesus beginning to speak in parables have been offered in Matthew’s gospel so far. You’ll remember that Matthew 12 contained an increasingly hostile and bitter conversation between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders. They’re now openly looking for a way to have Jesus killed, accusing him in chapter 12 of using Satan’s dark arts to drive out demons. This was a serious charge, punishable by death. The Pharisees and teachers of the law eventually made one charge like this stick, and for it Jesus was

crucified on the cross. The charge that finally brought Jesus down was his claim to be the 'king of the Jews.' In Roman occupied territories, where there is no king but Caesar, for Jesus to preach about the coming of a new kingdom, and claim to be the Messiah, God's anointed king, the rightful king of God's people – this was extremely dangerous talk. So as opposition against Jesus heats up, the time for speaking plainly about the coming kingdom of God is over. From one perspective then, the parables enable Jesus to keep on teaching publically, while keeping the true meaning of what he is saying held back from those who would harm him.

But other reasons for Jesus beginning to speak in parables have been offered too. In quoting the prophet Isaiah earlier in the

chapter, Jesus has signalled that this generation has been given their opportunity. He's spoken plainly, with great wisdom and authority, and he's backed up what he's said by performing extraordinary miracles amongst them. Yet the vast majority of the crowds have either rejected him or are still sitting on the fence – just as Isaiah had prophesied they would. Their window of opportunity is closing, the parables are forcing their hand. Either receive them simply as confusing stories and leave it at that, or think hard about them, consider them very carefully, and then seek Jesus and his disciples out to have them explained. The effort will be rewarded but the time for fence sitting has come to an end.

Yet from another perspective we've also seen the brilliance of Jesus' parables as a

teaching tool. Through them Jesus turns the ordinary into extraordinary. The agricultural and fishing industries were the major employers in the region of Galilee. Capernaum was located near important trade routes where farmers, fishermen and merchants would sell their wares. Jesus' parables draw out pictures from the everyday lives of his hearers – sowing seed, harvesting fields, planting trees, merchants trading for pearls, fisherman sorting their catches – and fill them with newfound significance by transforming them into pictures of the kingdom of God. You can imagine how Jesus' preaching was received by these common folk. 'Finally a religious teacher who speaks our language, who's walked a mile in our shoes, who knows what it is like to be us and who can explain these truths about God in such re-

latable and memorable ways.’ How many synagogue sermons had they forgotten and yet now when they’re sowing their fields, or harvesting their crops, or hauling in their catch they find themselves being reminded of the kingdom of God. There’s never been a greater preacher than Jesus and his parables certainly made a big contribution to his preaching.

The narrator, Matthew, bursts into his own story today to offer us yet another reason for Jesus speaking in parables. But first he says in verse 34:

34 Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable.

In saying that Jesus only spoke in parables he's talking about this particular occasion in Matthew 13. Jesus increasingly speaks in parables throughout the rest of the gospel, for the reasons we've just spoken about, but he does not exclusively do so. In this chapter however he is only speaking in parables. The further reason is found in verse 35:

35 So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet:

“I will open my mouth in parables,
I will utter things hidden since the
creation of the world.”

He's quoting Psalm 78, his eight direct quote from the Old Testament that is fulfilled in Jesus. And again today from this

quote we get a sense of the privilege of being first hand witnesses to one of the most important events in the history of the world. In Jesus' parables, within his cryptic teaching about the kingdom of God, is contained truths that have been kept hidden since before the beginning of the world; the type of things even angels long to look into, truths that even the greatest people in the Old Testament prophesied about but never saw. This is what is being revealed in Jesus' parables. The original context of Psalm 78 is similar to the generation that Jesus is preaching to: the whole original generation had rejected God, they'd forgotten his promises, great judgement was coming upon them, and only a small remnant of them would be saved. Matthew is showing us that those events were pointing forward to Jesus'

day; what those events anticipated is coming to fulfilment in him right now. As back then, so now, judgement is coming on this evil generation; but for a privileged few, salvation. And through the events of these dark days, the offer of salvation will come to the entire world.

Think & Pray

Have you ever spent much time thinking about Jesus' parables? They're at once some of his most well-known, and least understood teaching. As we've worked through Matthew chapter 13 have you begun to see them in a new light? How do you feel about Jesus using his parables at once to confuse but also to carry deeply profound truth? What does it mean for the way we approach his parables? Why

not pick one from Matthew 13 now, or one of your favourite parables, anyone of the 27 that we find in the gospels, and really turn it over in your mind? Consider it more deeply than ever before. Why not the parable of the sower, or the parable of the weeds from yesterday? What riches does it contain about the kingdom of God? And then however you're convicted by it, pray through it, praise God for it, and thank him for the coming of his kingdom.