

Chapter 16

The Teachings of Jesus:
The Parables



What a parable is

Parables use everyday images

Parables are an important part of Jesus' teaching

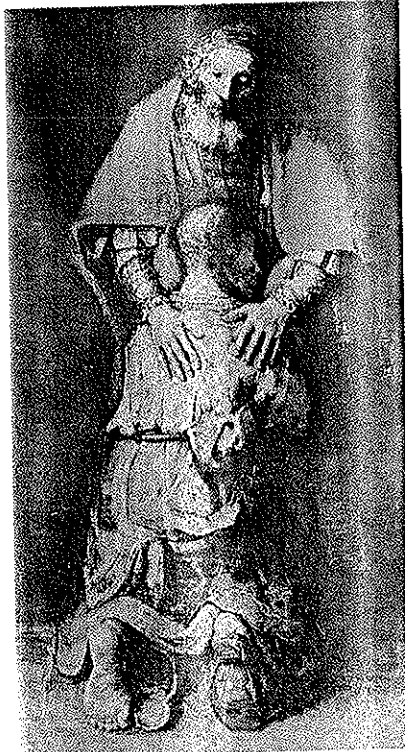
Parables often contain Kingdom of God images

16.1 What is a Parable?



Activity

Compose a simple story from everyday life that conveys an important message. Write it in a way that other people in your class will understand. Then try writing one for primary school children. Remember you have to keep it short, between 50 and 100 words.



Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn, *Return of the Prodigal Son*, c. 1668-69 (oil on canvas). The *Prodigal Son* is one of the most famous parables. The story is about a young man who squandered everything his father gave him. He then went back to his father and repented. This painting shows the father's love and forgiveness for his son.

A parable is a simple story, told in everyday language that contains an important message. There are many ways in which we can tell a story, especially a story with a meaning. Imagine that you have to write a story but in it you have to convey a message. You wanted people to remember the message and you want to present it in a way that encourages the listeners to think about what you have said. How would you go about it?



Think about

Parable checklist

Which of the following items is the most important in making a story interesting?

Length

Language

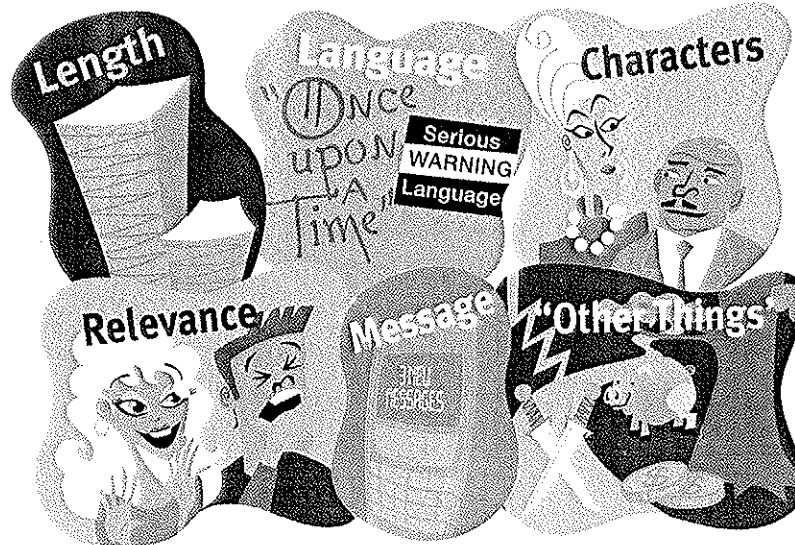
Characters

Relevance

Message

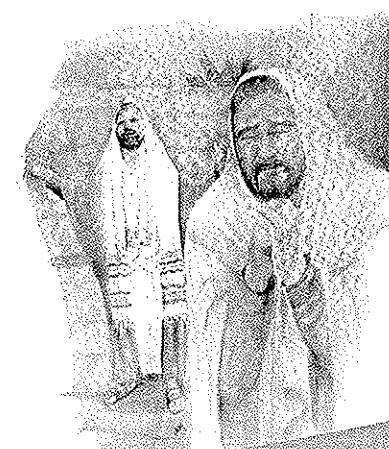
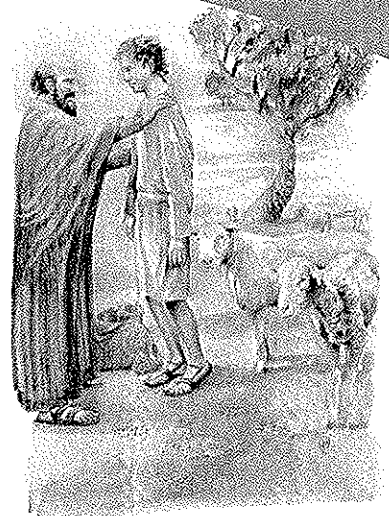
Other things

Give reasons for your answer.



The word parable comes from the Greek word *parabole* which means putting two things side by side so that they can be compared.

Parables have a long history. Many of the early Hebrew writings contained parables. The Greeks also used a form of parable – the fable made famous by writers such as Aesop. Many of his stories are well known throughout the world, for example, the story of the tortoise and the hare. The hare and the tortoise set off in a race. The hare is very fast and opens up a huge lead but does not maintain the effort and is eventually beaten by the consistent tortoise. Each fable ended with a message or moral. In the case of the tortoise and the hare, the moral is sure and steady wins the race. The point about the message is that it is not just about winning races. It is a lesson for life that can be applied to many practical situations.

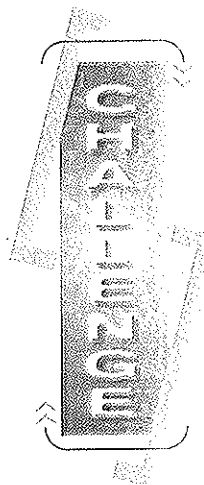


Activity

Jesus used parables to challenge the thinking and behaviour of his audience.

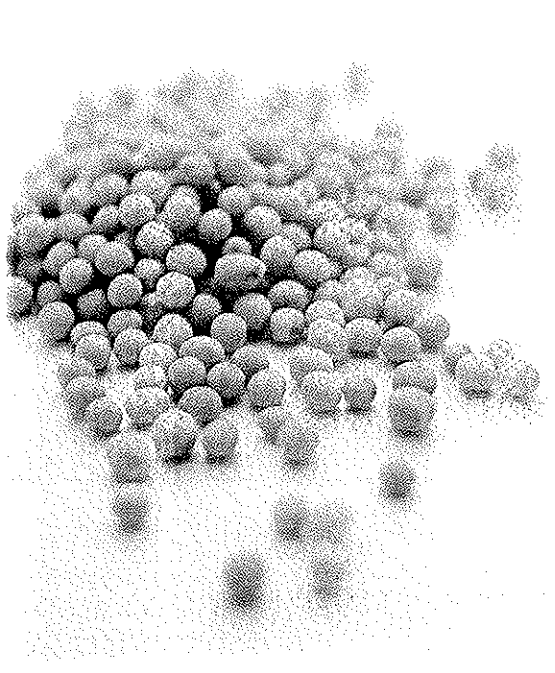
He used their everyday experiences to make sure they understood what he was saying.

There are many things in the modern world that Jesus would challenge. List at least five of these and give a brief explanation of why Jesus would consider each situation wrong or contrary to the values of the kingdom.



16.2 Use of Everyday Images

Parables are interesting and are usually concerned with one dominant message. They use many images that were very familiar to the people Jesus was addressing. There is nothing like recognising many of the places, things and people in a story to get you listening. Indeed, Jesus' parables are so well grounded in everyday life that they are still of interest today.



The Parable of the Mustard Seed



Activity

Read the parable of the mustard seed. Matthew 13:31-32.



Think about

What is the link between a mustard seed and the kingdom of heaven?

One of the features of parables is their length. This one is especially short, but see how rich in symbols and imagery it is. Have you ever seen a mustard tree? Chances are you have not. They are not common in our country. The people who first heard this parable would have been very familiar with the mustard tree which is particularly common in the region where Jesus preached. The mature mustard bush is also well known as a haven for birds which seek out its branches. The interesting thing about the mustard tree is the size of its seed. It is so small that it is almost invisible. The point is that it does not stay that size. It can grow into a tree of about two metres and is brimming with life. A living plant with birds nesting in its branches is an image of the Kingdom of God. This is the teaching that Jesus seeks to get across. The kingdom of God is not a place removed from people – something with which they are unfamiliar. Rather it is a place that protects and nurtures. We will look at some other kingdom images later in this chapter.

Parables often have people familiar to the audience as the main characters. These too would have been very familiar in Jesus' time.



Activity

Read the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, Luke 18:10-14.

Why is the tax collector praised and not the Pharisee?

We have seen that Pharisees were leaders of the Jewish community who strictly followed the religious laws. In the parable, Jesus is critical of the public way Pharisees drew attention to their religious practices. Tax collectors were also a very recognisable group in Jesus' time. They were hated because they collected taxes for the Romans and were known to be corrupt because they increased taxes so that they could keep much of the proceeds. The tax collector in this parable humbles himself before God. This parable contrasts the attitudes of two groups. What would have made this story memorable for those who heard it in Jesus' time was that he praised the hated tax collectors and not the Pharisees who saw themselves as leading members of the community.

In the parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector, the Pharisee refers to giving up a tenth of his income. This practice is known as tithing. Some Christian denominations today encourage their members to do this as a way of supporting their outreach and ministry.

Jesus praises the tax collector for being humble. Humility is a virtue. Being humble is not making yourself the focus of activity, but putting others first.

Can you be humble and proud at the same time? Discuss this with your partner.

Many parables are connected with the imagery of working the land, a theme very familiar to Jesus' audience who were very close to rural life.

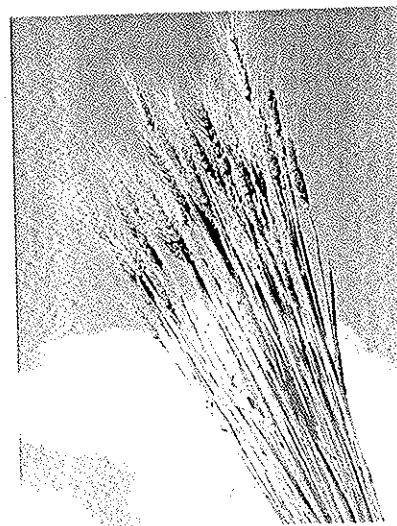
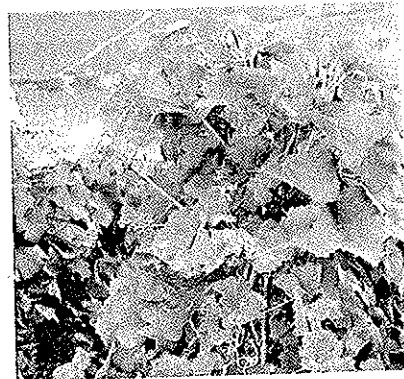


Activity

Read the parable of the fig tree in Luke 13:6-9.

What are some of the things the owner does to save the fig tree?

There is no mistaking the agricultural feel of this parable. It even goes into some detail, describing how the gardener will use manure to try and make the tree fruitful. As any fruit grower knows, it is not enough that a tree just survive. It must produce fruit. This idea would have been very clear to people who had their own fruit trees and were experienced in pruning them and trying to get them to be fruitful. This parable also gives us an insight into the life of the

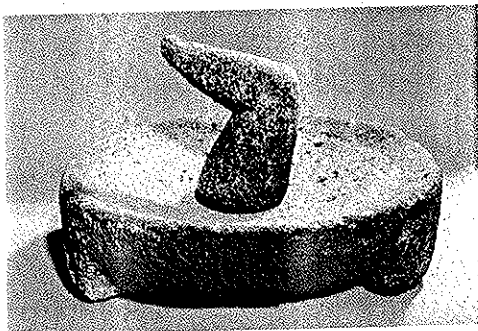


Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The gardener is clearly identified with Christ and the tree represents humanity. Just as the gardener tries to save the tree and make it fruitful, Christ intercedes for us with God the Father, the First Person of the Blessed Trinity.

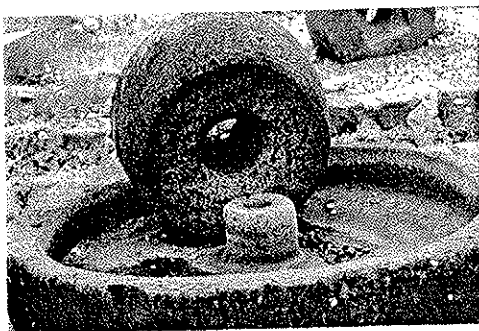


In the Gospels, three plants are mentioned on many occasions and this reflects their importance to the people of Palestine. The olive tree was grown throughout the region, often in relatively poor soil, and the oil produced was a basic ingredient in cooking. Olive trees if cared for properly could produce fruit for hundreds of years. Grape vines were also common, as wine was also a basic commodity. Virtually anyone could grow vines but to produce good fruit required watering and seasonal pruning. Wheat was widely grown in the north and depended on good rains for an abundant harvest. A good harvest meant plenty of food for the whole year.

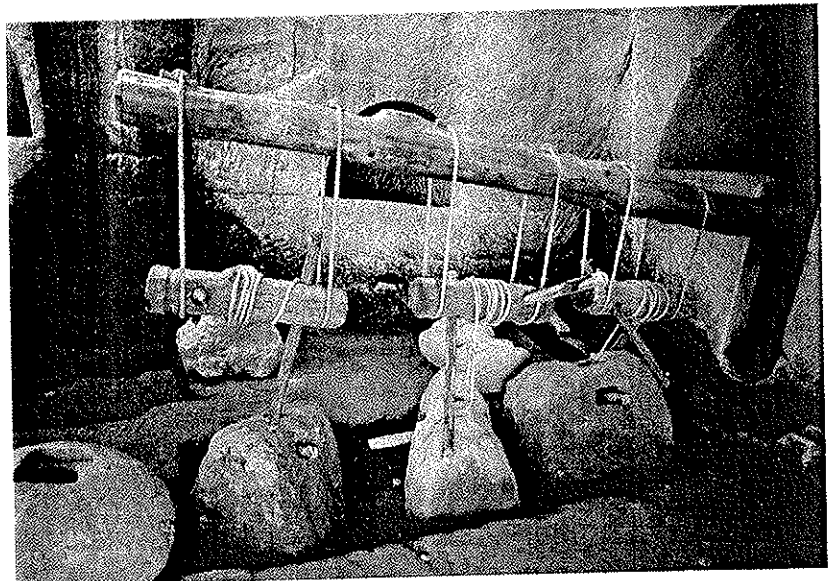
What are some of the characteristics of vines, olive trees and wheat which make them strong images for parables? What sacraments use oil, wine and wheaten bread?



Grinding stone made of black basalt, Herodian Jerusalem.



An Ancient Olive Press. Capernaum, Galilee.



Wine Press, Beit Govrin, Israel.



Activity

Group some of the themes used in the parables. These include agricultural images, images of nature, feasts and celebrations, and repaying debt. Give at least two examples of each image.



Think about

What is the point of telling a parable? Wouldn't it be easier just to tell people what the message of a story is?

16.3 Kingdom Images

Most parables are associated with telling us about the Kingdom of God, where God's will is done. Jesus announces the arrival of the Kingdom, when the power and authority of God will be revealed. We have already discussed the mustard tree as one image of the Kingdom. What other images of the Kingdom are used in parables? One of the most striking is the use of a feast to describe what the Kingdom will be like. Another is comparing the Kingdom to a treasure or item of great value.

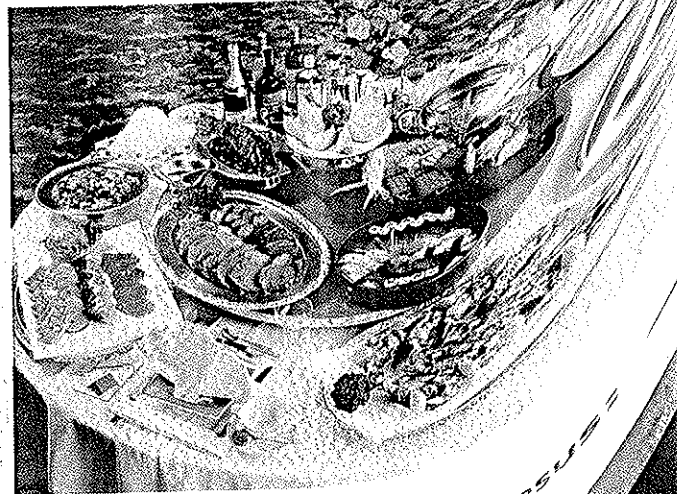


Activity - Read Matthew 13:44-46

The Kingdom is compared here to objects of great value. Finding treasure in a field was the equivalent of winning the lottery. With the turbulent history of the Jewish people involving banishment and exile, people sometimes buried their most valuable things, in the hope of one day returning. Many never returned, so it was possible to dig up treasure in the most unlikely places. Finding a treasure brings great joy and this is an important aspect of the Kingdom. It will be a time of great happiness, which is why feasts are often used as symbols of the Kingdom.



Paolo Veronese, *Feast in the House of Levi*, 1573. Galleria dell'Accademia, Venice. The banquet is one image of the Kingdom of God. Here Jesus eats with wealthy people; a reminder that the Kingdom is for everyone, rich or poor.

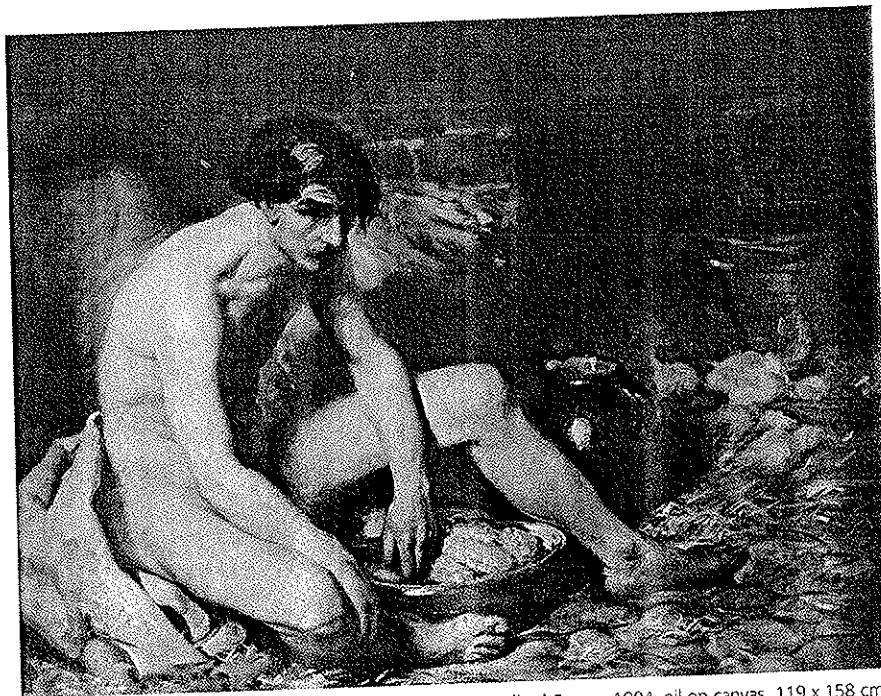


The Kingdom is also compared to a pearl. In our time, pearls are of great value, but they are not nearly as precious as they were in the ancient world. Pearls were very rare and someone searching for a perfect example could spend his or her life looking. This also tells us something about the Kingdom. First, it is something that needs to be searched and hoped for with great purpose. Second, when it is found it is a treasure without equal, the joy and peace of God.

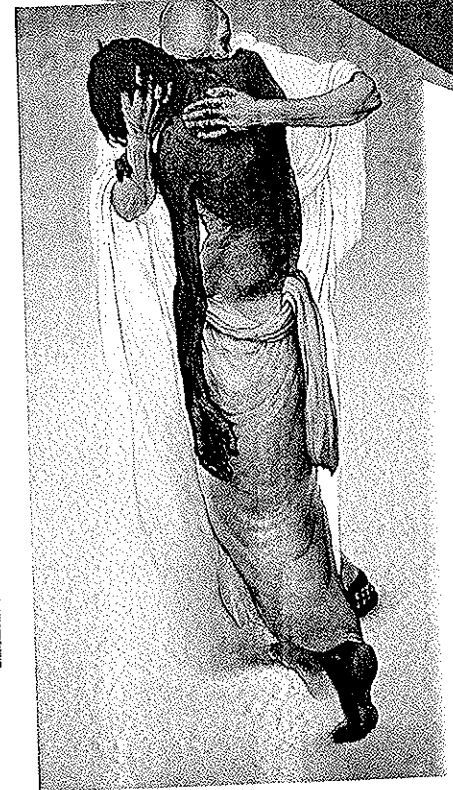


Test your knowledge

- 1 Give a simple explanation of what a parable is.
- 2 List some images that are used in parables.
- 3 Why were tax collectors hated by many people?
- 4 Name two plants that are mentioned in parables.
- 5 Give an example of how the Kingdom of God is described in a parable.
- 6 Using your Bibles, identify three parables and write a short summary of each.



Rupert Bunny, *The Prodigal Son*, c. 1904, oil on canvas, 119 x 158 cm.
Wesley Church, Lonsdale Street, Melbourne.



Frank Wesley, *The Forgiving Father*.
Indian Artist Frank Wesley's interpretation on the story of the prodigal son returning to his father.



Activity

Read Luke 15:11-32

Examine the two artworks: "Forgiving Father" and "The Prodigal Son."

1 On a full page in your workbook expand the word-board provided to consist of:

- (a) words to describe the emotions you see in the images
- (b) words and phrases from the Scripture which reflect these emotions.

Anguish - 'I have sinned'

PRODIGAL SON/FORGIVING FATHER

2 Jesus used parables as one means of getting people to think about their own lives and their relationships with God and others.

Use a text type response to explain your reaction to the text. Use the scaffold as a guide:

RESPONSE TO THE PRODIGAL SON

CONTEXT	THE REASON FOR STUDYING THIS SCRIPTURE
DESCRIPTION	Content of the Scripture How it was studied Points from class discussion
JUDGEMENT	Feelings you have as a result Does the Scripture help you think about your relationships?

LANGUAGE

- WORDS WHICH DESCRIBE YOUR FEELINGS
- WORDS / PHRASES FROM YOUR WORD BOARD