Finally, what constitutes our answer to the apology of Necessity and resignation is the faith that man is founded, at the heart of his mythico-poetic power, by a creative word. Is not The Good News the instigation of the *possibility* of man by a creative word?

CHAPTER 16

Listening to the Parables of Jesus

To preach today on the Parables of Jesus looks like a lost cause. Have we not already heard these stories at Sunday School? Are they not childish stories, unworthy of our claims to scientific knowledge, in particular in a University Chapel? Are not the situations which they evoke typical of a rural existence which our urban civilization has made nearly ununderstandable? And the symbols, which in the old days awakened the imagination of simple-minded people, have not these symbols become dead metaphors, as dead as the leg of the chair? More than that, is not the wearing out of these images, borrowed from the agricultural life, the most convincing proof of the general erosion of Christian symbols in our modern culture?

To preach today on the Parables of Jesus—or rather to preach the Parables—is indeed a wager: the wager that in spite of all contrary arguments, it is still possible to listen to the Parables of Jesus in such a way that we are once more astonished, struck, renewed, and put in motion. It is this wager which led me to try to preach the Parables and not only to study them in a *scholarly* way, as a text among other texts.

The first thing that may strike us is that the Parables are radically profane stories. There are no gods, no demons, no angels, no miracles, no time before time, as in the creation stories, not even founding events as in the Exodus account. Nothing like that, but precisely people like us: Palestinian landlords traveling and renting their fields, stewards and workers, sowers and fishers, fathers and sons; in a word, ordinary people doing ordinary things: selling and buying, letting down a net into the sea, and so on. Here resides the initial paradox: on the one hand, these stories are—as a critic said—narratives of normalcy—but on the other hand, it is the Kingdom of God that is said to be like this. The paradox is that the *extraordinary* is *like* the *ordinary*.

Some other sayings of Jesus speak of the Kingdom of Heaven: among them, the eschatological sayings, and they seem to point toward something Wholly-Other, to something beyond, as different from our history as heaven is from earth. Therefore, the first thing which may amaze us is that at the very moment we were expecting the language of the myth, the language of the sacred, the language of mysteries, we receive the language of our history, the language of the profane, the language of open drama.

And it is this contrast between the kind of thing *about* which it is spoken—the Kingdom of Heaven—and the kind of thing *to* which it is compared which may put in motion our search. It is not the religious man in us, it is not the sacred man in us, but precisely the profane man, the secular man who is summoned.

The second step, beyond this first shock, will be to ask what makes sense in the Parables. If it is true—as contemporary exegesis shows—that the Kingdom of God is not compared to the man who . . . to the woman who . . . to the yeast which . . . but to *what happens* in the story, we have to look more closely at the short story itself, to identify what may be paradigmatic in it. It is here that we run the risk of sticking too closely to the sociological aspects which I evoked at the beginning when I said that the situations described in the Parables are those of agricultural activity and of rural life. What makes sense is not the situations as such, but, as a recent critique has shown, it is the *plot,* it is the structure of the drama, its composition, its culmination, its denouement.

If we follow this suggestion, we are immediately led to look at the critical moments, at the decisive turning points in the short dramas. And what do we find? Let us read once more the shortest, the most condensed of all the Parables: Matthew 13, verse 44. Three critical moments emerge: *finding* the treasure, *selling* everything else, *buying* the field. The same threefold division may be found in the two following Parables: Matthew 13:45–46, 47–49.

If we attempt, now, to let these three critical moments expand, so to say, in our imagination, in our feeling, in our thought, they begin to *mean much more* than the apparent practical, professional, economical, commercial transactions told by the story. *Finding* something . . . This simple expression encompasses all the kinds of *encounters* which make of our life the contrary of an acquisition by skill or by violence, by work or by cunning. Encounter of people, encounter of death, encounter of tragic situations, encounter of joyful events. Finding the other, finding ourselves, finding the world, recognizing those whom we had not even noticed, and those whom we don't know too well and whom we don't know at all. Unifying all these kinds of finding, does not the

parable point toward a certain fundamental relation to time? Toward a fundamental way of being in time? I mean, this mode which deserves to be called the Event par excellence. Something happens. Let us be prepared for the newness of what is new. Then we shall "find."

But the art of the parable is to link dialectically *finding* to two other critical turning points. The man who found the treasure went and sold everything he had and *bought* it. Two new critical points, which we could call after a modern commentator, himself taught by Heidegger: Reversal and Decision. Decision does not even come second. Before Decision; Reversal. And all those who have read some religious texts other than biblical, and even some texts other than religious, know how much has been invested in this word "conversion," which means much more than making a new choice, but which implies a shift in the direction of the look, a reversal in the vision, in the imagination, in the heart, before all kinds of good intentions and all kinds of good decisions and good actions. Doing appears as the conclusive act, engendered by the Event and by the Reversal. First, encountering the Event, then changing one's heart, then doing accordingly. This succession is full of sense: the Kingdom of God is compared to the chain of these three acts: letting the Event blossom, looking in another direction, and doing with all one's strength in accordance with the new vision.

Of course, all the Parables are not built in a mechanical way along the same pattern. If this were the case, they would lose for that very reason the power of surprise. But each of them develops and, so to say, dramatizes one of the other of these three critical terms.

Look at the so-called parables of Growth: Matthew 13:31–33. This unexpected growth of the mustard seed, this growth beyond all proportion, draws our attention in the same direction as finding. The natural growth of the seed and the unnatural size of the growth speak of something which happens to us, invades us, overwhelms us, beyond our control and our grasp, beyond our willing and our planning. Once more the Event comes as a gift.

Some other Parables which have not been read this morning will lay the stress on the Reversal. Thus the Prodigal Son changes his mind, reverts his glance, his regard, whereas it is the father who waits, who expects, who welcomes, and the Event of the encounter proceeds from the conjunction of this Reversal and this Waiting.

In some other Parables, the emphasis will fall on the decision, on the doing, even on the good deed, as in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. But, reduced to the last critical turn, the Parable seems to be nothing more than a moral fable, a mere call to "do the same." Thus reduced to a moral teaching, the Parable ceases to be a Parable of the Kingdom to become an allegory of charitable action. We have to replace it within

the inclusion of the Parables of Event, Reversal, and Decision, if the moral fable is to speak once more as a Parable.

Having made, in that way, this second step and recognized the dramatic structure, the articulation of the plot which makes sense, we are ready for a new discovery, for a new surprise. If we ask: "And finally, what is the Kingdom of Heaven," we must be prepared to receive the following answer. The Gospel says nothing about the Kingdom of Heaven, except that it is *like* . . . It does not say what it *is*, but what it *looks like*. This is hard to hear. Because all our scientific training tends to use images only as provisory devices and to replace *images* by *concepts*. We are invited here to proceed the other way. And to think according to a mode of thought which is not metaphorical for the sake of rhetoric, but for the sake of what it has to say. Only *analogy* approximates what is wholly practical. The Gospel is not alone to speak in that way. We have elsewhere heard Hosea speaking of Yahweh as the Husband, of Israel as the Wife, of the Idols as the Lovers. No translation in abstract language is offered, only the violence of a language which, from the beginning to the end, *thinks through* the Metaphor and never *beyond*. The power of this language is that it abides to the end *within* the tension created by the images.

What are the implications of this disquieting discovery that Parables allow no translation in conceptual language? At first sight, this state of affairs exposes the weakness of this mode of discourse. But for a second glance, it reveals the unique strength of it. How is it possible? Let us consider that with the Parables we have not to do with a unique story dramatically expanded in a long discourse, but with a full range of short Parables gathered together in the Unifying form of the Gospel. This fact means something. It means that the Parables make a whole, that we have to grasp them as a whole and to understand each one in the light of the other. The Parables make sense together. They constitute a network of intersignification, if I dare say so. If we assume this hypothesis, then our disappointment—the disappointment which a scientific mind perceives when it fails to draw a coherent idea, an equivocal concept from this bundle of metaphors—our disappointment may become amazement. Because there is now more in the Parables taken together than in any conceptual system about God and his action among us. There is more to *think through* the richness of the images than in the coherence of a simple concept. What confirms this feeling is the fact that we can draw from the Parables nearly all the kinds of theologies which have divided Christianity through the centuries. If you isolate the Parable of the Lost Coin, if you interrupt the dynamism of the story and extract from it a frozen concept, then you get the kind of doctrine of predestination which pure Calvinism advocated. But if you pick the Parable of the Prodigal Son and extract from it the frozen

concept of personal conversion, then you get a theology based on the absolutely free will of man, as in the doctrine that the Jesuits opposed to the Calvinists, or the Protestant Liberals to the Orthodox Protestants.

Therefore, it is not enough to say that the Parables say nothing directly concerning the Kingdom of God. *We must say in more positive terms, that taken all together, they say more than any rational theology.* At the very moment that they call for theological clarification, they start shattering the theological simplifications which we attempt to put in their place. This challenge to rational theology is nowhere more obvious than in the Parable of the Good Seed spoiled by the darnel sowed among the wheat. The farmer's servants went to their master and said, "Sir, was it not good seed that you sowed in your field? Then where has the darnel come from?" Such is the question of the philosopher when he discusses theoretically the so-called problem of evil. But the only answer which we get is itself metaphorical: "This is an enemy's doing." And you may come through several kinds of theologies in agreement with that enigmatic answer. Because there is more to think about in the answer said in a parabolic way than any kind of theory.

Let me propose one more step, a step which I hope will increase our surprise, our amazement. Many people will be tempted to say, "Well, we have no difficulty dropping all systems, including rational or rationalizing theologies." Then, if all theories are wrong, let us look at the Parables as mere practical teaching, as moral or maybe political teaching. If Parables are not pieces of dogmatic theology, let us look at them as pieces of practical theology. This proposal sounds better at first sight than the first one. Is it not said that to listen to the word is to put it into practice? This obviously is true. But what does that mean, to put in practice the Parables?

I fear that a too-zealous attempt to draw immediate application from the Parables for private ethics or for political morality must necessarily miss the target. We immediately surmise that such an indiscreet zeal quickly transposes the Parables into trivial advice, into moral platitudes. And we kill them more surely by trivial moralizing than by transcendent theologizing.

The Parables obviously teach, but they don't teach in an ordinary way. There is, indeed, something in the Parables which we have as yet overlooked and which they have in common with the Proverbs used by Jesus according to the Synoptics. This trait is easy to identify in the Proverbs. It is the use of paradox and hyperbole, in such aphorism and antithetical formulae as: "Whoever seeks to gain his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will preserve it." As one commentator says, the paradox is so acute in this overturning of fates that it jolts the imagination from its vision of a continuous sequence between one

situation and another. Our project of making a totality continuous with our own existence is defeated. For who can plan his future according to the project of losing "in order to win"? Nevertheless, these are not ironical nor skeptical words of wisdom. In spite of everything, life is granted by the very means of this paradoxical path. The same has to be said of hyperbolic orders like: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you." Like paradox, hyperbole is intended to jolt the hearer from the project of making his life something continuous. But whereas humor or detachment would remove us from reality entirely, hyperbole leads back to the heart of existence. The challenge to the conventional wisdom is at the same time a way of life. We are first disoriented before being reoriented.

Does not the same happen with the Parables? Is their way of teaching different from that of reorientation by disorientation? We have not been aware enough of the paradoxes and the hyperbole implied in those short stories. In most of them there is an element of extravagance which alerts us and summons our attention.

Consider the extravagance of the landlord in the Parable of the Wicked Husbandman, who after having sent his servants, sent his son. What Palestinian property owner living abroad would be foolish enough to act like this landlord? Or what can we say about the host in the Parable of the Great Feast who looks for substitute guests in the streets? Would we not say that he was unusual? And in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, does not the father overstep all bounds in greeting his son? What employer would pay the employees of the eleventh hour the same wages as those hired first?

The Parables of Growth are no less implausible. Here it is the hyperbole of the proverb that is at work. What small seed would yield a huge tree where birds can nest? The contrast is hardly less in the Parable of the Leaven. As to the Parable of the Sower, it is constructed on the same contrast. If it points to eschatological plenitude, it is because the yield of grain in the story surpasses by far all reality.

The most paradoxical and most outlandish Parables, as far as their realism is concerned, are those which Joachim Jeremias has grouped under the titles "The Imminence of Catastrophe" and "It may be Too Late." The schema of *occasion*, which only presents itself *one time* and after which it is *too late*, includes a dramatization of what in ordinary experience we call seizing the occasion, but this dramatization is both paradoxical and hyperbolic; paradoxical because it runs counter to actual experience where there will always be another chance, and hyperbolic because it exaggerates the experience of the unique character of the momentous decisions of existence.

At what village wedding has anyone slammed the door on the frivolous maidens who do not consider the future (and who are, after all,

as carefree as the lilies of the field)? It is said that "these are Parables of Crisis." Of course, but the hour of testing and the "selective sorting" is signified by a crisis in the story which intensifies the surprise, the scandal, and sometimes provokes disapproval as when the denouement is "unavoidably tragic."

Let me draw the conclusion which seems to emerge from this surprising strategy of discourse used by Jesus when he told the Parables to the disciples and to the mob. To listen to the Parables of Jesus, it seems to me, is to let one's imagination be opened to the new possibilities disclosed by the extravagance of these short dramas. If we look at the Parables as at a word addressed first to our imagination rather than to our will, we shall not be tempted to reduce them to mere didactic devices, to moralizing allegories. We will let their poetic power display itself within us.

But, was not this poetic discussion already at work, when we read the Parable of the Pearl and the Parable of Event, Reversal, and Decision? Decision, we said, moral decision comes third. Reversal precedes. But the Event opens the path. The poetic power of the Parable is the power of the Event. Poetic means more than poetry as a literary genre. Poetic means creative. And it is in the heart of our imagination that we let the Event happen, before we may convert our heart and tighten our will.

Listen, therefore, to the Parables of Jesus (Matthew 13:31–32 and 45–46):

> And another parable he put before them, saying, "The Kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.
>
> "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it."