

Considering the parables of Jesus

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Jesus was evidently a great story-teller: he seems to have taught very often in the form of parables. So what is a parable? It's a short punchy story that doesn't so much give you an answer as provoke you to think. Like the gospel narratives in general, it seems to me that the parable stories are not retained as history or documentary in our modern sense at all, but as stories that capture a meaning, the resonance of which will be different over time and in different places.

Jesus' parables range from a single phrase with a vivid image, eg it is 'easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God', to a comparison, 'the kingdom of God is like...', to actual stories of the form of:

'Well once there was this man, and he...'

And then there is some kind of unexpected outcome that you never saw coming.

They often pose a question – the Good Samaritan – 'Who is my neighbour?' 'Let me tell you a story... what do you think?', a teaching style that we still think of as very Jewish.

It is also very Friendly: 'what canst thou say?'

He is often unexpectedly funny in ways we might miss due to over-familiarity –

eg Matt 7: 3-5, the speck in the other person's eye... and a plank in your own;

What do good shepherds do? Apparently they normally don't leave 99 unattended for the sake of one. And why is the volatile and vacillating Peter nicknamed Rocky?

We need to try to 'hear' Jesus' stories and parables as they were first heard – as fresh, provocative, shocking even.

There are anywhere between 35 and 60 of them, depending on how you count;

perhaps 46, eg <http://www.swapmeetdave.com/Bible/Parables/List-In-Order.pdf>

The parables are in the Synoptic gospels, the most Jewish of the gospels (ie not John): some are in Mark, but they're mostly in Matthew and Luke.

Dates: Mark probably c. 70 CE, Matthew and Luke around 80-85 CE; and John around 95 CE (most theologians and Bible scholars seem to converge round these dates, see eg Bart Ehrman).

The character of Jesus in the gospels (Francis Spufford, 'Unapologetically Yours 2', *True Stories: And Other Essays*, 2017, p.211):

a person inclined on occasion to freak out and lose his temper, especially with cruelty and self-righteousness; and serious to the point of horror about human failings, especially cruelty and self-righteousness; but never, never, for a single recorded instant, willing to discard any human soul as beyond the reach of love, whatever the law says.

It seems to me from the stories about his parables, his encounters, his actions, that Jesus didn't care a bit about what people thought or believed, whether they were on the right

side of the Law or not. What he really cared about was in their hearts what they actually did in practice. Nothing about 'orthodoxy' or 'right-thinking'; it's all about 'orthopraxis' or 'right action'.

1. What did Jesus care about?

The etymology from the Greek for parable – parabolí, παραβολή – means a shot or a throw (volí), something that you throw beside something else (para): it is an analogy, a teaching tool, a query. What is this message he seems so keen to point to all the time?

For me, it's summed up in the recurrent phrase he uses, 'the kingdom of God'.

Jesus spoke as a radical Jewish prophet in the tradition of the prophets.

The way he proceeded was to re-energize the tradition, drawing on key points in the scriptures, bringing them into new focus.

But more than that – his entire witness has to be seen as a conduit for the actions of God: the initiative comes from God and it's only by the power of God that he could do things.

And more than that again: for us (if you want to see it like this – there is nothing coercive about any of this) he speaks directly for God and on behalf of God. We can see in him (if we wish to do so) the human revelation of what God is like, of what God wants.

So what he means by 'the kingdom of God' is acting in line with what God wants – transforming the world, overturning all wrong, putting all things to right, rejoicing in human flourishing, bringing even the most marginal and most neglected people into the full joy of 'life in abundance'.

This is often directly at odds with our all-too-human inclination to look after number one, to get your retaliation in first, to let your anger fly, to vilify others, to fear the stranger, to hate people who are different.

And very much at odds with our persistent tendency to build institutions that depend on power and violence, exploitation and inequality, oppression and repression, on exalting the mighty and... keeping the lowly jolly well in their place. He's having none of it.

Jesus is very keen on the two great laws of Judaism (Deut. 6:5, Leviticus 19:18):

Luke 10, 25-42 The Good Samaritan

Lawyer: what must I do to gain full/ eternal life?

Jesus: what is written in the law? How do you read it?

Lawyer: 'love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind', and 'love your neighbour as yourself'.

Jesus: Do this and you will love.

'But who is my neighbour?'

And off we go... 'What do you think? Let me tell you a story.....'

The same message is here:

Matthew 22: 37-39

Pharisee/ legal expert: 'What is the greatest commandment?'

Jesus: 'love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all our mind', and 'love your neighbour as yourself'.

So there you go!

But he goes well beyond this, you could say he's even more radical:

Matthew 5:43-48

⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect

'Perfect' (cf also Matthew 19: 16-26) – a note of caution is due here. 'Perfect' (Greek: *teleios, τέλειος*) doesn't mean unattainable virtue. The Pharisee and the taxpayer, below, a story that says that nobody can possibly be perfect, only God is good; everything depends instead on recognizing that you always need the love and mercy of God. Possible other translations include 'complete, finished, grown up, mature, in your intended place.' The meaning is then something like: 'Let your love be as complete as God's love' – generous, not making arbitrary distinctions based on conventional morality or social hierarchies, loving your enemies.

From this, the message is evidently that our first duty is to trust God fully and completely. From that flows the imperative to act generously and mercifully toward other people – it's what you do that really matters.

So what is this Kingdom of God all about?

- The stories say that the kingdom of God is unfolding all around us and it's a standard against which to judge everything. It includes everyone, without exception.
- It's a decision, it's urgent, it's now.
- It overturns all your normal expectations about how to order social relationships: it's dangerous for the conventional economic and social and political order because it throws hierarchies on its head and says the most despised people in your society are the very ones that God is looking out for.
- It's all about right relations with other people.

The Kingdom of God is unfolding around us: it's the standard-setter

Lots of Jesus's stories are set up to tell us something about the meaning and purpose of life, which is, in the Jewish language of his time, the coming of the kingdom of God

The sayings are often allusive, but Jesus's listeners would be familiar with the way the prophets and in the psalms poured scorn and condemnation on social injustices and oppression in the name of what God wants. Rituals are neither here nor there. Acting with justice, mercy, and generosity are at the heart of all of it. Jesus uses these and other quotes freely:

Amos 5: 14-15. 21-2, 24 Seek good, and not evil, that you may live; and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you... Hate evil, and love good, and establish justice in the gate... I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them... Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.

Hosea 6: 6 For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.

Psalm 40 6, 8 Sacrifice and offering you did not desire—but my ears you have opened — burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require.. “I desire to do your will, my God; your law is within my heart.”

Isaiah 42, 6-7 a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness (cf Luke 4: 16-21).

You'll know the Kingdom of God when you see it...

Jesus's listeners would instantly understand as a metaphor for Israel itself the parables about a king who has gone on a journey and put his estate in the hands of managers who have become corrupt and oppressive and exploitative, on whom justice will be wrought when he returns.

Anywhere there's a story about a king and his kingdom, you should hear this as a parable – a story about a king is 'like' a story about the ruler of heaven and earth.

There's a Quaker quip that would have us talk about the Commonwealth of God – same idea. We shouldn't get distracted by the idea of a king as a metaphor.

The stories tell us that paying attention to the Kingdom of God is the most urgent thing to do in life. It's worth gambling your very life on:

it's like buried treasure, like a hugely valuable pearl you should bet your fortune on (Matt 13:44-46).

Old routines won't accommodate this new cloth, new wine (Matt 9: 16-17).

We can't know who is ultimately good or evil: wheat and weeds all flourish now, but the ultimate winnowing will certainly take place 'in the end time' (Matt 13: 24-30).

It may or may not take root (like sowing seeds) (Luke 8:4-15); it's like yeast, like a mustard seed (Matt 13: 31-33); building a house on solid ground (Matt 7:24-27).

It's a decision, it's urgent, you can't go to sleep on the job

There are many stories along these lines:

the wise and foolish maidservants at the wedding, and be prepared (Matt 25: 1-13); have your wedding clothes ready for the decisive moment Luke 14:7-24;

The king who went away will find out those working on his farm who abused his trust (Luke 12: 35-48; the king expects his servants to use his resources well (Matt 24: 14-30).

But the 'end time' is not in the future, it's now.

The rich man who mistreated the poor man in life and is suffering for it 'in hell' (Dives and Lazarus) is a lesson for here and now: if you are doing evil now, you are putting yourself into damnation in the eyes of God, so get a grip and change your life and your behaviour (Luke 16: 19-31).

What we do right now is seen in the light of eternity, of the 'end times'. Judgement is not fictional or in the future, but is the standard for us to act by here and now.

The stories say that God explicitly stands on the side of the weakest and the most vulnerable; Jesus identifies himself with those on the outside, those on the margins. If you don't respond to that of God in other people, however hard they might make it seem for you, you just aren't in tune with the values of the Kingdom.

In the last instance the reckoning will come, and the King will say:

'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me' (Matt 25:40).

You will be judged by your actions.

It's the choices you make now that count – and you'll be judged by how to deal with other people. Everyone you meet matters because, as Friends say, 'there is that of God in everyone'.

This is very dangerous for conventional morality

Many parables run counter to everyday expectations about how justice works, how people should behave. Lots are about God's infinite care for every individual, starting with those most in need, whether they are downtrodden by society or excluded by their perceived sin or impurity. For example:

the woman who sweeps out her house obsessively until she's found the lost coin (Luke 15: 8-10); the good shepherd and the lost sheep (John 10: 1-18);

the Prodigal Son (Luke 15: 11-32);

the unexpectedly high pay rate for the labourers who came late to the vineyard (Luke 20: 1-16, Matt 20: 1-16).

Other stories are about God responding to prayer by pouring out good things:

the pestering widow, even the unjust judge gives way (Luke 18:1-8);

the man disturbing the neighbour's household for bread (Luke 11: 5-13).

You might think that the Jesus would endorse the religious leaders who were highly respectable and who were in charge of organizing everyone else's religious compliance – but no. Typically he has a good go at them for enjoying their high social status far too much, even as they pile up intolerable compliance burdens on everyone else. They're like well-packaged ornaments that look good but are in fact full of something rotten, toxic... ('whited sepulchres', Matt 23: 27).

These leaders should care about encouraging a free response to God's love, they should be manifesting God's mercy, they should be implementing God's justice to right social wrongs. Instead they reinforce oppression. They get it in the neck from Jesus, and often.

In contrast, there are parables that tell us that the key is to know our own limitations, to acknowledge our dependence on loving acceptance, to know our need for forgiveness, because we will always fall short.

The Pharisee and the tax collector, Luke 18: 9-14

The upright man, honoured by society, seems the most obvious candidate to be thought of as close to God. But he is all too happy with his 'reward on earth'.

The one who is vindicated in this story is – shockingly – the person who had the job of a reviled outsider, a cheat and a collaborator, who was ritually impure, who had no right to take part in community worship. But he's the one who knows that he needs God:

⁹To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: ¹⁰“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

¹³“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

¹⁴“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Right relations with other people

Jesus's values are not at all based on conventional morality, 'family values', social propriety. 'Love your neighbour as yourself' is shockingly extended to 'love your enemy', those who do you wrong (Matthew 5:44, Sermon on the Mount).

He advocates extravagant – unreasonable? – generosity to others: if someone asks you something, give it twice over; if someone takes your coat, give them your shirt as well.

He tells a story about a servant who is in debt to his master and begs for more time before he's going to be hauled up before the law (Matthew 18:21-35). The master agrees. Then this servant goes and threatens one of his own subordinates who owed him money and extorts the money back from him. The master is seriously not impressed: if you've already been forgiven, how much more should you forgive willingly in turn.

How often? seven? more? 'Seventy times seven!' (Matt 18:22).

For people used to counting on their fingers, this is the same as saying – don't even count! Endlessly, he seems to be saying, freely, like God forgives you.

The kingdom of God is not about ordinary human morality or consequential thinking or finite resources – the stories are often about boundless forgiveness, bottomless generosity, unconditional welcoming.

The father of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32) sees him coming 'from a long way off' and runs out to welcome him, then throws a big feast. Understandably enough, the 'good' brother is more than a bit put out. And normal farms and family wealth can't be divided out again and again and laid to waste by messers, without their meeting serious family resistance and serious personal consequences. Evidently this is not what God is like, not at all.

2. How this plays out: social hierarchies, social distinctions, wealth

Jesus's sayings are full of the subversion of the expected social and moral order.

'The last shall be first and the first last' (Matt 20: 16, Luke 13: 30), and the conventionally pious and virtuous are not the ones who are on the right track.

The ritually impure woman who does him a generous deed can do so because she has already 'been forgiven', had divine love infuse her, so she can mirror this in her own gesture of love. Whatever happened exactly, it clearly shocked Jesus's respectable host (Matt 26:6-13, Mark 14: 3-9, Luke 7:36-50, John 12: 1-8).

Wealthy, respectable people are already getting their reward in social status and esteem, but he seems to be telling us that God is on the side of those who have no power, poor health, are excluded from the community, have no security, people who are on the hard end of things. The implications for social inequality and social justice are enormous and ongoing – unresolvable ultimately until the 'coming of the Kingdom' – but a continuous challenge to us here and now and always.

The 'Jesus Seminar' of US biblical scholars holds that Matthew's texts, 'blessed are the poor *in spirit*', 'you who hunger *for righteousness*, thirst *for justice*', etc., are not so 'authentic', and that a better representation of what Jesus meant is this, from Luke:

Congratulations, you poor! God's domain belongs to you.

Congratulations, you hungry! You will have a feast.

Congratulations, you who weep now! You will laugh. (Luke 6:20-21)

'This very reversal of conventional values is a mark of the authentic Jesus'.

The Good Samaritan, Luke 10: 25-37:

The shocking thing in this story is that the conventionally admirable people looked the other way, while it was the outsider who stepped in to help.

'Guess who turned up next? A Samaritan!' (cue gasps of shock and horror).

'And what do you think he did?' (rob him again? skin him alive?)...

Think of your society's least favourite out-group – who would you be afraid of, disdain, not want to get too close to, never expect to get any help from?

If 'even' that person does the generous thing, they are the one really 'loving their neighbour'. The implications for 'who is my neighbour' are vast: this is a key pathway to thinking about our responsibilities for every other person, regardless of race, rank, gender, nationality, location.

It's a pointer to the universal equality of all human beings. As God loves and forgives me, so I'm asked to love, forgive, be generous to, be concerned about the welfare of – everyone else. It's an obvious reference point for the Quaker testimony of equality.

The rich young man

This is a tough one. Not exactly a parable but a story linking straight to a parable-like saying (a camel can't get through a needle's eye; it links to the story about Dives and Lazarus, Luke 16: 19-31).

Jesus clearly did think that wealthy people would find it very hard to enter fully into the life of loving God and loving your neighbour as yourself, let alone loving your enemies and

transforming your inner dispositions of anger, greed, envy, revenge, violence. But they are not beyond the reach of a question that could help them transform their worldview.

Mark 10:17-31

¹⁷ And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ¹⁸ And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. ¹⁹ You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honour your father and mother.'" ²⁰ And he said to him, "Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth." ²¹ And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." ²² Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

²³ And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" ²⁴ And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." ²⁶ And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, "Then who can be saved?" ²⁷ Jesus looked at them and said, "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God."

Is he serious? Some commentators have tried to interpret this metaphorically – Eg maybe the 'eye of the needle' was a pedestrian gate into Jerusalem through which a laden camel couldn't pass, so you'd have to travel unencumbered, setting aside your possessions. But others are sceptical on historical and archaeological grounds.

Perhaps then this is another hyperbolic statement of Jesus's, intended to shock and disturb (like being so horrified of doing wrong that you'd rather pluck out your eye or cut off your hand, which clearly no-one ever for an instant took literally). And Jesus clearly didn't ask everyone to sell everything they possessed, so he wasn't setting a rule.

Maybe it was something about this young man – maybe he was being held back by his attachment to possessions, social standing, control over resources. But maybe the persistent human worry about material security is always going to be a problem for us. We think we're not really all that attached to our wealth or possessions. But can our preoccupation with things really be avoided? In which case, we're all snookered.

This is also a recurring theme in Friends' testimony of simplicity.

Simplicity is not to be confused with puritanism (though it has been), or austerity or mandatory poverty (thought it has been too):

it surely isn't a matter of spoons and sideboards and how many pin-tucks you have in your skirt and never wearing any colour other than grey.

Perhaps it's something else, something deeply grounded in your disposition, in your cast of mind, in your transformed orientation to things and possessions. Maybe it's about not

obsessing about material security in the form of big granaries or ever-bigger bank accounts, but caring most about the important things, stuff that is not materially measurable, 'treasure in heaven' (Matt 6: 19-21).

Jesus was a big advocate of being in the moment, mindfulness we might say, not worrying about what tomorrow might bring. But in the end, we're not really all that much like birds of the air or lilies of the field (Matt 6: 26-34), and as long as there is continuous human society there will be economic activity, and there will be social inequality and economic insecurity to varying degrees. Welfare states help a lot, but they are still part of the logic of getting and having, even if we collectivize some of the risk and insecurity.

Perhaps our best hope is to note that last line –

With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God.

There are no rules, no certainties, no surefire recipes about what you should do, when, how. We will always have to face this prompt: 'there is one thing you lack'... We will not escape the challenge to think about our attachment to possessions, status. But in the end, the message seems to point back to a story about the generous, unearned love and mercy of God. It seems to me that we can do little else but to trust in this, and see where it takes us and what we are called to do.

3. The death of Jesus as a parable

We have lots of stories about Jesus's parables and teachings, his encounters and his healings. We should also remember that the stories about his passion and death take up about a third of the gospel stories. They are a significant portion of the total and I think we should take them seriously as part of his teaching – in this case, by example.

Some Friends find it hard to think about let alone to see images of Jesus being tortured in this particularly cruel and agonizing Roman manner. But rather than averting our gaze and our mind, I think it is very salutary to look straight at what is happening and to understand how the manner of Jesus's death is entirely of a piece with his life. The stories he told and the stories about his life were preserved by his followers not merely as a matter of historical interest but as some kind of assertion about the value of a life of trust in the divine love on which he bet everything, up to and including his own life.

Jesus set himself up as the person who would bring about the transformation of the world in unexpectedly radical ways – to right all wrongs, lift up the lowly, fill the hungry with good things, put down the mighty from their thrones, wipe away all tears, etc etc... And the brutal outcome of his witness is this bald and undeniable fact that is at the very heart of the tradition: he failed miserably.

In fact, he was put to death in the most demeaning way possible, in the manner the Roman authorities reserved for political criminals who were a threat to the dominant social order. It was a mode of execution that was designed to be a horrible warning, a very public humiliation, a protracted torture and a terror-inspiring deterrent, and it was meted out to thousands upon thousands upon thousands of people up and down the empire over some hundreds of years.

(Not that the forces of the empire actually thought the Jesus movement was seriously seditious – they didn't go after anyone else – just that they decided to take him out and humiliate him publicly in order to crush the enthusiasm of his followers and supporters and fans, and to put an end to their messianic fervour for the radical intervention of God in ordinary life).

So what kind of parable is this horrible death?

a. He identifies with the most despised and the outcasts.

He always did. We could see his death as a pretty extreme logical extension of the same thing. He stood against the forces of conventional power and authority and they found it intolerable; he opposed everything that stood for domination and oppression, and it took its revenge on him.

On this view, 'the beloved one of God' is stripped of everything – freedom, dignity, autonomy, human status, even his clothes; humiliated and brutalized; ritually unclean too; he is fully identified with the lowest of the low, cut off from humanity and even from God.

This stirs compassion for him, and by extension, fellow-feeling for anyone who is at the hard end of things. We can read our own suffering in his, and this can be and has been a powerful source of comfort for many people over the years.

A further reading (depending on how you understand Jesus' claim to speak somehow 'for' God) is that through this suffering man, God is fully identified with the whole of suffering humanity and all the awful things that come with the human condition itself.

b. His passion is continuing in the world all the time.

If you see the story like this, you can take it further as a paradigm of all injustice and all suffering and all the limitations of the human condition. People who are poor and weak and vulnerable are exploited and ignored and neglected all the time; there is horrible misuse of power to oppress people, to bypass justice; there is senseless cruelty all around us; there is suffering; there are endless tears.

Our politics and our institutional arrangements organize winners and losers systematically both within states and in the international order of things.

We are all implicated. Violence is our default response to being challenged.

The very source of our economic wealth is a mincing machine for the most vulnerable people and the engine of destruction of our fragile planet.

We have a choice about which side of this merciless stand-off we're on.

It mightn't work out well for us, and it absolutely didn't for Jesus.

But as he always taught (as Herbert McCabe summarized it):

if you don't love you're dead, and if you do, they'll kill you.

- c. The death of Jesus is about deep compassion and sorrow, but it's not about despair...

...because hard on the heels of the story of his appalling death is the affirmation that he is risen – really and fully in his real and full self (the stories are clear about this, eating fish and so on); but in some mysterious and different way – still the same, not recognizable in the ordinary way, but ready to be encountered in many unexpected ways and especially in our relations with other people.

Someone once said that 'to absorb violence and demonstrate it is powerless against you is radically transformative'. The resurrection of Jesus is entirely of a piece with everything his life stood for: it's the opening out of a transformed way of living that is available to everyone.

'Resurrection' ('resurgere', to rise again) doesn't have a fixed definition and people have understood the claim about 'new life' in a variety of ways. On the view outlined here, it's as much a claim about a transformed worldview that everyone takes part in, not just a surprising resuscitation of one man or (as one theologian has put it, warning against over-literal readings) 'a conjuring trick with bones. Reflecting on the significance of the assertion about the connection between his death with new life, Cynthia Bourgeault says that:

Jesus' real purpose in this sacrifice was to wager his own life against his core conviction that love is stronger than death, and that the laying down of self which is the essence of this love leads not to death, but to life.

But this is emphatically not a charter for victimhood – it is powered instead by creative force of love beyond all understanding.

Jesus always taught, after all, that the agenda of God is entirely one of life, equality, flourishing, inclusion, participation, affirmation, ultimate reconciliation.

For me, this is entirely at one with the Quaker Peace Testimony that asserts not that 'We utterly deny all outward wars and strife and fightings with outward weapons, for any end or under any pretence whatsoever', but also that the point and drive of our witness is work for practical change in the conditions that generate injustice and inequality and the drive to violence, and 'to live in the life and power which takes away the occasion of all wars'.

If Jesus death is to be seen as a kind of parable, what is it pointing to, what is it like?

It is like... life...

It's the ultimate paradox; it's the ultimate parable.