

Sunday, July 24, 2011: Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

by [Paul Keim](#) in the [July 12, 2011](#) issue

In C. S. Lewis's *Studies in Words*, the best book of his that you've never heard of, he describes the original meaning of the Latin term *natura* as something like "sort, kind, quality, or character." "When you ask, in our modern idiom, what something 'is like,'" he says, "you are asking for its *natura*."

So what is the *natura* of the kingdom of God? This seems to be precisely the lesson that Jesus of the synoptic Gospels is attempting to deliver to his generation, to his disciples and through them to us.

Jesus came preaching the breaking-in, already-here, yet-to-come kingdom—the reign of heaven on earth. His appeal to such a transcendent reality, a divine reign, a politics different from the prevailing one, got a lot of people fired up. In first-century Palestine it was the worst of times, it was the best of times. Everybody seemed to sense that something was about to happen. Messianic expectations were at a fever pitch. Thinking new thoughts was dangerous, and the punishment for sedition under the Pax Romana was imprisonment, torture, banishment and crucifixion.

Jesus used parables extensively—exclusively, according to Matthew 13:34. Perhaps that's just the gentle hyperbole of orally transmitted memory. But Jesus was known for his vivid vignettes, his skillful use of language to inspire and instruct. It was apparently a distinct enough feature of his style that the Gospel writers felt the need to explain. He was also in the habit of privately explaining their meaning to his disciples (Matt. 13:36; Mark 4:34). When they ask, "Why parables?" he evokes Isaiah's confounding commission (Isa. 6:9-10). It seems to be a kind of a test. Those predisposed to take the message to heart will understand the figurative allusions; those not inclined to read between the lines will be baffled.

Though it had a technical and more limited meaning in the poetic arts of classical antiquity, the term *parable* in the New Testament reflects the Hebrew Bible's broad, primary genre of likeness or comparison, the *mašal*. This category could designate everything from a pithy proverb to an intricate allegory. The operative principle is saying something about one thing by speaking of another. (The righteous are like

trees planted by streams of water.) A *mašal* is a fiction that tells the truth. When handled skillfully, the *mašal* points to its intended meaning. Through the provocative juxtaposition of two unlike things, the parable makes an implicit assertion that the listeners must interpret. Jesus developed this tradition into a hallmark of his pedagogical mission.

There is a provocative juxtaposition in Jesus' teaching between admonishment for living now and preparation for the judgment to come. Even in this week's limited selection from Matthew 13 we learn some things about the nature of the kingdom of heaven from a Matthean perspective. In the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the yeast, the dynamics of kingdom growth are portrayed as exuberant and barmy.

The final three parables are found only in Matthew, though paralleled in logia 109 and 76 of the Gospel of Thomas. The parables of the treasure in the field and the pearl present a view of the inherent value of the kingdom, as well as the cost of citizenship. Believers who truly understand its value will be willing to give up everything they have, including their lives, for the sake of the kingdom.

The parable of the net reflects the eschatological tenor of Jesus' message. The sea is full of good fish and bad fish. When the fishermen haul in a catch they keep the good and toss the bad. An interpretation is appended—for the disciples: at the end of the age the identity of the wicked and righteous will be revealed. (I wonder how many of those bad fish thought they were good.)

After a session in the house explaining things to the disciples, Jesus asks if they have understood. As an educator, I am intrigued by the question—and the answer. The disciples respond, "Yes." They claim to have understood everything, and Jesus seems to accept the response at face value. The response of most professors to such an assertion would be: trust and verify—provide tests and essay assignments to see *what* students have learned and *if* they have learned. The disciples often seem not to have learned much at all (Matt. 15:16; 16:9, 11).

The confident yes of the disciples creates another teachable moment and elicits a parabolic sketch about scribes who have been "trained for the kingdom." They are like the "master of a household," Jesus explains, who "bring out of their treasure what is new and what is old." Maybe Jesus was just yanking their chain—understood everything indeed! I prefer to dwell on the image of "the new" and "the old" at our disposal in that treasury of the breaking-in, already-here, yet-to-come kingdom.