

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Fifth Sunday after Trinity
July 12, 2020

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In St Matthew's Gospel we read about Our Lord Jesus that "He told them many things in parables." And the gospel's arrangement leaves us with the impression the Lord's parables were all spoken *on the same occasion*. By this time in His ministry Our Lord had begun to proclaim the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven. When asked to give some details, He took to giving parables.

The sad thing is that those who asked for more were not like children eager to be instructed! These people were impatient. They wanted Jesus to get His Kingdom started or be branded a failure. Then as now, many people talk big and cannot deliver. Speaking in parables was the Lord's response to this mindset. He tested people wanting action on the wrong level. And the people were put off by it.

There is a reason for understanding the parables in this way. Our Lord Himself provided the clue. When asked by His disciples why He had adopted this new method of instruction, Jesus gave them what must have seemed a strange answer: He had now begun to *reduce* the number of His followers. Jesus ended up with twelve men united to Him in spirit. Only to them did He explain the meaning of the parables.

This seems a strange way to evangelize! But our methods may not always be a carbon copy of Divine revelation! Way back in the story of Israel's Judges the Lord counseled Gideon to reduce his forces prior to the victory over Midian in the Valley of Jezreel. Why? The Lord said to Gideon: "The people with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand, lest Israel vaunt themselves against me, saying, 'My own hand hath delivered me.'" (*Judges 7:2*) When the pandemic ends and you find yourself in a hotel room, take out the *Gideon* Bible and read about the original Gideon and his victory in the Valley of Jezreel! But now fast forward to Golgotha, where the number united to the Lord in spirit was reduced even further: *from twelve to two*, Our Lady and the Beloved Disciple. On Good Friday the whole Church numbered two people! The Cross is God's decisive work, and His only. The parables were designed to actually send some people into further opposition to Jesus!

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Now this is *not* to say Our Lord was deliberately concealing the truth, which might have saved those who heard it. Rather, Christ found the world in such a mess the Divine Word of God inevitably separated people into two camps. When it came to the crunch, and at the very heart of the Gospel good news, Christ saved the world *not* by His teaching being accepted (in parables or otherwise) *but by the Cross*. The Cross is Christ's victorious acceptance of a fate brought on by the world's rejection of God. The world Christ entered was past preaching. The long history of rejection of the Old Testament prophets was primary evidence. That is why God became Incarnate. A world past preaching was not past God dying to save it.

The parables, then, held the opposition at bay while the Lord fashioned a nucleus of believers He would leave on earth at His Ascension. That is why these parables were heard by everybody, but the explanations were only given to the disciples. What was nourishment for one group was poison for the other. Even inside the closest group of the Twelve, St Peter, and especially St John were having interior candles lit by what they heard, while Judas Iscariot, hearing *the same parables and explanations*, thought they were a waste of time.

The parables are a joy to us. That is because of our vantage point. We are part of that nucleus of believers. We know the Cross and Resurrection are the central events in world history. If there is good soil in us, receptive to the Word of God, that is because the rocky or caked dirt and dust that held our sins has been ploughed, weeded, enriched, and watered with Divine Grace. That grace was released into a sin-sick world not by teaching but *by the death* of God's Own Son.