

Wrestling With the Symbols: A Sermon on Reading Scripture

The following is a sermon that appeared on my website, and never made it to my blog. Sometimes an example is better than an argument. Perhaps what I write below shows something of what I mean when I say that Scripture is “formally sufficient” and has an “inherent intelligibility.” Other helpful examples can be found in my article on George Herbert in my “Pages” section in the sidebar and my sermon on “Christological Subversion.” . . . Or you could just read all of my sermons.



One of the prerogatives of the preacher is that, since he or she is the one in the pulpit, he or she can also break the rules on occasion. This morning, I'd like to break the rules a little bit. Rather than preaching on the Scriptural readings, I'm going to talk *about* them. In a few minutes, you'll realize what I mean by that.

What I would like to do this morning is talk a little bit about the use of metaphorical and symbolic language in Scripture. Metaphor and symbol are the primary ways in which the language of the Scripture speaks of God. This happens so frequently that often we don't even think about it. A good example is the number of images that cluster around Jesus in the NT. In the NT, Jesus is called a King, a Lamb, a Priest, a Shepherd, a Judge—the list goes on and on.

The readings in today's lectionary provide a prime example of the prevalence of metaphor in Scripture. What we see in the passages is something that happens frequently in the Bible. A single image or cluster of images is used and developed by several authors to develop a common theme. Identifying the central themes of the metaphors in today's readings is fairly straightforward. The predominant metaphor is that of a farmer who owns a vineyard. In all three passages, the owner of the vineyard is clearly God. The vineyard represents the people of God, more specifically God's covenant people, the nation of Israel. Finally, the prevailing theme is that of judgment. The owner of the vineyard is—to put it mildly—disappointed with something about his vineyard.

In the Isaiah passage, the vineyard owner is disappointed because the vineyard has not produced its expected crops—instead of producing grapes from which good wine could be made, it has produced “wild grapes.”

In the parable told by Jesus in Matthew's gospel, the approach is slightly different. In this variation on the theme, it is not the vineyard that disappoints the owner, but the tenants—who refuse to turn over to the vineyard owner his share of the grapes. When the vineyard owner sends his servants, and finally his Son, to collect what is due to him, they are beaten and the Son is killed.

Finally, the Psalm looks at things from a rather different perspective. In the Psalm, the point of view is that of the tenant, or perhaps the vineyard itself, who asks the vineyard owner why he has neglected his vineyard and allowed it to be trampled and destroyed by strangers and wild beasts.

The key question for the reader of these passages is: what are we to make of this metaphor of the vineyard owner and the vineyard? To answer this question, we have to ask how we deal with metaphor in the Scriptures in general.

The first point to which we must attend is that metaphorical language is not literal. This should be so obvious as not to need pointing out. There is probably no one among us who would be so oblivious as to interpret today's passages literally—to presume that the Bible was teaching us that God is a literal vineyard owner who plants grapes and harvests them. Why would God need to plant grapes? God is the Creator of all the grapes in the world. If God planted grapes, would he eat them or make wine with them? Would he drink his own wine, or would he sell it on the open market? Would it be fair competition if you could buy wine in the local liquor store that had the "God" label on it?

Oddly, many otherwise intelligent people seem to forget this point when it comes to interpreting Scripture. Literalism is a problem both for those in the church who call themselves progressives and those who call themselves conservatives. Every once in awhile a prominent bishop suddenly notices that this metaphorical language does not make much sense if taken literally. Four decades ago, Bishop John A.T. Robinson came to the realization that God does not really live in the sky, and decided that "our image of God must go." We could not talk about "our Father in heaven" anymore. These days, the retired Bishop John Spong of the diocese of Newark has written best-selling book after book in which he often seems to confuse the metaphorical and symbolic language of Scripture with the language of mythology, and assumes that the key to understanding the Scripture is to discard the "myth" and keep whatever we find left that is palatable. Interestingly, the palatable parts just happen to correspond to the good Bishop's political causes.

At the opposite extreme from Bishop Spong are groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Seventh Day Adventists, and fundamentalist Protestants who take the strange and sometimes bizarre symbolism found in Scripture texts like the Book of Revelation and try to find in this symbolism a one to one

correspondence with events in the modern world. The popular *Left Behind* novels are the latest example. Where Spengler literalizes what is intended to be symbolic and mythologizes what is intended to be literal, the Fundamentalists find literal meanings in symbolic passages that are just not there. Although some in the last election might have found it disappointing, the Book of Revelation does not teach that John Kerry [or now Barak Obama] was the anti-Christ. In this respect, Handel's Messiah is a better interpretation of the book of Revelation than the one's found in any Fundamentalist commentary on the end of the world.

If metaphorical language is so easily subject to misinterpretation, why is it so prominent in the Scriptures? Why should Scripture not speak in clear, unmistakable literal language, something like the instructions for programming a VCR or a computer software manual? (Well, perhaps that wasn't quite the best illustration!) An ancient Christian writer who was known by the name of Dionysius the Areopagite long ago asked himself the same question. Why does Scripture sometimes use such inappropriate and even irreverent images to describe God? God is described in the Bible as a rock, a lion, a thief in the night, even a chicken! Dionysius suggested that such outrageous images are used because they help us avoid the dangers of confusing our own limited conceptions of God with the reality itself. When sophisticated theologians speak of God as being all-powerful, or all-perfect, or Necessary Being, they sometimes give the impression that they know what they're talking about. But of course we have no conception of what it means to be all-powerful or totally perfect, or self-existing Being. These notions are totally outside our experience as finite creatures. But we do know what a farmer is, or a rock, or a lion, and hopefully we're not apt to confuse them with the literal reality. We know that God does not plant grapes, or stub your toe, or have a bushy mane. Because the images cannot be taken literally, they point beyond themselves to the God who is hidden in mystery.

Another characteristic of metaphor is that it is open-ended and evocative. A metaphor can be used in different ways in different contexts. No one use of the metaphor is necessarily the single correct one. Different uses and different metaphors have to balance each other. We see that in today's readings. A central concern of the readings is God's judgment of the covenant people of Israel. An overly literal and one-sided reading of the parable in Mt's gospel could lead to the conclusion that God has finally given up on the people of Israel. The vineyard has now been turned over to the Church. Israel is no longer God's people. But the reading in the Psalm will not allow us to take that approach. In the Psalm, the tenants (or the actual vineyard) dare to ask the vineyard owner if he hasn't been too hasty, and beg for a second chance. The tenants ask: "Why have you broken down [the] wall [of your vineyard], so that all who pass by pluck off its grapes? . . . Turn now, O God of hosts, look down from heaven; behold and tend this vine; preserve what your right hand has planted."

The apostle Paul uses imagery similar to that of today's passages in Romans 11 in a manner that also calls into question simple attempts to define God's judgment. Paul says that we Gentile Christians are like a wild branch that has been grafted into the cultivated olive tree of Israel. If we fail to be faithful to that which we have been called, God can remove our wild branch from the original tree. In another development of the same theme, John's gospel applies the vineyard imagery to the Church rather than to Israel. Jesus says to his followers on the night before his crucifixion: "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you abide in me, you will bear much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:4) But Jesus goes on to say: "Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers." (John 15:5) If we who are the Church do not abide in Christ, then, like Israel, we also will face judgment. God's judgment is not then a rejection of the nation of Israel as such, but a warning to

the people of God, whether those of the old covenant or the new.

Similarly, the open-endedness of metaphor in Scripture means that we should not jump too quickly to the conclusion that we know necessarily what a given metaphor means. The metaphor of the owner of the vineyard is a good example. A careless reading of the metaphor seems to present us with a rather harsh, even unmerciful image of God. If a vineyard doesn't produce what you want, then you dig it up and start over. But, of course, God's people aren't branches and dirt, simply to be discarded if they do not produce. As the Psalmist pleads: "Restore us, O God of hosts; show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved." At the beginning of the Isaiah passage we read this morning, we discover that the planter of the vineyard is not only a farmer, but also a lover, a lover who grieves over his vineyard. He pleads: "What more was there to do for my vineyard than I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?" At the end of the reading, we find that God truly cares for his vineyard: "[T]he people of Judah are his pleasant planting." But when God expected justice from his people, he found bloodshed; when he looked for justice, he heard the cry of oppression. So the casual reading just won't do. God is not simply a capricious vineyard owner. His judgment is always rooted in his care for his people and our just dealings with one another.

In unveiling the metaphors of Scripture, we often find that a willingness to be teased, to wrestle with an image, and to sit lightly with a given interpretation is more helpful than simply to dismiss the images we don't like, and to keep the ones we do. A sanctified imagination is sometimes more helpful in understanding Scripture than a Ph.D. in ancient languages or a bishop's mitre. The Scriptures like to play with our imagination. If a given metaphor is somewhat limited, the writers do not hesitate to build on it, to pile metaphor on

metaphor. Sometimes the metaphors seem impenetrable, sometimes they just don't seem to make sense. In other cases, they speak to us immediately. Whether they speak directly to our hearts, or we "just don't get it," we should remind ourselves that we need to be patient with the metaphors, to realize that sometimes their very strangeness and outrageousness is needed to get our attention, to awake us from our insulated cocoons and to learn not only how to understand in new ways the unknowable God to whom they point, but to relearn the meaning of old symbols that we think we understand, but may not have understood at all.

At the end of the day, the metaphors are pointers. They are not the thing in itself. God is a lover, and a lover who sometimes plays hard to get. God has spoken to us in metaphors, not because they are adequate, but because we have no way to speak of him that is quite adequate. The metaphors shatter our illusions, but the Shepherd, the Rock, the Vineyard Owner, to whom they point, is the real thing itself, and not a metaphor.