Listening to the Master’s ‘Voice’

by Daniel J. Harrington, S.J.

The Kingdom of God was the heart of Jesus’ teaching. He focused on both the present and the future dimensions of God’s Kingdom. He tried to convey a vision of the present world as radiating the glory and the power of God. Jesus sought also to provide reasons for hope about the future as he taught people to look forward to and pray for the full coming of God’s reign. Jesus was the prophet of God’s Kingdom.

As a prophet Jesus was also a teacher. He was a wise teacher, and so he used the methods that wise teachers use. His primary audience was made up of ordinary people who lived in first-century Galilee. For them he had a message of hope.

Teaching with parables

Jesus tried to meet his listeners in their own lives and to use their ordinary experiences as tools to help them better understand the Kingdom. For farmers, he used illustrations from farming. For fishermen, he took images from fishing. For women, he told stories pertaining to their everyday lives, which included cooking and housecleaning.

Jesus addressed people in their own settings. But his goal was always to give them glimpses of the Kingdom of God. He wanted to show them how to discern the Kingdom’s present dimensions as well as prepare for eternal life with God in its fullness.

Though Jesus was an effective teacher, the main focus of his teachings—the Kingdom of God—presented challenges. How does one talk about something beyond human comprehension and control? It is God’s Kingdom, and not ours, to give. Its fullness belongs to the future, the last days. Its present dimensions are signs of its future fullness. The best is yet to come.

Jesus frequently used parables in teaching about God’s Kingdom. The word parable derives from the Greek verb paraballo, which means to place one thing beside another. A parable is a form of analogy that seeks to illuminate one reality by appealing to something better known.

A parable may be defined as a story, taken from nature or everyday life, about an interesting or unusual case, which points to another level or topic and teases the mind of the listener into active thinking. We’ll look at parables in Matthew 13 to demonstrate.

The power of a good story
Almost everyone enjoys stories. Children often say, “Tell me a story.” A story takes us out of ourselves, at least for a moment, and transports us into a new and different setting. It engages our imagination and makes us eager to find out how the story will end. The parables in Matthew 13 are, first of all, stories. They concern a farmer who sows seeds, a tiny mustard seed, a small amount of yeast, wheat and weeds sown together in a field, buried treasure, a precious pearl and fishermen casting their dragnets.

These parables reflect aspects of nature and everyday life in first-century Galilee, where farming and fishing were major occupations. However, in each parable something unusual surfaces:

- a miraculously big harvest
- a large mustard bush
- a huge amount of bread
- a mixed harvest that needs sorting
- precious goods discovered by accident
- a catch of fish that needs to be separated.

More than a typical story

The deeper level to which each parable points is announced at the beginning of all but the parable of the sower: “The kingdom of heaven is like....” We are told from the start that these short stories are intended to teach us something about the Kingdom of God. And the purpose of these parables is to make us ask questions and think about that Kingdom. At each point we are led to ask: What aspect of the Kingdom does this little story bring out?

Scholars generally agree that the parables allow us to hear the “voice” of the historical Jesus. They reflect life in first-century Galilee, where Jesus lived and worked, where farming and fishing were common occupations. And they manifest a certain coherence of thought and convey a consistent vision of the present and future dimensions of the Kingdom of God.

In the Gospels, Jesus never defined the Kingdom of God. Nor did he ever provide a theological treatise on the topic. Instead, he communicated his vision of the Kingdom through short stories and images well suited to his first audiences in Galilee. He taught in a way that engaged the imaginations of his hearers, and he invited them to think about various aspects of God’s Kingdom. His focus on the Kingdom gave his listeners—and gives us—a goal to strive for and a horizon against which to live and act.

Prophet or…?

Jesus used many of the literary techniques and rhetorical devices that other Jewish wisdom teachers of his day employed to convey their visions of God and of human existence. In recent years scholars have been divided over whether Jesus should be classified as a prophet pointing to the last days or as a wisdom teacher. But this is a false contrast. The wisdom writings discovered in 1947 among the Dead Sea scrolls at Qumran have confirmed that there was no sharp division between hope for God’s coming Kingdom and the literary forms and concerns of Jewish wisdom teachers.

The Kingdom of God was the goal and horizon of Jesus’ teaching. Jesus wanted to help people to enter the Kingdom of God and enjoy its fullness. Much of his “ethical” teaching concerned the values and virtues most appropriate for those seeking to enter the Kingdom. He sought to show people how to reach their goal of eternal happiness with God.

The ‘voice’ of Jesus

The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5—7) is a summary of Jesus’ teachings. Rather than the transcript of a speech delivered in one place at one time, it is more likely a collection of Jesus’ sayings taken from several different sources and assembled by the evangelist Matthew or a predecessor. Nevertheless, its individual sayings reflect with a high degree of probability the actual teachings of the historical Jesus. They allow us to hear the “voice” of Jesus.
The Sermon begins with a series of beatitudes in which Jesus declares some unlikely persons to be happy or fortunate: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.”

They are followed by analogies that declare Jesus’ followers to be “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world.” Then, in an “I” saying, Jesus declares, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.” This is followed by six contrasts or antitheses: “You have heard that it was said...But I say to you....”

More wisdom in the Sermon

In the next section Jesus lays down rules regarding three practices of piety: almsgiving, prayer and fasting. He provides the Lord’s Prayer as a sample prayer. He also gives instructions concerning various topics in no particular order, a format found in other biblical wisdom books (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Sirach).

Within this block of teachings there are prohibitions (“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth”), sayings (“No one can serve two masters”) and the “golden rule” (“[D]o to others as you would have them do to you”). The Sermon ends with cautions about the need to put Jesus’ challenging teachings into practice (“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing”). All these different literary devices in the Sermon on the Mount show that Jesus was a wisdom teacher in the service of the Kingdom of God.

Another common teaching form that very likely reflects the practice of the historical Jesus is the controversy or conflict story. These are short narratives in which someone, often with hostile intent, approaches Jesus with a hard question (“Why do...the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?”). The tense situation provides Jesus with an opportunity to deliver his own wise teaching, to display his superior wisdom and to escape the trap set for him by opponents.

Guide for the servants of the Kingdom

The Sermon on the Mount also provides a sample of the content of Jesus’ ethical teaching. With the Kingdom of God as the goal and horizon, the specific teachings are intended as directives or guidelines toward reaching that goal. Jesus is the instructor, and his Sermon can be aptly described as a wisdom instruction such as one finds especially in Proverbs and Sirach.

The beatitudes offer a sketch of character traits, attitudes and virtues that are fitting for those seeking the Kingdom of God. As “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world,” such persons perform a vital function for and in our lives. Rather than abolishing the Law and the prophets, Jesus urges his followers to go to the roots of the individual biblical commandments and so avoid breaking even the letter of the law.

In matters of religious observance Jesus challenges his followers to examine their motivations. Almsgiving, prayer and fasting, while good in themselves, must be undertaken as ways of honoring God and not simply as means of establishing a public reputation for holiness. The various teachings in Matthew 6:19—7:12 highlight the need to seek “treasure in heaven,” to serve God as one’s only master, to avoid fruitless anxieties and harshly negative judgments about others, to persist in prayer and to observe the “golden rule.”

Jesus’ concluding challenges (Mt 7:13-27) emphasize that the way to God’s Kingdom may seem hard and narrow and that his teachings demand practical application. The content of the Sermon—like the entire Gospel tradition—concerns Jesus’ identity as a wisdom teacher in the service of the Kingdom of God.

Teaching through symbolic actions

In addition to parables and wisdom sayings, Jesus taught by symbolic actions. These passages are sometimes called enacted parables because they convey teaching through an activity rather than by words alone. In doing so, Jesus followed the examples of the great prophets of the Old Testament: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Hosea. His actions were similar to the symbolic demonstrations used effectively by 20th-century leaders like Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.
The most striking examples of Jesus’ teaching by means of symbolic actions were his “triumphal” entry into Jerusalem (Mk 11:1-11) and his “cleansing” of the Temple (Mk 11:15-19). On Palm Sunday Jesus concluded his journey to Jerusalem by mounting a colt and enacting the role of the humble messiah-king prophesied in Zechariah. Likewise, by cleansing the Temple area of its excessively commercial aspects, Jesus echoed the prophetic teachings of Isaiah (“My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the peoples”) and Jeremiah (the Temple as “a den of robbers”).

By such symbolic actions, Jesus confirmed his identity as the prophet of God’s Kingdom, one who stood in the same line as Israel’s great prophets of the past and at the same time fulfilled their prophecies.