

LIFTING THE VEIL: IMAGINATION AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD
LECTURE 4 OUTLINE

CHRIST AND THE MORAL IMAGINATION: PARABLES

“Poetic imagination working at a reasonably deep level is a teacher – and it’s not just the reader who is taught, it’s the poet.”

-Malcolm Guite

- “I believe in Christianity as I believe in the sun rising, not only because I see it, but because by its light I see everything else.” -C.S. Lewis
- Parable of the Grain
 - Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.”¹
- “I would contend that Jesus never tells a moral parable—one that might kindle us to particular ethical choices, including the choice of self-sacrifice, self-abandonment—he never, ever preaches any of these without actually doing or being that himself.”
- Parable of the Grain in Paul
 - So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body; it is raised a spiritual body.²
 - He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.³
- Malcolm’s response to the parable of the Grain:

¹ John 12:23-26 NRSV.

²1 Corinthians 15:42-45 NRSV.

³ Colossians 1:15-17 NRSV.

John 12:24: Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

A Grain of Wheat

Oh let me fall as grain to the good earth
And die away from all dry separation,
Die to my sole self, and find new birth
Within that very death, a dark fruition
Deep in this crowded underground, to learn
The earthy otherness of every other,
To know that nothing is achieved alone,
But only where these other fallen gather.

If I bear fruit and break through to bright air,
Then fall upon me with your freeing flail
To shuck this husk and leave me sheer and clear
As heaven-handled Hopkins, that my fall
May be more fruitful and my autumn still
A golden evening where your barns are full.⁴

- Richard Hays' Response
 - Guite discusses how biblical scholar and former Duke Divinity School dean Richard Hays used "A Grain of Wheat" in his retirement address. The address is [available to watch here](#).
- "Our longer inheritance"
 - Christ is not a moral exemplar.
 - Christ is an archetypal achievement in which we get to participate.
 - It's not that His is a pinnacle achievement to which we must aspire.
 - "Christ always is what he is preaching it seems to me." ~Fr. Malcolm Guite
 - Piers Ploughman: an example of a poet who retold a parable in an imaginative way so that it is not that quaint thing that is not our problem anymore.

⁴ Malcolm Guite, "A Grain of Wheat," in *Parable and Paradox* (London: Canterbury Press, 2016).

The Vision of Piers Plowman

As we went on the way talking together
We saw a Samaritan sitting in his saddle,
Riding rapidly on the road that we had taken,
Coming from a country that men call Jericho,
And hastening on his way to a joust in Jerusalem.
He overtook the herald and Hope together,
Where a man was wounded and waylaid by robbers.
He could neither stand nor stir nor signal for assistance,
Nor in any way save himself, and seemed half perished,
Naked as a needle and no help about him.⁵

Faith had first sight of him but veered around him,
And would not come near him by nine furrows.
Hope came hastening after. He had already boasted
How he had helped many men with Moses' covenant.
But when he saw that sight, he stepped sidewise
As much in dread, by this day, as a duck of a falcon!⁶

But as soon as the Samaritan saw the sick man
He alighted from his horse and led him by the bridle
And went to that wanderer, found his wounds open,
And perceived by his pulse that he was at the point of dying;
That unless a saviour came speedily he should not rise live.
He unbuckled his two bottles and poured both together,
He washed his wounds with wine and oil,
Anointed him and bound his head and carried him carefully
And held him upon his horse till they arrived at Lex Christi,

⁵ William Langland's *The Vision of Piers Plowman* rendered into modern English by Henry W Wells (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968) Passus XVII, lines 48-57.

⁶ *Ibid*, lines 58-63.

An inn six or seven miles this side the New Market.
He harboured him in the hostelry and called the host to him
And said: "If he spends further, I shall make good hereafter
For I may not stay," he said; and bestrode his charger,
And so rode rapidly on the highroad to Jerusalem.⁷

The Holy Ghost has in keeping what the heartless ravish,
The life and the love which is the light of a man's body.
For every kind of good man may be compared in simile
To a torch or a taper to reference the Trinity ⁸

One similar to the Samaritan and sometimes to Piers the Plowman
Came barefoot on an ass's back, bootless yet pricking.
He had no spurs nor spear, but was sprightly in bearing.
Like a squire speeding to the ceremony of knighthood
To get his gilt spurs and cut goloshes.
Then Faith cried from his window, "A, fili David!"
As an herald in arms when adventurers come to jousting.
Old Jews in Jerusalem joyously chorused:
Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini.
Then I asked Faith aside what affair was stirring,
And who should joust in Jerusalem. "Jesus," he answered,⁹

- The Call to Imagination: a personal response
 - Jesus, the man, appeals to our imaginations.
 - He asks us to imagine what it would be like ...
 - ... if God's will really were done on earth as it is in heaven.
 - ... if the Kingdom, the rule of the realm of the God who is love, were already active around us.
 - But He also asks us to live as if it were now.
 - Those words that the imagination loves—as if something, what if something—are constantly there in His teaching to appeal to us.

⁷ Ibid, lines 64-80.

⁸ Ibid, lines 281-284.

⁹ Ibid, lines 10-20.

As If

*Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again.*¹⁰

The Giver of all gifts asks me to give!
The Fountain from which every good thing flows,
The Life who spends himself that all might live,
The Root whence every bud and blossom grows,
Calls me, as if I knew no limitation,
As if I focused all his hidden force,
To be creative with his new creation,
To find my flow in him, my living source,
To live as if I had no fear of losing,
To spend as if I had no need to earn,
To turn my cheek as if it felt no bruising,
To lend as if I needed no return,
As if my debts and sins were all forgiven,
As if I too could body forth his Heaven.¹¹

¹⁰ Luke 6:30 NRSV.

¹¹ Malcolm Guite, "As If," in *Parable and Paradox* (London: Canterbury Press, 2016).

Imagine

*Luke 6:37 Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned.
Forgive, and you will be forgiven.*

Do not judge and you will not be judged.

Imagine if we took these words to heart,
Unselved ourselves and took another's part,
Silenced the accuser, dropped the grudge...

Do not condemn, you will not be condemned.

Imagine if we lived our lives from this
And met each other's outcasts face to face,
Imagine if the blood-dimmed tide was stemmed.

Forgive and you yourselves will be forgiven.

What if we walked together on this path,
What if the whole world laid aside its wrath,
And things were done on earth as though in heaven,
As though the heart's dark knots were all undone,
As though this dreamer weren't the only one?¹²

¹² Malcolm Guite, "Imagine," *Parable and Paradox* (London: Canterbury Press, 2016).