

17 Sunday 2020 A Reflection

This Sunday's Gospel brings to a close Matthew's chapter devoted to Jesus' parables, stories that drew on ordinary events in life which pointed beyond themselves. Why did Jesus begin to use parables at this stage of his ministry? The answer is found in the hearers of Jesus' preaching. Jesus explained, "The reason I speak to [the crowds] in parables is that 'seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.'" As one author puts it, "Jesus continues to teach but he now uses enigmatic language, which will be a challenge for the listeners to ask themselves what the teaching means. To those whose hearts are blinded it will be meaningless."

Matthew had reported that the scribes and Pharisees first began to accuse Jesus of blasphemy when he forgave a paralysed man his sins. This was followed by their complaints that he ate and drank with tax-collectors and sinners. And a little later, noticing that Jesus' disciples plucked grain on a Sabbath and that he healed a man with a withered hand on that holy day, Matthew tells us "the Pharisees conspired against him, how to destroy him."

At the very end of our chapter, and found in the longer reading of today's Gospel, Jesus returned to the theme of understanding, when he asked his disciples, "Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." More than once Jesus challenged his disciples for being weak in faith, but in Matthew's Gospel they do understand his teaching.

Against the background of this chapter of Matthew which highlights both attitudes of openness and hostility to Jesus' teaching we might recall the characteristics of dialogue that express love of neighbour. Paul VI's encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam*, of 1964 named four characteristics of authentic dialogue:

(1) Clarity, "Clarity before all else; the dialogue demands that what is said should be intelligible."

(2) Meekness. "Our dialogue must be accompanied by that meekness which Christ bade us learn from Himself: 'Learn of me, for I am meek and humble of heart.' It would indeed be a disgrace if our dialogue were marked by arrogance."

(3) Confidence: "Confidence not only in the power of one's own words, but also in the good will of both parties to the dialogue. Hence dialogue promotes intimacy and friendship on both sides. It unites them in a mutual adherence to the Good, and thus excludes all self-seeking."

(4) The final characteristic of dialogue is Prudence: "The person who speaks is always at pains to learn the sensitivities of his audience, and if reason demands it, they adapt themselves and the manner of their presentation to the susceptibilities and the degree of intelligence of their hearers."

In such dialogue Paul VI considers that "truth is wedded to charity and understanding to love." May these characteristics be appropriately present as we communicate with each other and may they transfer over into our dialogue with the Lord in our prayer and worship.

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