

from Living the Good News

Having a goal like building the kingdom cannot be accomplished unless one identifies the tasks that need to be done and the strategies that must be invented to accomplish these tasks. Jesus was no pie-in-the-sky visionary but demonstrated a keen awareness of the practical tasks that had to be done to bring the kingdom into being. Moreover, he also devised ingenious teaching strategies for accomplishing these tasks.

As the servant of God's presence, Jesus the Teacher taught ways of discovering, celebrating and reordering life around the experience of God's presence. He characterized this task as a raising of consciousness—helping those with eyes to see and those with ears to hear (Matthew 13:13-16; Mark 4:11-12, Luke 8:9-10).

Jesus' Teaching Strategy

Jesus knew that God was present in our world. But God, by nature, was not of our world. God was the creator who fashioned everything that was created, but God transcended creation. God was not visible, tangible or in any way directly accessible to the senses.

The whole Jewish tradition was based on their experience of this transcendent God breaking into the world to relate to them. Jesus' problem, then, was how to get people to notice something that was beyond their powers of sense perception but not beyond their experience. How could he provide people with eyes to see and ears to hear what normally went unseen and unheard in their experience of God? His answer was to use the stories that we call parables.

One of the most helpful descriptions of a parable was given by the British scripture scholar C.H. Dodd. "At its simplest the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought" (The Parables of the Kingdom, p. 5.). In other words, parables are imaginative expressions that employ a short narrative fiction to make reference to a transcendent reality.

Jesus' parables were apparently innocent stories or analogies that forced the audience to change the way they thought about their world. His parables present a world that was topsy-turvy from the usual perspective. When Jesus spoke in parables, he invited his audience to use their imaginations to enter into a world that saw things from God's point of view.

What if the world could be understood and then organized not according to our human desires but according to God's? Jesus imagined this world as the kingdom of God—the world as it would be if God reigned supreme over creation. This was the world as God intended it to be before the powers of evil distorted it into the twisted and confused world that we experience every day.

How do you use parables in your teaching?

(Excerpt from A Seeker's Guide to Jesus in the Gospels by Steve Mueller (Loyola Press, 2001. Used with permission.) Download the entire article [here](#).