

The Teaching Methods of Jesus

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1. A Teacher come from God

Here we are concerned to look at Jesus as a teacher, not so much from the point of view of what he taught, but rather from the point of view of the methods of teaching he employed as a teacher.

The place of Jesus as the founder of one of the major religions of the world is, of course, unique and unquestioned. His teachings, and those of his followers, have profoundly influenced the moral and social and religious thought of men throughout two thousand years. And there are no signs of abatement even in this modern age of science, technology and secularism.

Since this is manifestly true, it is all the more surprising that so little attention seems to have been given to the question of methods Jesus used in his teaching ministry. Scattered references may be found in existing studies of the life and teaching of Jesus, and to those who search deeply enough there are clues to be found. Even when people have been provoked to ask the question, “How did Jesus guarantee that what he taught would be remembered?”, the answers given tend to be in general terms or within the context of expository sermons. Little has been done to examine his teaching ministry from a technical, educational point of view. If this is attempted now, it is not only because Christian teachers may learn from it, it is also because in an increasingly sophisticated age, men are becoming aware that there are close connections between the “message” and the “medium” in every form of communication. An understanding of content may be helped by a study of methods. This is certainly true of Jesus as a teacher.

That Jesus was successful as a teacher may, of course, be questioned. After all, when his ministry apparently ended in an ignominious death upon the cross, there were few who were prepared to support him, and of these the majority were broken-hearted and panic-stricken. But this was not the end of the story. That small band of followers, taking courage from their assurance that Jesus was risen from the dead, began to speak to others of all that he meant to them. And they found a ready response among those whom they addressed. The significance for us in this study is that many who did respond were among those who could recall what Jesus had said and done. It was upon this foundation that the number of followers of Jesus began rapidly to increase. The effect of a teaching ministry may have been delayed, but it was not nullified. The teaching of Jesus cannot be seen as the sole reason for the response, but it was undoubtedly an important factor in the early and critical months of the life of the Christian Church.

It might also be contended that even if Jesus was successful as a teacher in his own time, there is no justification for believing that a study of his methods may be relevant for the communication of the faith today. Certainly it would be wrong to apply literally the methods of one age to those of another; it would be equally wrong to assume the special techniques and teaching aids available in the present century should be ignored. A study of his methods does reveal, however, certain principles of communication, and an understanding of the message itself, which I believe to be valid for today. It is from these principles that we have much to learn.

If we are prepared seriously to consider Jesus as a teacher who has something to tell us about the art of teaching, it becomes necessary to define more closely what is meant by his teaching ministry. We begin by recognising that for Jesus, as for us today, there was a distinction between “preaching” and “teaching”. Too often, religious leaders and those who follow their example, have been tempted to combine preaching and teaching, and have ended up by confusing the specific purposes which should lie behind them.

Jesus saw the two functions as two separate activities, and he approached them quite differently. When Matthew described the beginning of Christ’s ministry he did so in the words, “He went round the whole of Galilee, *teaching* in the synagogues, *preaching* the gospel of the Kingdom, and curing whatever illness or infirmity there was among the people.”¹ The separation of the two activities, preaching and teaching, can also be illustrated by reference to the other Gospels. Thus Luke gives a more detailed account of the preaching ministry of Jesus in terms of the declaration and exposition of God’s word within the Scriptures. “He stood up to read the lesson and was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He opened the scroll and found the passage which says, ‘The spirit of the Lord is upon me...’ He began to speak: ‘Today in your very hearing this text has come true...’”² On the other hand, Mark shows how the teaching ministry unfolded. “He began to teach by the lake-side... And he taught them many things by parables.”³ Our study will, therefore, be limited to those records in the Gospels which are closely related to teaching. We shall not be involved in assessing those episodes which belong to a preaching ministry.

There is another distinction which also has to be made, not only for the sake of clarity, but also because it affects our attitude to teaching the faith

¹ Matt. 4:23 (my own italics)

² Lk. 4:17-21

³ Mk 4:1-2

today. There is a part of Christ’s teaching ministry which is related to the imparting of instruction. This will be discussed in detail in a later chapter. But it is important to note here that Jesus distinguished between instruction given to the committed and that given to the uncommitted. Unfortunately, there is again a danger that in Christian teaching today these two aspects are confused. The result is that sometimes the wrong Christian instruction is given to the wrong people! Jesus made no such mistake.

While we may profit from looking at the ways in which Jesus taught, there is one major feature of his ministry which sets him apart from ourselves. Those of us who are called upon to communicate the Christian religion find it necessary to interpret life in terms of what we understand Jesus Christ himself to be as a person and a teacher. We may call upon the inner experience of our response to him, but all the time we are compelled to point our pupils to the one who is at the centre of all Christian thought. All that we offer, whatever methods we use, must be seen in relation to the life of Jesus, the work of Jesus, the message of Jesus.

The uniqueness of Jesus as a teacher lies in the fact that he was always his own authority and his own interpreter. From his own resources of a living and perfect relationship with God as his Father, he could interpret the realities and experiences of life in his own right. “The people were astounded at his teaching, for, unlike the doctors of the law, he taught with a note of authority.”¹ “You have learned that our forefathers were told... But what I tell you is this...”² “My testimony is valid, even though I do bear witness about myself; because I know where I come from, and where I am going... my judgment is valid because it is not I alone who judge, but I and he who sent me.”³ He was a teacher come from God in a way that we can never be.

The significance of this uniqueness for Christian education lies in the fact that while teachers should encourage their pupils to look at life “through the eyes of Jesus”, they need also to give those pictures of Jesus that will enable them indeed to look at life through his eyes. This means that far more emphasis must be placed upon the Gospels themselves, as distinct from the assumption that, because the Bible is all inspired and profitable, all parts are equally important for our purpose.

If our own study is modest and limited by the very terms of reference we have laid down, it will be surprising if at the end we do not find that, while we have learned something of his own methods of teaching, we have

¹ Mk 1:22

² Matt 5:21-22

³ Jn 8:14-17

come again into the living presence of one who still challenges and inspires. We may become better teachers because we have been brought nearer to God, and seek to help others come to God. Jesus will still be the one teacher who in a wonderful way has come from God, and continues to bring God to us through himself.

2. The Story Teller

The art of story-telling is one of the most ancient and universal means of communication devised by man. Long before historical events and codes of law were recorded, the customs of tribes and peoples were transmitted from one generation to another by means of stories and legends. The Old Testament itself abounds in illustrations of this kind and they have their parallels in all other ancient civilizations.

The use of stories as a means of communication cannot, however, be judged solely in terms of past history. The sophisticated novel and modern drama have their place in the dissemination of ideas in society today; and whilst there is a world of difference between a crudely expressed legend and twentieth century imaginative literature, both have their place in the communication of insights into individual and corporate life.

There is no need here to defend the place of story-telling in the sphere of Christian education. It has long had an honoured place in teaching children; and stories, well told, capture the interest of young people as well. Adults, too, are not averse to listening to stories as distinct from some of the more complicated processes of abstract argument. A great deal of information about the continuing work of the Christian Church as it witnesses to successive generations has been communicated in story form. And there are many who depend almost entirely upon the story method for their knowledge of the Bible.

Jesus clearly regarded the story as one of the best methods of making known the truths he wanted to impart. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how some of his truths could have been imparted, with so good effect, in any other way. To have attempted to do so might have led to a stylised set of instructions, arid and abstract, that could have remained petrified within the first century. As it is, his stories are not only remembered; they are studied again and again, challenging each generation afresh with the truths they contain.

It is not my purpose here to discuss the techniques which are necessary for successful story-telling. A number of books are already available which have done this; and other aids have been prepared to help people exercise the art. When we examine the stories of Jesus, however, there are certain principles which are worth careful consideration, and an

understanding of these principles can give significance to the techniques to be mastered.

The list of stories told by Jesus at the end of this chapter does not pretend to be complete. There are parables told by Jesus which might well have been added to the list, and the only reason for their omission is their severe brevity. These have been included in the chapter dealing with illustrative material. But the number of stories selected is less important than their examination, and it is to this examination that we now turn.

The first thing we note is that THE STORIES ARE ALL CREDIBLE. When people listened to the stories of Jesus there was no danger that they would be put off because they were too trivial, or silly, or too far-fetched for words. Jesus did not indulge in such flights of fancy that only a sophisticated minority might respond to what he described. The characters portrayed were living characters, recognisable to all. Whether judged from the standpoint of literary invention or from psychological analysis, there was something of Everyman in every character.

The circumstances outlined in the stories were also within the experiences and understanding of all who heard them. The events described were such as did and could happen. There was no absurdity about them.

So the stories were peopled by farmers and labourers, by rich men, poor men, beggars and thieves; there were housewives and bailiffs, householders and plaintiffs. The characters were proud and humble, brave and cowardly, selfish and self-less. And the circumstances described sought to deal with ordinary situations arising out of family relationships, intrigues to steal property, work in the orchards and on the farms, the perils of journeying in wild and dangerous places.

The very importance which Jesus gave to telling stories could have led to disaster if the hearers had been tempted to ask irrelevant questions or had been asked to swallow too much before accepting the stories. Instead, they were accepted without question, and are still accepted today.

Because they were credible it became possible for people to concentrate on the point of the stories. And it is still true that men find themselves involved in all that is happening when they hear the stories today. Our sympathies may be with a publican (tax-collector) whose humility contrasts sharply with the self-righteousness of a Pharisee, but we cannot avoid thinking about the Pharisaism of so much of our own worship. We may hope for justice for a poor widow whom everybody is ignoring, and yet there remains a nagging feeling that we, too, would rather ignore those who harass us with their problems. We may pass judgement upon a foolish traveller who goes alone through a desolate

region infested with robbers, but know within ourselves how easily by our own foolishness we come to need the help of others.

The same credibility helped to sustain the interest to the very end of each story. At every stage there is involvement with one character after another, one circumstance after another. The stories become part of our lives, part of our inner responses to life until, sometimes soon and sometimes later, and always with deeper understanding, we say to ourselves, “So that was what Jesus was trying to teach!”

The next thing we notice is that all the stories ENCOURAGE THE EXERCISE OF THE IMAGINATION. Those who write or tell stories are always walking on the knife-edge of revealing too much or too little. If there is too much detailed information the attention of the reader or hearer is lost. If there is too little, people may ask at the end, What has all that been about? Jesus was a supreme master in knowing just how much to say. His stories have never failed to excite the imagination.

If, for example, we take the very familiar story of the prodigal son,¹ it is worth while reading that story and drawing up a list of all the facts in the story. It then becomes apparent how skilful Jesus was in leaving the right parts of the story to our imagination. What were the motives which lay behind the decision of the younger son to leave home? What kind of habits did he acquire when away from home? What were his companions like, and who were they, those associates who later deserted him? Did the elder son miss his brother when he was away? Did he really regret his return, or only the fuss that was made of him when he did return? What were the thoughts and feelings of the father when first approached by his son to take his share of the inheritance? Why did he allow him to leave home? What was the likely sequel to the events which took place when the younger son returned?

The questions can be multiplied as one seeks to probe more deeply into the apparently simple, yet very profound, relationship of a father and his two sons. Jesus gave the setting to the relationship: he left it to the imagination to fill in the details. In this way Jesus ensured that as man’s knowledge and experience are widened and deepened, so he continues to be involved in the stories, always able to find deeper levels of truth and insight. Interpretation remains relevant for each individual at the level of his or her understanding. No story can ever be abandoned because all the lessons have been learned and there remains no further illumination of truth to be discovered.

¹ Lk 15:11-32

But if Jesus knew which parts of the stories to leave to the imagination he also knew which parts of the stories had to be described in order that the imagination would be rightly used. The questions we have already posed about the story of the prodigal son are questions which naturally arise, and we can answer them ourselves because if we are faithful to the facts of the story given by Jesus, the precise way in which we answer them does not matter. The story may be widened by our imagination, but there are essential facts given which control the direction of the conclusions to be drawn from the story. And this is important. If Jesus had said too little or had missed out essential features, the stories might have stimulated imagination but the exercise would have become too wide-ranging to be effective.

No greater tribute can be paid to the skill of Jesus in promoting the use of imagination than to attempt either to write a similar story ourselves or to re-write such a story in modern terms. All such endeavours become a pale imitation of the original stories as told by Jesus himself.

In the third place we note that the stories contain an ELEMENT OF SURPRISE. There is a sense in which the stories are not so much narratives as dramatic pictures. And like all true drama there is climax and surprise. Even with the examples of the great classical drama of the Greeks or the tragedies of William Shakespeare’s plays, the seeming inevitability of events does not detract from the sense of climax and surprise.

Those of us who have grown up with the stories may be less aware of these elements than we ought to be. To the sensitive spirit, however, there remains that sense of surprise at the paradoxical nature of the stories and their particular relevance to ourselves in the different experiences of life through which we pass.

Certainly for the people of his own time Jesus produced some shocks. To a community brought up to accept the view that riches were an indication of God’s favour, and poverty a sign of God’s judgment upon wrong-doing, the story of Lazarus who sat at the gates of the rich man¹ was quite unexpected. What would the hearers make of a story in which labourers in a vineyard, irrespective of the hours they worked, all received the same wages?² What, indeed, do we make of the story today? Those who gathered to listen to Jesus would not expect him to commend an unjust steward,³ or to refer to a Samaritan in complimentary terms.⁴

¹ Lk 16:19-31

² Matt 20:1-16

³ Matt 18:23-35

⁴ Lk 10:30-37

It is little wonder that the crowds remarked on the newness of his teaching. His approach, both in content and methods, was so different from the traditions of the religious leaders of his time.

Again, we should recognise that Jesus always told his stories FOR A PARTICULAR REASON. It is true, as we have seen already, that almost all kinds of truth can be discovered incidentally in a study of the stories and the characters who people them. And this aspect of Christ’s teaching should never be underrated. Nevertheless, whatever by-products of understanding may emerge, whenever Jesus told one of his stories there was always a particular purpose he had in mind.

There are two levels at which the particular purpose may be assessed. There is the meaning of the story itself; there is also the circumstance which gave rise to the story. In practice, of course, these were almost invariably interrelated. But both have their place. So, while the story of the good Samaritan, for example, may offer facets of truth, and rightly so, there is need to examine the story in the light of the circumstances which gave rise to it, and deduce from that the particular meaning Jesus intended to convey.

At a time when it is easy for people to plead for story material and when one is aware that behind it is the assumption that almost any story will do for any occasion, or a kind of laziness which refuses to accept the importance of other teaching methods, it is significant that Jesus himself did more than tell stories. Equally significant is the discipline he himself exercised when he told a story only when the circumstance demanded it and there was a particular purpose to be fulfilled.

So the story which Jesus told of the householder who built upon rock rather than sand¹ should be judged within the context of a teaching exercise as a means of summarizing in picture language the results of accepting or rejecting this teaching. The story of the sower² can only be properly understood when one remembers the contemporary situation of Jesus when people everywhere were looking for signs that would indicate success. Only in these terms does it speak effectively to Christians today who also are in danger of looking about them desperately for signs of success and how to achieve it.

From this analysis of principles underlying the way in which Jesus told his stories it becomes obvious that he never fell into the error of moralizing from the stories. The stories were always OPEN ENDED so that at the conclusion of each he could say, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” This fact is true, of course, in the whole range of his teaching,

¹ Matt 7:24-29; Lk 6:47-49

² Mk 4:4-9; Matt 13:3-9; Lk 8:5-8

as James Stewart has properly pointed out: “As you turn the pages of the Gospels, one fact stares out at you,” he writes, “The quite amazing patience of Jesus with the men he had to teach, his steadfast refusal to compel them or dictate to them or bend them to his will, his overwhelming respect for their personalities.” But it is particularly true and important in our consideration of Jesus as a story-teller.

This does not mean that Jesus did not follow up the stories, given the right circumstance. It does mean that in a general way Jesus was content to allow the stories to speak for themselves. To have elaborated upon them would have been to defeat their purpose.

I stated at the beginning of this chapter that there was no need to defend the place of story-telling in the sphere of Christian education. Perhaps for some, its value will be reinforced. Yet for many its popularity as a method of teaching has lain in the idea that such an idea is the easiest to master and will yield the best response. There is more in the art of story-telling than many imagine. Not for nothing did the children who were interviewed about their refusal to continue attending Sunday Schools affirm that they were bored by the repetition and childishness of stories, and many of them Bible stories! Stories have their proper place, but that place needs carefully to be determined. The stories themselves need equally carefully to be chosen and prepared. Here, as in other realms of our lives, we need to sit at the feet of the Master and learn of him.

Some stories Jesus told

The house-builder	Matt 7:24-27
The sower	Matt 13:4-9
Seeds and tares	Matt 13:24-30
The unjust steward	Matt 18:23-35
Labourers in the Vineyard	Matt 20:1-16
Treacherous servants	Matt 21:33-43
Guests at the marriage feast	Matt 22:1-14
Wise and foolish virgins	Matt 25:1-13
Talents and their use	Matt 25:14-30
The good Samaritan	Lk 10:30-37
A friend in search of bread	Lk 11:5-10
A rich man and his barns	Lk 12:16-21
The barren fig tree	Lk 13:6-9
Chief seats at the feast	Lk 14:7-11
The lost sheep	Lk 15:3-7
The prodigal son	Lk 15:11-32
Stewardship commended	Lk 16:1-9

Lazarus and the rich man	Lk 16:19-31
The importunate widow	Lk 18:1-7
Two men at prayer	Lk 18:9-14

3. Illustrative Material

Christianity, and the Hebrew religion from which it sprang, is unique in its emphasis upon God who is active in the whole world of His creation. In a remarkable way, and men have never been finally able to resolve the tensions, the world of creation and the world of historical events are interwoven into a pattern reflecting God's activities in fulfilment of his purposes. At the same time there has emerged an emphasis upon men as the servants or children of God, who only fully reflect the reality of God's presence when they can translate His purposes into the whole of their lives. Specific religious activities, however mysterious or sacramental their nature, must not for the Christian lead to an exclusive and artificial religious experience; they should lead to an ever deeper involvement in all that makes for life.

The focal point of this attitude to religion and life is summed up admirably in the two commandments which Jesus Himself stressed, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself."¹ It is this which makes clear so much that Jesus wanted to communicate; that the revelation of God in Christ is concerned to establish right relationships between God and men, and among men, and that these are expressed in the totality of life.

We ought not to be surprised, therefore, that when we examine the illustrative material of Jesus, these are the aspects to which they are related, and in order to give greater significance to his intentions, it is from the realms of the whole of life that he selects his material. Just as the great formative prophets of the eighth century BC were challenged to look around them, and to see the realities of God's truth in the bursting forth of the almond blossom in spring-time,² or in a basket of summer fruit being taken to the market,³ or a potter at his wheel,⁴ or in a builder with his plumb-line,⁵ so Jesus himself was always challenging his hearers to look

¹ Lk 10:27

² Jeremiah 1:11

³ Amos 8:1

⁴ Jeremiah 18:1-4

⁵ Amos 7:7

about them at the scenes of everyday life and of nature, and to discover in them the inner meaning of life.

Thus the illustrations of Jesus are to be seen, not only as a special means of communicating truth, but also as part of the truth itself. If God called upon the prophets in the words, "What do you see?"¹ Jesus did the same to his own generation. And perhaps there is an aspect of Christian education today which should carry the same challenge.

It is easy to become imprisoned within a framework of ideas so that what should be in essence an exercise of release or "salvation" becomes a restriction and a form of "bondage". Not all the emphasis of Christ's teaching was upon a redeeming power that overcomes the sense and power of guilt for moral and spiritual sin. There is that within it which offered men freedom from the rigidity of the rules and regulations of an outward religious system. And this emphasis did not escape the attention of St. Paul.

Today we are in danger of offering a system of religious ideas which in their own ways may be just as introverted and restrictive. A framework of truth confined to certain biblical and theological presuppositions can become as dangerous as the legalism of the Pharisees. There is the need to reclaim people for the wholeness of living which is true salvation and which is offered when people are taught to open their eyes and see God at work in the whole of life and to express right relationships in every aspect of life. And this may well be done when, like Jesus, we are prepared to bring together both content and illustration into the realms of everyday life.

Of course there are dangers in attempting to do this. The truth that makes men free can never be a safety-first operation. There will be those who will ask, What has this to do with religion? (Alas! for those who seeing, do not see, and hearing, do not hear.) There will be those who will reduce everyday life, and illustrations based upon it, to the trivial. Such triviality, however, stems from an inability to see "life at full depth".² And, of course, one is not suggesting that this emphasis should be the sole emphasis of all teaching.

Nevertheless, as the analysis of the illustrative material used by Jesus abundantly shows, Jesus did spend a great deal of time in drawing pictures of ordinary life and taking his illustrations from the same source. When, therefore, we turn to our own examination of the illustrations we find that

¹ Jeremiah 1:11; Amos 7:8

² cf. Professor Jeffreys' oft-quoted phrase, "The Christian religion is normal experience understood at full depth."

the overwhelming majority do belong to what we have called EVERYDAY LIFE.

In doing this Jesus was aware that while a few might be convinced by closely-knit arguments, many more were likely to remember what he said when his teaching was lit up by pictures of everyday life. Moreover, he was anxious to show that his message was not primarily a kind of abstract pattern of philosophical thought. It was a call to action that could immediately affect everyday life; it was a challenge to a change in attitudes that would influence all life. The reality and application of God's love and truth should reflect itself at all times in all that was going on in the world.

Jesus really had no alternative, if he was to be true to himself and the reality of the incarnation as we now understand it, except to illuminate his teaching with references to birds and flowers, fishermen and farmers, wedding feasts and parties. These are what life was about when Jesus walked the earth, and this is what the Christian religion is about.

The effectiveness of Christ's illustrative material is beyond question. Could Peter and Andrew ever forget that they were called to be fishers of men¹ when scarcely a day would go by without them seeing men sailing on Lake Galilee, or mending their nets on the shores of the Lake? What housewife would forget the teaching of Jesus when day by day she would finger the coin that meant so much to her?² Even now it is an impressive sight to travel through Israel or Jordan and see the fields carpeted with flowers so that not even Solomon in all his glory could ever be attired with such beauty,³ or see the reeds shaken in the wind⁴ by Lake Galilee. Equally impressive are the towns and villages set high on the hills where all men can see them.⁵

The full effect of this emphasis on everyday life cannot be appreciated until the illustrations used by Jesus are winkled out of the pages of scripture. If you do it for yourselves, it is a tremendously worthwhile project. And if you do, try to make your own classification. The one drawn up for our purpose is only one approach, but for me, it was full of surprise. The very weight of references to the domestic scene, to the world of nature, to identifiable characters gave a perspective both to the teaching process and the content which I had scarcely recognised beforehand.

¹ Mk 1:17

² Lk 15, 8-10

³ Matt 6:28

⁴ Matt 11:7; Lk 7:24

⁵ Matt 5:14

Given the proper insights and concern for interpretation, the value of illustrations taken from everyday life is surely indisputable.

This becomes clear when we recognise in the second place that the illustrations have, for Jesus, a SPECIFIC APPROPRIATENESS. They were never in danger of becoming trivial because, when they were used they were always particularly relevant to the situation which gave rise to them.

We may not learn everything there is to learn about life by looking at sparrows being sold in the market, or at the flowers growing on the hillside,¹ but we do learn that there are some things in life that we ought not to be anxious about and for which so much time and energy may be wrongly spent. Building on rock or on sand may seem so trivial and stupid as not to offer any valid choice.² Yet within the context of Christ's teaching the importance of the illustration is readily recognised. How many people there are, even after two thousand years, who still persist in building their own lives on sand! How many of us, if we are honest, are not in constant danger of doing the same?

The appropriateness of choice of illustrative material did not come to Jesus by accident. Behind them stretch those years of his life which have been called the hidden years; a time spent in preparation and meditation, reflection and observation. It is not possible to say how far Jesus was able to seize upon the immediacy of a situation (and clearly he was able to do this) and how far he had thought in advance how and what he would teach. The two skills are closely related. It is possible to assert, however, that if Jesus had not spent those years in contemplation he would not have been equipped so that even the simplest picture of life could be conjured up to match the appropriateness of an occasion. This faculty is teaching at its best.

So from another angle we ourselves are challenged to see the inter-relationship of content with illustration. The more we are enabled to see God at work in the whole of life, the more readily we acquire the art of seizing upon the right illustration for the right occasion. Because we have been able to see, we can help others to see. The challenge for so many teachers remains in the question, How can the blind lead the blind?

In the third place the illustrations convey the NOTION OF ACTIVITY. Reference has already been made to the Jewish and Christian view of God as active in the world of His creation. It is also true that the Hebrew language itself has so evolved that it reflects a preference for the active rather than the passive, the picturesque rather than the abstract. The same

¹ Matt 6:26-30

² Matt 7:24-27

may be said of the illustrative material of Jesus. He is always seeking to convey a picture of God ever at work; creating and sustaining, guiding and controlling, judging and forgiving, redeeming and renewing. And complementary to that emphasis he seeks to challenge men to be active in their religious convictions, doing good, exercising charity, going beyond what would normally be expected of them, spending and being spent in the service of God's kingdom.

These factors ought not to detract from a concern to study Christ's teachings as a whole, and to build an acceptable philosophy of religion or theological pattern upon them. The mind of man demands that such should be attempted. It should help us to beware, however, of being satisfied with those attempts as ends in themselves. If our philosophy or theology does not lead to active participation in the establishing of God's kingdom, here upon earth, it has failed.

Examine again the illustrations of Jesus. We may or may not have the intellectual capacity to harmonize them into a coherent pattern of thought; none of us can escape the challenge of the illustrations which continually point to the message of Jesus, "You must therefore be all goodness, just as your heavenly Father is all good".¹

Next, it is important for us to note that the illustrations REVEAL THE HUMOUR OF JESUS. Almost as much profound thought has been given to the nature of humour as to the nature of tragedy, and there are those who believe that humour has its roots in the affliction or discomfort of others. It is therefore supposed that Jesus did not have a sense of humour. This view, still commonly held among people who ought to know better, is unfortunately supported by those who approach the scriptures in a kind of sanctimonious fashion, thinking that every single word is a weighty pronouncement from God Himself and therefore to be regarded with solemnity. I should say here, lest I be misunderstood, that I myself take the scriptures seriously, but this does not mean that I regard every text in such a way that one must take it with pious solemnity. This approach, indeed, denies the humanity of Jesus, and I suspect that no man is a proper person if he has no sense of humour. Jesus certainly had a sense of humour and, as in other respects, he used it effectively in his illustrated teachings. He did so also without having recourse to the afflictions and discomforts of other people. There is no cruel or selfish vein in his humour.

Once one is released from an inhibited and false religious view of the scriptures, it is possible to see the humour of Jesus as belonging to the school of cartoonists or comic-strip writers rather than to any other. So, for

¹ Matt 5:48

example, he pictures a householder proudly lighting the lamp, and then carefully placing it under a meal bin.¹ Or he pictures some housewife painstakingly trying to thread a needle not with cotton, but with a camel!² A man self-righteously accosts another because he has seen a speck of sawdust in his eye, but is unaware of a plank of wood protruding from his own eye.³

This kind of grotesque exaggeration or ludicrous situation belongs properly to the world of slapstick comedy, or to some of the comics produced for children. It also belonged to the world of the Middle East where Jesus lived and Jesus was not averse to using it. And we have no need to be offended by the idea. Such humour served to highlight the absurdity and silliness of so much behaviour that was pretentious and respectable, but which God recognized for what it was.

Finally, we should note that the illustrations demand A LEAP OF FAITH. In the previous chapter we looked at the place which imagination has in the story-telling of Jesus. There is in fact an interesting connection between exercises of the imagination and the exercising of faith. Both the stories of Jesus and the illustrations he used carry the same implication. That which is left to the imagination stimulates the will, and can lead to a genuine expression of faith on the part of the hearer. As significance dawns, so we know in our inner beings the truths which, by faith, need to be acted upon in our lives.

If Jesus suggests that He is the bread of life,⁴ and the water of life,⁵ he is providing a kind of analogous thought for men to work out for themselves. At the same time he is also suggesting that every time bread is broken or water is drunk there can be an imaginative exercise of the will which becomes an expression of faith in Christ as the life-giving bread and water. One level of interpretation can lead to others until all life is truly sacramental. "We feed on Him in our hearts with thanksgiving."

Through imagination which can lead to experience, or in experience which stimulates imagination, the world of ordinary things becomes charged with the activity of God in Christ. His kingdom has come among us, and is within us.

All teachers should recognize the value of illustrations. But from which sources should they be taken? What disciplines should be observed if their

¹ Matt 5:15

² I am aware that another interpretation has been given to this illustration by some scholars who, it seems to me, miss the point! Mk 10:25

³ Matt 7:3-5; Lk 6:41

⁴ Jn 6:35

⁵ Jn 4:7-15

purposes are to be fulfilled? How are they to be used with maximum effect? No one can afford to consider these questions without first examining the effective use which Jesus made of illustrative material, and by being prepared to learn of him.

Some illustrations Jesus used (in Luke's Gospel)

a) Everyday life

- 5:31 Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.
- 5:34 And Jesus said to them, "Can you make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them?"
- 5:38 But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins.
- 6:48 He is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock. And when a flood arose, the stream broke against that house and could not shake it, because it had been well built.
- 7:32 They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not weep."
- 8:16 No one after lighting a lamp covers it with a jar or puts it under a bed, but puts it on a stand, so that those who enter may see the light.
- 9:48 Whoever receives this child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. For he who is least among you all is the one who is great.
- 10:30 A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead.
- 11:5 Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, "Friend, lend me three loaves"?
- 11:24 When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, and finding none it says, "I will return to my house from which I came."
- 11:33-36 No one after lighting a lamp puts it in a cellar or under a basket, but on a stand, so that those who enter may see the light. Your eye is the lamp of your body. When your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light, but when it is bad, your body is full of darkness. Therefore be careful lest the light in you be darkness. If then your whole body is full of light, having no part dark, it will be wholly bright, as when a lamp with its rays gives you light.

- 13:21 It is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened.
- 14:8-24 When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honour... When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours... A man once gave a great banquet and invited many...
- 14:28 For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it?
- 14:34 Salt is good, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored?
- 15:11 There was a man who had two sons.
- 20:24 "Show me a denarius. Whose likeness and inscription does it have?" They said, "Caesar's."

b) Nature

- 6:43-44 For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thornbushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush.
- 9:58 Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.
- 10:2 The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.
- 10:18 I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.
- 11:11 What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent?
- 12:16 The land of a rich man produced plentifully.
- 12:27 Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.
- 12:54-55 When you see a cloud rising in the west, you say at once, "A shower is coming." And so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, "There will be scorching heat," and it happens.
- 13:6-9 A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, "Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?" And he answered him, "Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."

- 14:5 Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day, will not immediately pull him out?
- 15:4 What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it?
- 17:6 If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, "Be uprooted and planted in the sea," and it would obey you.
- 17:24 For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day.

c) Characters

- 5:31 Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.
- 7:41 A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty.
- 10:30 A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead.
- 11:21 When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are safe.
- 12:16 The land of a rich man produced plentifully.
- 12:39 But know this, that if the master of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have left his house to be broken into.
- 12:58 As you go with your accuser before the magistrate, make an effort to settle with him on the way, lest he drag you to the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and the officer put you in prison.
- 13:25 When once the master of the house has risen and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, "Lord, open to us," then he will answer you, "I do not know where you come from."
- 16:1 There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his possessions.
- 17:7 Will any one of you who has a servant ploughing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, "Come at once and recline at table"?
- 18:2 In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man.

- 19:12 A nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and then return.

4. The Use of Questions

Teaching situations cannot be exercised properly without an element of question and answer. At the simplest level it is important for teachers to discover what knowledge their pupils already possess, and what they do not know. At another level teachers need to discover whether their pupils have discovered the significance of what has been taught. The concern to ask questions, however, ought not to remain the prerogative of teachers only. In proper learning situations, the pupils should also be encouraged to ask questions, and any teacher failing to give such an opportunity is failing as a teacher. It might almost be said that when people stop asking questions they stop learning. The use of questions, both for teacher and learners, is extremely important.

With a subject like the Christian religion, concerned as it is with every aspect and experience of life, and which ought not to be limited to factual knowledge about religion, the process of question and answer, with the discussion that may ensue, is a vital means of exchanging insights and interpretations. Unlike academic subjects, it is in the nature of religion that those insights and interpretations which illuminate life's experiences are not limited to the teachers as "experts" in the subject. They can also emerge from the experiences of the pupils themselves. It is part of the paradox of life in the religious realm that there are aspects of truth which are hidden from the wise and revealed to the simple!¹ These aspects may well remain hidden without the process of question and answer being allowed its proper place.

That Jesus recognised the value of asking and answering questions cannot be doubted when one studies the Gospels from this point of view. There is, however, one general comment which needs to be made here lest it be thought that too much is being claimed for the place which this method had in the practice of Jesus.

When one reads the Gospel records it might be assumed that the majority of questions asked by Jesus are really rhetorical questions inserted in the oratorical passages, and for which Jesus did not require answers. It should be remembered, therefore, that the Gospels themselves are only abbreviated versions of the ministry of Jesus; they are shorthand notes rather than full and detailed descriptions of the events to which they refer. What often appears to be a rhetorical question is a shorthand note of

¹ Lk 10:21

a turning point in the teaching situation being described. The question is not really rhetorical in our accepted sense of the word. It is a significant clue to the mind of Jesus or to the point of challenge to the hearers in what was a much more prolonged discussion or dialogue. In St Mark's Gospel, for example, there is a remarkable passage in which Jesus shares a discussion with the disciples on the danger of the leaven of the Pharisees.¹ The whole of the discussion, which includes ten questions which Jesus asked his disciples, is telescoped into seven verses! This was an important discussion, and it dealt with a matter not easy to define. Obviously much more was said by Jesus and the disciples than is now recorded. And the questions, which read as rhetorical questions, would be used in a wider and deeper sense than is indicated.

Jesus, however, did use RHETORICAL QUESTIONS for dramatic effect, and one of the ways which helps us to detect them is by recognising his practice of coupling questions together in the form of parallelism. This he did quite deliberately and for a very good reason. Most poetic forms are based on parallelism of one kind or another. For example, the English forms of poetry are frequently based on the parallelism of sound. This is what we mean by rhyming: the practice of using words which mean different things, but are similar to each other when spoken. Hebrew forms of poetry, and those therefore familiar to those who listened to Jesus, are often based on the parallelism of ideas. When Jesus coupled questions together in rhetorical fashion he was not so much becoming caught up in flights of oratory in the Western fashion. He was being true to the poetic, and dramatic, forms of speech acceptable to those of his own time. And just as we find it easy to remember what is said in rhyming verse, so the people who listened to Jesus found it easy to remember what he said in the repetition of questions which had similarity in ideas.

An example of what has been described as synonymous parallelism may be given by quoting the question, "If you love only those who love you, what reward can you expect?" which is followed immediately by the further question, "And if you greet only your brothers, what is there extraordinary about that?"² Loving and greeting; people we love and brothers; rewards and something extraordinary; these are couplets of ideas which have notes of similarity about them.

This practice was, of course, varied by Jesus, just as all forms of poetic verse may vary. So sometimes Jesus carried the coupling of ideas, not in two separate questions, but within a single question, as for instance when

¹ Mk 8:14-21

² Matt 5:46-47

he said, "Can grapes be picked from briars, or figs from thistles?"¹ Another variation may be quoted where Jesus takes one idea with one question, and then develops the same idea from another angle with a second question. Thus, "Is there a man of you who by anxious thought can add a foot to his height?" This is followed by the question, "And why be anxious about clothes?"²

These questions may not read like poetry to us, but they would be recognised immediately as poetic speech by those who first heard them. In the framing of them Jesus was seeking to ensure that the people would grasp the inner meaning of what they thought they had known all the time. The same characteristic we have observed already in story-telling and illustrative material can be noted here. Jesus was seeking to relate the mysteries of the Kingdom, not to the eroticism of a mystery cult, but to a life with God which could be lived out and understood in terms of the obvious and everyday situations of ordinary life. Beneath the apparently naïve questions were challenges to thought and ideas which could revolutionize the world if taken seriously.

Jesus also practised regularly the art of ASKING QUESTIONS IN REPLY TO QUESTIONS. Jesus never fell into the trap of giving answers when it was clear to him that the questions were motivated by a desire to prove him wrong. Whilst he never shunned controversy - on the contrary - he himself never sought to provoke argument for its own sake. On the other hand, in those situations when those who opposed him were obviously looking for an argument by asking "loaded" questions, he used his skill by turning the argument back upon his opponents.

When, for example, the Pharisees questioned his right to heal on the Sabbath day³ they were less concerned about the good that would result from the healing, and more concerned to show that Jesus was breaking the laws of the Sabbath and, therefore, doing wrong. If he could be trapped into such an admission it could then be quoted against him that he was a self-confessed law breaker. So Jesus countered the attack by putting the question to the Pharisees, "Suppose you had one sheep which fell into the ditch on the Sabbath: is there one of you who would not catch hold of it and lift it out?"

The same method was used when he was questioned about the nature of authority upon which his ministry rested.⁴ "The baptism of John," he replied, "Was it from God, or from men?"

¹ Matt 7:16

² Matt 6:27-28

³ Matt 12:11-12

⁴ Mk 11:30

This way of dealing with his opponents may at first sight seem merely clever. But it is more than mental gymnastics. The questions which Jesus asked in response to those put to him were of such a character that the answers given to them became the right answers to those originally raised. The real answer to the breaking of the Sabbath laws is found when one answers the question which Jesus asked. The real answer to the question of authority for a ministry is found in the assessment of the quality of John the Baptist's ministry. The Pharisees became angry and embarrassed, not only because they had failed to trap Jesus, but because they had become caught in their own trap. They knew that the only valid answers to the questions of Jesus gave the proper answers to those they had put to him.

From this it is easy to see that Jesus used the art of asking questions in order to present CHALLENGES to those to whom he spoke. The technique of raising questions so that people had to find answers for themselves rather than having them imposed upon them, was not used solely to confound the critics. It was also used more positively in order to draw out responses to his truth.

When men came to Jesus for help and guidance, instead of giving them an answer immediately, or meeting their need without question, he preferred to ask the kinds of questions which would help them draw on their inner resources. For example, when the two blind men approached Jesus,¹ asking him to have pity on them, he did not immediately give them their sight. He moved on, waiting to see if they would follow him; and when they did so, even to the house that he entered, he turned to them with the question, "Do you believe that I have power to do what you want?" It was their response to the question which enabled Jesus then to touch their eyes and restore their sight.

We can readily believe that blind men, hearing that a healer had appeared upon the scene, would chance their luck to see if he could do anything for them. Jesus was equally aware of this, and needed the assurance of personal conviction before he was ready to act. The questions he put, in circumstances like these, were challenges to a positive response to him. Without such response Jesus was unwilling or unable to do what was asked, as is demonstrated in the way in which he was received in his own home town. There he could do "no mighty works"² because there was no positive response.

But by far the most positive event described in the Gospels which illustrates the use made by Jesus of questions in order to bring out a challenge and a response is that which took place when he was with his

¹ Matt 9:27-30, cf. Matt 20:29-34

² Mk 6:5; Matt 13:58

disciples at Caesarea Philippi.¹ Most students of the New Testament refer to this incident as the major turning point in Christ's ministry. The Twelve disciples had withdrawn with Jesus to a secluded spot and he had questioned them about the various views which people had of him. They answered these questions openly and honestly. Then Jesus followed up with the most important question of all, "And you," he says, "Who do you say I am?" It is at this moment that their general feeling about Jesus, their gropings toward a true understanding of his nature, finds its focus. Peter brings into the open the inner conviction that had gradually dawned upon him and his companions. "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." This was the moment of truth. The nature of Christ's ministry, and the quality of discipleship of those chosen to follow him, were never the same again.

In these pages we are concerned to study the teaching methods with particular reference to Christian education as they are exemplified by Jesus himself. We are not concerned either with preaching or evangelism. Yet here at this point we need to realise that the art of asking questions cannot remain isolated within the realms of a teaching exercise. There come those times when, as teachers, our function becomes more important than we sometimes imagine. Behind the questions can lie challenges, evoking responses, which are part of true Christian Education, but which can have a significance for those who answer them far beyond a general acceptance of Jesus Christ as a good man. They can lead to commitment which is renewing and transforming. We must never be afraid or ashamed to ask questions. Without them the right answers may never be forthcoming. As, I believe, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Ramsey, once said, "We may be concerned with the 'didache' (teaching), but we ought not to be surprised if sometimes it becomes the 'kyrugma' (preaching)."

Some questions Jesus asked (in Luke's Gospel)

a) The general public

6:32-46 If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you?...

And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you?... And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you?... "Can a blind man lead a blind man? Will they not both fall into a pit?... Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?"

¹ Mk 8, 27-31; Matt 16:13-20

- 7:14-26 What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? What then did you go out to see? A prophet?
- 8:45 Who was it that touched me?
- 9:25 For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?
- 11:18 And if Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand?
- 12:6 Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies?
- 12:56-57 You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time? And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?
- 13:2-4 Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem?
- 13:18-20 What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it?
- 14:28 For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it?
- 14:30-34 Salt is good, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored?

b) The disciples

- 8:25 Where is your faith?
- 9:18-30 Who do the crowds say that I am?... But who do you say that I am?... For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?
- 12:25 And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?
- 12:42 Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom his master will set over his household, to give them their portion of food at the proper time?
- 16:12 And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own?
- 17:7 Will any one of you who has a servant ploughing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, "Come at once and recline at table"?
- 20:24 Show me a denarius. Whose likeness and inscription does it have?
- 22:48 Judas, would you betray the Son of Man with a kiss?

c) Religious leaders

- 5:22 Why do you question in your hearts?
- 5:34 Can you make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them?
- 6:3 Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God and took and ate the bread of the Presence, which is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those with him?
- 6:9 I ask you, is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to destroy it?
- 13:15 You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it away to water it?
- 14:3-5 Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?... Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day, will not immediately pull him out?
- 15:4-8 What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it?
- 20:4 Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man?
- 20:17 What then is this that is written: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone"?
- 20:41 How can they say that the Christ is David's son?

d) Specific individuals

- 7:42 When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?
- 8:30 Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?"
- 10:26 What is written in the Law? How do you read it?
- 17:17 Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine?
- 18:19 Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.
- 18:41 "What do you want me to do for you?" He said, "Lord, let me recover my sight."
- 22:48 Judas, would you betray the Son of Man with a kiss?
- 22:52 Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs?

5. The Place of Instruction

Before we can consider in any detail the place of instruction in the teaching methods of Jesus there are two matters of general interest that

have first to be discussed. One of these was mentioned briefly in the opening chapter when a distinction was drawn between instruction given to the committed and that given to the uncommitted. The importance of the difference between them is referred to by James Stewart. He has noted that Jesus always adapted his teaching to the kind of audience that he had, and was never tempted to go too fast for them to follow him. On one occasion he actually said, "There is still much that I could say to you, but the burden would be too great for you now".¹

"The practical issue of this for today," writes Stewart, "ought to be stressed. It never was Christ's way to demand a full-fledged faith for a beginning. It never was his way to hold men back from discipleship on the grounds of an incomplete Creed." Too often teachers of the Christian religion are impatient to give the full diet of Christian instruction to those who are not ready to receive it, and in their use of the Gospels they often fail to distinguish between the teaching given by Christ to "beginners" and that which was reserved for the more mature disciples. Greater care needs to be exercised in the choice of biblical and theological material when we are seeking to instruct our pupils so we may be more loyal to Jesus himself on this matter.

The other matter of general interest is related to the first and refers to the ways in which the writers of the Gospels have arranged their material. Our understanding of such arrangements may help us to recognise what is genuine instruction and the difference between instruction offered to the committed and the uncommitted.

It is now generally accepted that what has come to be called The Sermon on the Mount is in fact a collection of the teachings of Jesus given at different times and under different circumstances, and almost certainly repeated as he went from one community to another. This view accounts for the fact that the "Sermon" is brought together in St Matthew,² but is scattered in different parts of St Luke's Gospel.³ For this reason, it is legitimate to regard the "Sermon" not as a unified, proclaimed word, preached on one occasion, but as a collation of important parts of a teaching ministry, exercised in the open air wherever people gathered to hear him.

It is also generally agreed that it is impossible to approach St John's Gospel in the same way one may approach the Synoptic Gospels. Neither scholars nor ordinary readers can be absolutely sure at all times about which parts of John's Gospel refer to words used by Jesus himself and

¹ Jn 16:12

² Matt 5-7

³ Lk 4:16-21; 6:20-49; 9:23-27; 12:1-40

which are words inserted by the author. An obvious example of this difficulty is seen in the famous passage in chapter three, where Jesus is visited by Nicodemus.¹ The conversation between the two is recorded up to the point when Jesus exclaims, "What! Is this famous teacher of Israel ignorant of such things?" Then follows the long discourse which includes the text, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." But how much of this discourse comes from the lips of Jesus, and how much is comment by the author, it is impossible to say.

Of course, in the last analysis, one cannot be absolutely certain about the literal accuracy of any words put into the mouth of Jesus. And one has to take refuge in the views of scholars who assert when specific texts are quoted that if Jesus did not say precisely these words, he must have said something like them. But John's Gospel is different from the others and greater care has to be exercised.

Because of this difference of approach the examples taken so far, with reference to stories, illustrations, questions, and answers, have, in the main, been selected from the synoptic Gospels rather than from St John's Gospel. When we turn to the subject of instruction, however, we do depend very much on St John's Gospel for an understanding of the instruction which Jesus gave specifically to the disciples, but which was not shared with the general public. And here we recognise that even if not every word is literally accurate only Jesus himself could have given birth to the ideas contained within the instruction.

There is a startling difference between the kind of instruction given to the uncommitted and that given to the chosen few, but the difference is not contradictory. It is a difference which arises from the fact that Jesus could approach his disciples from deeper levels of spiritual interpretation than was possible when approaching either those who were generally curious and interested, but nothing more, or those who were avowedly hostile to him.

It is evident from the accounts we have that, particularly in the earlier part of Christ's ministry when many people heard him gladly,² Jesus was prepared to supplement his stories with what might be described as straightforward instruction. As has already been shown, that instruction was accompanied by an abundance of illustrative material. When the instruction is examined carefully, however, it becomes clear that the insistence of Jesus upon life as it is going on all the time, is made in order to underline the reality of the Kingdom of God, with God active at work

¹ Jn 3:1-21. Note particularly vv. 12-21.

² Mk 12:37

within the kingdom, and to persuade men to enter into it by their willingness to recognize His Fatherhood and themselves as His children.

It is for this reason that while much of Christ's teaching is deceptively simple, related to ordinary, everyday events, it is never trivial. The "Sermon on the Mount" deals with such subjects as anger and envy, sexual desire and covetousness; with honesty in word and deed; with acts of long-suffering and charity; with prayer and service. But all are related to the Kingdom of God and the way in which men think and behave when they are truly members of that Kingdom.

When, however, Jesus was able to give instruction to the disciples, he could take the same themes of God's Kingdom and membership within it, but deal with them at deeper levels. With the disciples it was possible to consider his own unique place within the Kingdom, including the significance of His own suffering and death, and their union with him as co-heirs in the Kingdom. It was necessary also to relate all this to their particular duties as leaders of others, and the power that would be available to them in order to fulfil their mission as leaders.

So, the instruction given by Jesus was always given at THE RIGHT LEVEL OF UNDERSTANDING. To quote James Stewart yet again, the teaching was always "adapted to his audience." Some have believed that this emphasis in modern views about Christian education leads to a failure either to stretch the mind or the imagination. But this is not so. Trust in Jesus constantly stimulated the imagination, and certainly made his hearers think. The principle of adapting one's instruction to a specific audience does not mean always operating at the level of the lowest common denominator. A wise mother buys clothes a little too big for the child, so that he can "grow into" them. She does not, however, buy clothes that should be worn by adults! Experiential teaching certainly does not imply that there is no place for mental and imaginative challenge.

This willingness on the part of Jesus to teach at the right level of understanding enabled him to take those who responded, step by step, to where he wanted them to be. But he never sought to drive all who listened to him along the same road. It is significant that the disciples heard the same general discourses of the Master, and that they followed up the ideas by further questions and discussion. Yet only towards the end of his ministry could Jesus share with them the more intensely spiritual insights into his way of life. Then the disciples exclaimed, "This is plain speaking. Because of this we believe that you have come from God."¹ Plain speaking indeed! If Jesus had attempted to unfold to them two years previously

¹ Jn 16:29-30

what he was sharing with them when he spoke those words, they would not have understood in the least the significance of what he said.

The instruction was also given in such a way that it CHALLENGED PEOPLE TO ACTION. Psychologists have been quick to point out the dangers of allowing emotion to become an end in itself, and we all know the fearful consequences upon personality if proper outlets to the emotions are denied. It has not always been appreciated, however, that there are subtle perils in developing ideas and thoughts without encouraging transformation into action. The present malaise in democratic forms of life is due, at any rate in part, to the stimulation of ideas and thoughts without finding the proper channels through which they may be actively expressed.

Jesus was different. The instruction he gave stimulated both thought and imagination, but carried with it the challenge to action. The will could be directed to do something about what was being offered. It used to be said in teaching circles that there is no "impression without expression" and this facet of a learning process has now been carried to greater depths. Not least has it come to be seen as relevant for the older members of the community as well as for children. Everything that Jesus taught carried the implication that those who heard could immediately begin to do something about it. This attitude, and the action following upon it, was such that they would become as "salt to the world", or "light for all the world".¹ And this was the criterion of their membership within God's Kingdom. "Not everyone who calls me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of Heaven, but only those who do the will of my heavenly Father."²

In all this it is important to see that Jesus was not just a pragmatist, telling people what to do, think and say in certain circumstances. He was concerned also in his instruction TO ESTABLISH THE RIGHT MOTIVES. Why were people to "turn the other cheek" or "go the second mile"?³ Why were the disciples not only to love their neighbours, or their enemies, but also to love one another? Once more one can recognise the difference in emphasis, dependent upon the type of audience, but no fundamental contradiction.

For the general public at the time of Jesus the phrase "Kingdom of God" had not only a religious connotation, the theology of which has attracted the minds of scholars over the centuries. Because of the inter-relationship of race and religion, the Hebrews saw the phrase very much as a kind of slogan rallying them to forms of political action and even rebellion.

¹ Matt 5:13-14

² Matt 7:21

³ Matt 5:41

This accounts for much of the emphasis in Christ's teaching which possessed a contemporary significance. There were thousands who would respond to the idea of God's Kingdom being established in the manner of a latter-day Davidic Kingdom, with the overthrow of the enemies, the destruction of their oppressors and the exaltation of themselves as the victors. It was the notion that God's Kingdom meant loving and forgiving which was truly revolutionary. The idea that God's purposes could only be fulfilled in a life of selflessness and sacrifice was quite staggering. Yet this was what was implied in Christ's teaching about the Kingdom. This was what alone could emerge when the nature of God as a heavenly Father, concerned for all men everywhere as members of His family, was revealed. The quality which enabled people to establish right relations was a quality of love for God as Father and one's fellow men as brothers.

The instruction given to the disciples, particularly in the Upper Room, was quite different. Yet the same truth is apparent. The insistence upon love, the concern for an understanding of God as Father, these appear in almost every line. And they are bound up in the person of Jesus Christ himself as the one who truly reveals the reality of God, who alone can use the phrase, "I am the way; I am the truth and I am the life",¹ and who indicates that the selflessness and sacrifice necessary in the establishing of God's Kingdom is something which he himself must bear.

It is their personal response to him, and their continuing relationship with him, which makes it possible for them to recognise the inner meaning of what has been taught to others, "I am the vine, and you are the branches."²

Again, it is important for us to note the SYMBOLIC QUALITY of his instruction. The avoidance of the temptation to reduce his teaching to a set of rules and regulations, to be obeyed literally, and of the temptation to offer abstract principles so remote from reality as to be meaningless to ordinary people, was more perceptive of the true function of a teacher than is often recognized. It was made possible by a symbolic quality within the instruction which prevented what he had to say to the general public from becoming trite, and also gave to the committed disciples a living picture of Christ-like principles not dependent upon academic ability.

Because of this, the instruction given in the Sermon on the Mount becomes an encouragement to people always to be looking at all the events of ordinary life as illustrative of God in action, and evidences of the reality of the Kingdom of God. At the same time, the instruction given to the disciples, particularly in the Upper Room, is charged with symbolic

¹ Jn 14:6

² Jn 15:5

meaning, and reaches its highest point in the way in which Jesus used the elements of the Last Supper for this purpose.

The same use of symbolism can also be discerned as the common factor in his teaching, both to the general public and to the disciples, and it is significant that this approach to Christian education today is now finding prominence. The significance of his interpretation of such words as "bread" and "water" and "light" and "shepherds" have been seized upon as obvious examples of the symbolic quality of Christ's teaching and key words in the thematic approach to Christian education today.

The use made of the Scriptures by Jesus is a subject to be discussed in a later chapter. But it is appropriate to mention here that Jesus approached the Scriptures as symbolic of truth rather than as literal statements of fact. His increasing emphasis upon the life of the Messiah in terms of a Suffering Servant stemmed directly from the symbolic language of the prophets. He himself became the living symbol of the truths they had perceived and uniquely in his own person the symbol became the reality.

There are some who believe that the major part of teaching should be instructional. There are some who think it to be easy, and are suspicious when other methods are suggested. Jesus made it clear that there is a place for instruction, and no serious teaching function can choose to ignore it. He also made it clear that it is only a part of that function, and that as such, far from being easy, it requires a great deal of care and sensitive understanding. Only by following him can we resolve the questions about when and when not to instruct, and what should be inserted and what omitted in the instruction.

6. Situation Teaching

I imagine that most readers will understand immediately what is implied by the phrase "situation teaching", but for some a simple word of explanation may be valuable. The better known phrase, "situation ethics" is recognized as a description of that form of ethics which rejects principles or generalizations on matters of conduct and behaviour, and prefers instead to take each particular circumstance or situation on its own merits. It is assumed to be wrong or impracticable to pronounce a dogmatic creed of conduct and then apply it to every kind of situation which may arise. It is much better and far more practicable to judge each case on its own merits. So, what may be the right action in one set of circumstances, can be wrong in another set of circumstances. In describing this way of looking at ethical behaviour I am not seeking to pass any judgment upon it. I do so in order that readers can see more clearly what is meant by "situation teaching".

Such teaching implies that process of teaching which seeks to avoid a preconceived pattern of truth to be imposed upon students regardless of circumstances, but which prefers to draw out from the students their own insights and understanding from particular situations with which they may be familiar or may themselves have already experienced.

That Jesus used this method of teaching is beyond question. The Gospels describe many situations which arose during the course of his ministry and which were used by him in order to teach those involved in the situations. There are, however, three factors which have to be remembered all the time when discussing this kind of approach.

Firstly, one should recognise the value of what may be described as seizing the right opportunity in order to offer some aspect of truth, some quality of interpretation, or some valid judgment upon the situation that is being used. It would be impossible always to use this method of leading into a teaching situation, and if it were attempted it would quickly become boring or pompous! One cannot imagine Jesus constantly making the most of every occasion to speak some supposedly “well chosen” words. Nevertheless, there are occasions when only the most insensitive would fail to recognize the opportunity to make a significant comment upon a situation that has arisen. This may be personal or local; it may relate to a community or belong to world affairs. But each presents an opportunity for teaching of one kind or another, and should readily be seized. Teachers who must always follow the pattern of instruction prepared by themselves, or a syllabus presented to them, and have not the capacity to vary their teaching under any circumstances are not only lacking in imagination, they are simply failing in their duty as teachers.

Secondly, one should be aware that behind the specific teaching which arises out of the opportunity to use a given situation, there is a valid pattern of truth from which the specific teaching springs. This is the important factor lying behind all that Jesus taught, and all the methods he employed. There is a harmony of truth in all the observations he made in all the situations in which he became involved. However, a teacher does not necessarily impose his or her own philosophy of life upon others, nor does the teaching itself become theological teaching, simply because there exists within the character of the teacher a personal philosophy or theological interpretation of life.

And thirdly, we should note that it is possible to take the process of situation teaching and use it, not only when the opportunity presents itself, but also in imagined or contrived situations. Jesus himself did this and we can do the same. Indeed, a great deal of modern teaching which involves “case studies” or emerges from dramatic introductions of life situations is

based upon the same principle. Whether the situations are real or imaginary, the concern is to relate truth to the specific problem rather than to generalize or pontificate.

One of the most frequent situations which arose in Christ’s ministry and which gave rise to teaching was that related to the SIGNS and MIRACLES he performed. His healing ministry was, of course, exercised in its own right. As far as was possible, bearing in mind that Jesus was all the time concerned to make the kingdom of God in its entirety real for men, and that he himself was human, and therefore limited in his own resources of body, mind and soul, he did seek to give to those who came to him health and strength in the place of sickness and weakness. Jesus did not select a few people suffering from certain ailments and then cure them so that he could create interest in his teaching. We do not always differentiate between those means which exist to serve ends, and ends in themselves which become steps to the furtherance of other ends. Given the right situation and the right conditions Jesus healed people for their own sake. If the opportunity was then given to teach, he was prepared to take it. But there were many he did heal and which were not necessarily accompanied by any specific teaching.

When the right opportunity arose, however, Jesus never failed to seize it. On such occasions his teaching tended to fall into two categories. There was, first of all, the need to explain what he was seeking to do, and why he did what he did, particularly in the face of hostility that was often aroused. That a man could so obviously seek to do good to others and then find himself surrounded by critics and opponents may seem unthinkable to us (though it still happens today). Yet this was the fact. The Scribes and Pharisees were quick to condemn what was done because it happened on the Sabbath, or was related to the forgiveness of sins, or was supposedly evidence of the possession of the power of evil!

In these circumstances Jesus did not shrink from answering their questions or justifying the rightness of his actions, while at the same time indicating some aspect of truth overlooked or ignored by his critics. These elements in his teaching became valuable to all who listened and not least to the disciples themselves.

In the second place the healing ministry enabled Jesus to show to his disciples something of the spiritual symbolism of what had happened. Modern psychological study can help us to understand more clearly what health really means, especially in regard to the subtle interrelationship of body, mind and soul. And out of all this our interpretations of fullness of life and salvation are given wider connotation than existed a hundred years ago. The disciples could not be psychologists in the strict sense of that

word, but they did know from what Jesus shared with them and what they saw him do that response to him opened up a power of God which transformed the whole of life. An artificial separation of categories of body and mind and soul was outside their experience. It was not for nothing that their own ministries included healing as well as teaching. And, as with Jesus, both were to be seen as one.

Nor is it without significance that the miracle of feeding the five thousand (recorded in all four gospels) not only symbolized the concern of Jesus that the hungry should be fed, but also became symbolic of a spiritual truth related to the bread of life, to be contrasted with the false leaven of Pharisaism. It is true that men without bread must die; it is also true that men do not live by bread alone.

The life of Jesus reveals at every stage a compassionate concern for all who were down-trodden and needy, and he was not satisfied with words alone. He did what he could to bring help and relief. Yet, whenever this happened, if the opportunity presented itself, he sought to give guidance and challenge. Within the situation he was prepared to offer teaching that was specific and direct, and also teaching that was interpretive and symbolic.

Situation teaching was also practised by Jesus when he found himself MEETING PEOPLE by chance on his various travels. It is an interesting exercise to go through the Gospels and see how much of his teaching would have been lost to the world had he not used the occasional meeting of people as an opportunity to draw attention to some facet of his truth. One quickly becomes familiar with the teaching likely to emerge from the healing ministry he exercised. But it is impossible to know in advance how Jesus will use the chance encounters of ordinary people, the old and young, the rich and poor, the respectable and outcast. Each such situation as it is recorded brings new light on what it means to be a follower of Jesus, and a new dimension of understanding to the message he proclaimed.

For example, the arrival of the mother of Jesus with his brothers became, for Jesus, not an occasion to renounce his family (as some have supposed), but rather to indicate the widening of his family circle to include all who belong to the family of his heavenly Father.¹ The arrival of mothers who brought the children in their arms to be blessed of him, and what he then said and did, have set the foundations to a whole process of Christian concern for the young, and have undoubtedly influenced the

¹ Mk 3:33-34; Matt 12:47-48; Lk 8:19-21

various interpretations of infant baptism or dedication in the two thousand years of Church history.¹

Perhaps the story of the Good Samaritan would never have been told but for the encounter with the lawyer who confronted Jesus with his questions. And this story itself, with its deliberate use of the Samaritan as hero, brings into our minds that other chance meeting with the Samaritan woman at the well, and the teaching that followed upon this encounter.²

The quickness of mind, so evident in his ministry, is also illustrated by the fact that Jesus could introduce into his teaching an element dependent upon people he and his hearers were all able to observe close at hand. Thus, Jesus could instruct his disciples on humility and trust, and suddenly point out a child passing by or standing on the fringe, as an illustration of what he wanted to say. Or again, he could indicate a group of wedding guests struggling to find places of honour at the feast, and point to the significance of that kind of attitude to life.

Again, we have to remember that this was not the only way he taught. And it was never intended for its own sake, or even because it would be thought clever. Opportunism in such encounters was always tempered by appropriateness. He did not tell a story simply to entertain. He always had a teaching purpose.

“Situation teaching” and its parallel in “situation ethics” come most closely together when we study the reaction of people to the ACTIONS OF JESUS AND HIS DISCIPLES. The Hebrew people, from the eighth century BC onwards had pioneered the way of moral and social standards to be seen in relation to religion. It was from their understanding of the nature and requirements of the God whom they worshipped that “scriptural holiness” has really evolved. With the passage of time, however, the Hebrews had hardened these insights into codes of law, and with all the artificial and technical impositions of detailed application. By the time Jesus arrived on the scene the spirit of the Law had become lost in the complicated system of legal definition. When Jesus described himself therefore, as one who was seeking to fulfil the Law, he was in fact seeking to enlarge the understanding of the spirit of the Law. And in so doing it was inevitable that the literal application of rules and regulations had to be destroyed. This he did, not by abstract argument, but by action. He knew that by so doing he would invite criticism, but he knew, too, that what he did would provide him with an opportunity to explain why he did what he did.

¹ Mk 10:13; Matt 19:13; Lk 18:15

² Jn 4:4-29

The concern of religious leaders that work on the Sabbath day should be restricted was entirely right. This was in the best interests of all, and still has its place in the kind of industrial world in which we now live. It is equally true that for hygienic reasons it was good to form the habit of washing before meals. Or again, we would be less than realists if we said that it did not matter what kind of company our friends and loved ones are keeping. The balance between work and recreation, the forming of hygienic habits, the concern for choosing the right companions, all these provide standards and tests to be observed if the true interests of society are to be preserved.

But when standards are so laid down and applied that even to pluck an ear of grain and rub it in one's hand to extract the kernel is put into the category of work, that to have an occasional meal without observing the ritual of washing one's hands is classified as sin, that to go to a public place and mingle with "bad characters" as a gesture of goodwill is condemned as consorting with the devil - when these things happen, a proper balance and judgment in life has been lost.

Jesus tried to point out the loss of that balance, and so brought the whole question of behaviour out of the realm of rules and regulations into the realm of common sense. At the same time he stresses what the modern teacher of "situation ethics" seeks to do. He went behind the ritual observation of a code to the prior concerns for motive and consequence. And this he did by a process of teaching which sprang out of the actual situations in which he and his disciples found themselves.

Examples of "situation teaching" can be found in all the Gospels. A special word needs to be said, however, about the place which such teaching has in St. John's Gospel. It can be argued that this principle in fact forms the framework upon which the gospel itself is built. Remembering what has already been said about the difficulty always to distinguish between the actual words of Jesus and comments upon the teaching made by the author, it is quite clear that St. John's Gospel follows a pattern whereby a situation is described, an aspect of truth is revealed, and an exposition of that truth is offered. Readers may care to examine the gospel for themselves and see how clearly the framework to the gospel does in fact reveal this pattern. Here is the clearest evidence of all that the method of "situation teaching" used by Jesus made a profound impression on the disciples themselves, and became a process of teaching which they themselves afterwards followed.

Some situations used by Jesus for teaching (in Luke's Gospel)

a) Signs and miracles

5:17-26 "Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Rise and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" - he said to the man who was paralysed - "I say to you, rise, pick up your bed and go home." And immediately he rose up before them and picked up what he had been lying on and went home, glorifying God.

6:6-11 And Jesus said to them, "I ask you, is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to destroy it?" And after looking around at them all he said to him, "Stretch out your hand." And he did so, and his hand was restored.

14:1-14 "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?" But they remained silent. Then he took him and healed him and sent him away. And he said to them, "Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day, will not immediately pull him out?" And they could not reply to these things...

"When you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher.' Then you will be honoured in the presence of all who sit at table with you. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

"When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just."

b) Meeting people

7:36-50 A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?"... I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little." And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."

- 9:46-48 An argument arose among them as to which of them was the greatest. But Jesus, knowing the reasoning of their hearts, took a child and put him by his side and said to them, "Whoever receives this child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. For he who is least among you all is the one who is great."
- 10:25-37 Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbour to the man who fell among the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise."
- 14:7-24 see above

c) Response to comments by other people

- 5:29-35 "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."... "Can you make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days."
- 6:6-10 "I ask you, is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to destroy it?" And after looking around at them all he said to him, "Stretch out your hand." And he did so, and his hand was restored.
- 11:37-54 "Now you Pharisees cleanse the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. You fools! Did not he who made the outside make the inside also? But give as alms those things that are within, and behold, everything is clean for you."
- 15:1-32 "I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."

d) Disciples' experiences

- 9:28-31 And as he was praying, the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white. And behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem

7. The Use of the Scriptures

For some readers the most important, and perhaps the most controversial, aspect of this study in the teaching methods of Jesus has been left too long. But now we can turn to it. The use of the scriptures in a process of Christian education raises fundamental questions of authority,

content, and method; and the answers given to them are interwoven in the approach adopted by the individual teacher. My own attitude to the scriptures, both in terms of authority for the Christian religion, and in relation to the teaching of the Christian religion, has been published under the title *Christian Education and the Bible* and there is no need to cover the same ground here. Nevertheless, there are some features of the discussion which must be mentioned if we are to gain anything from looking at the way in which Jesus used the scriptures of his time (which are, of course, incorporated in the Bible of today).

In the first place we should recognise a distinction between a teacher's personal attitude to the Bible and the emphasis placed upon it in teaching situations. There are those who accept the authority of the Bible (even if they do not accept the notion of infallibility) but who readily recognise that the children they teach must be sensitively introduced to the Bible. Much confusion has been caused by the assumption that those who ask for a more careful selection of Bible material to be offered gradually to boys and girls are automatically among those who would deny the authority of the scriptures. This is not so.

A distinction between a respect for the scriptures and the use to be made of them is relevant to a proper understanding of Christ's own use of the scriptures. On the evidence we have in the Gospel records there is no doubt that, at any rate for the uncommitted, Jesus spent far more time looking at experiences and situations of everyday life than he did in expounding the scriptures. In St. Mark's Gospel, for instance, there are twice as many references to the former as there are to the latter. But the quotation of such statistics should not lead us to believe that Jesus had scant regard for the scriptures. On the contrary, it is implicit within his own ministry that he had a high regard for them.

The shaping of his ministry in the terms of a Suffering Servant; his willingness to use the concept of the Kingdom of God despite its political overtones; the readiness with which passages of scripture came to his lips in times of personal crisis; all these make it clear that Jesus was not only very conversant with the scriptures, he respected them as records of God's will and purpose for the world of men. He was not thereby led into assuming that his task as a teacher was merely to expound them to all and sundry and in all times and places.

In the second place we have to recognize the difference between Jesus and ourselves as teachers or interpreters. Because of what Jesus believed himself to be, and what Christians believe him to be, he was his own authority. His teachings about the Kingdom, the interpretations he brought to bear upon the nature of God and man, and the way these influenced the

insights he brought to bear upon life, were the outworkings of his own personal relationship with God. They were not derived from, even if they were influenced by, any other source. Supremely and uniquely he could say, “You have learned that our forefathers were told... But what I tell you is this...”¹ Christian teachers are necessarily in another category. Their authority is derived from other sources than themselves. It is also part of their function to point to Jesus Christ as the supreme and unique interpreter.

Awareness of this difference immediately necessitates a modification of attitude to the scriptures. Jesus, as a teacher, has indicated the use he was prepared to make of the scriptures. He was himself, in his own teaching and ministry, the living embodiment of the New Testament, without whom there would be no New Testament to study. If, therefore, we are to be faithful to the task of teaching the Christian faith, we may learn from Jesus himself, but we must also offer a greater emphasis upon New Testament scriptures if his mission and message are to come alive. This I believe to be essential, not only in terms of content and method of teaching, but also in terms of a proper understanding of the whole Bible. Only when we approach all that the Bible offers to us through our understanding of what Jesus has revealed and taught will the authority and unity of the Bible make sense. Too much damage has been done in the past by the naïve assumption that every part of the Bible stands in its own right as an authoritative word of God. To listen to some, one might imagine that Jesus had never lived or his supreme and unique revelation never been made known.

In the third place we must recognise the distinction between the Jewish background to life at the time of Jesus and that of the Greek and Roman world. The ministry of Jesus was exercised in the main among the people of his own race, for whom political and social and religious activities were so closely bound together as to be inseparable. And the laws by which the people lived had their origin in the scriptures. Jesus was able, therefore, to take a knowledge of the scriptures for granted. His references to the Kingdom, to the laws required to be fulfilled, to stories of events in the earlier history of the Hebrew people, could be made in the assurance that his hearers would understand the reference.

The missionary enterprise of the early Christian Church into the world of the Gentiles is not only significant in terms of history and theology. It is significant in terms of an attitude to the Bible. The apostles and early Fathers could no longer assume, as Jesus did, that those who listened to

¹ Matt 5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43.

the Christian message were as familiar with the Old Testament. And their approach had to be different. The effectiveness of their teaching stemmed much more from the relevance of what was taught in terms of the needs of the people, and from the example offered than it did from trying to prove from the Old Testament that Jesus was the Messiah.

These three general factors should, then, be borne in mind before an attempt is made to consider Christ's use of the scriptures. When we do so we find that there are four main principles which Jesus seemed to accept, and which may help us to use Bible material aright.

We begin by noting that Jesus accepted the AUTHORITY OF THE SCRIPTURES, but recognized the need to BRING NEW INSIGHTS to them. He made it very clear at the start of his ministry that his purpose was not to attack and destroy the foundations upon which God had sought to establish his kingdom. “Do not suppose,” he said, “that I have come to abolish the Law and the prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to complete.” And, lest there was any misunderstanding about this, he went on to say, “If any man therefore sets aside even the least of the Law's demands, and teaches others to do the same, he will have the lowest place in the kingdom of heaven”.¹

On a number of occasions when he was challenged or questioned about the ways in which men should learn to live, he acknowledged the primacy of the Commandments of God as found in the Old Testament,² and referred the enquirers to them. His acknowledgement of the Law's requirements can also be seen in his direction to the lepers whom he healed to show themselves to a priest, “and make the offering laid down by Moses”³ for their cleansing. His ideas about the true purpose of the Temple, and his indignation at the ways in which that purpose was being defeated, stemmed from the scriptural concept of the temple.⁴

Much more significant, however, was his recognition of the need to bring new insights to the scriptures. It was important to bring people back to the teachings of the Law and the prophets, but this by itself was not enough. He had not come to abolish; he had come to fulfil. And this is illustrated most clearly in what has come to be called “The Sermon on the Mount”. Whatever the Law might say about one's attitude to one's fellow men, or to the family, whether one was concerned with legal proceedings or with bringing gifts to an altar, Jesus went beyond the requirements of the Law to the heart of the matter. Murder, divorce, revenge, are serious

¹ Matt 5:17-20

² Mk 10:17-22; Lk 10:25-28; 18:18-21; Matt 19:16-22; 22:34-40

³ Mk 1:43-44; Lk 5:14-16

⁴ Mk 11:17; Lk 19:46; Matt 21:13

matters, but they are really the outworkings of attitudes of mind and heart, and it is there that trouble begins. Only when hatred and lust and jealousy are removed can a world be established that is free from the possibility of murder and violence.

This was a radical approach to the teachings of the Law and the prophets; this was the element of revolution in the conception of the Kingdom. An emphasis upon legal externalism had led to a hypocritical outward recognition of God's commands, and Judaism had moved away from the spiritual foundation of the Law to an artificial and detailed pattern of rules and regulations. Christ's fulfilment, in his concern for new insights, was a return to the original spiritual intention of the Law *and* the prophets, and in that sense was radical. It was also revolutionary in that it turned the motives of men and the hearts of men to God himself.

Next we notice that Jesus was not averse to using the scriptures in order to REFUTE ARGUMENTS brought against him by those who accepted the literalism of the scriptures but had abandoned its true spirit. The scribes and the Pharisees used the scriptures as a warrant for their authority in introducing a soul-less system of rules and regulations. It was in Jesus that they met their match. Their attacks upon him and his disciples for their failure to observe some of the more precise rules of ritual, the concepts of the Messiah in relation to himself, their attitude to the Sabbath, even to their acceptance of children's praises in the court of the Temple, were answered by reference to the scriptures themselves in which Jesus showed himself to be as knowledgeable as any. It is to be noted, however, that this use of scriptures was a limited exercise. He never sought to browbeat people into the acceptance of his views by such methods. Only when challenged as to his apparent unwillingness to accept the scriptures did he justify his actions by referring to them.

More important was the way in which Jesus used the scriptures in order to HELP THE DISCIPLES to understand his own mission, and to interpret properly the events that would take place as a result of his mission. It is significant that pointed and frequent response to the teachings of the Old Testament on the Messiah as a Suffering Servant was not offered until their response to him was assured. But when Peter was led to exclaim, "You are the Messiah" in answer to the question, "Who do you say I am?"¹ Jesus was ready to use every opportunity of showing to the disciples what was the true picture of the Messiah in the scriptures. It was not the popular picture of the all-victorious agent of God compelling the enemies to fall at his feet and bringing into a position of power the Jewish nation. It

¹ Mk 8:27-29

was the picture drawn by Isaiah and picked up by later prophets which offered signs of the way the Messiah would have to go. The key to the interpretation of the scriptures for Jesus was Isaiah 52:13 to 53:12. This was the passage he explored and expounded with the disciples. This, in part, is the justification of those who insist that no Old Testament passage can be interpreted correctly and its true meaning discerned, except from the standpoint of Christ's own revelation.

Jesus also used the scriptures FOR ILLUSTRATIVE PURPOSES, and here we note how frequently this aspect of his teaching was related to the subject of judgment. The picture of "gentle Jesus meek and mild" may (or may not) be helpful to children. It is certainly far from a complete picture. There was nothing sentimental about him, and as it became clear that his message was being rejected he was not afraid to warn his hearers of the consequences of their hardness of heart. Such stern condemnation of their lack of response was given graphic support by his allusions and illustrations. Towns like Chorazin and Bethsaida and Capernaum would fall under judgment like the cities of Tyre and Sidon and Sodom. If people were looking for signs that God's kingdom had come, they would soon discover it in God's judgment – a judgment more severe than the one passed on Nineveh, more desolate than that imagined by Daniel, more comprehensive than that pronounced upon the shedding of innocent blood from the time of Abel to Zechariah.

Illustrations and allusions they may be. They do reflect, however, an understanding on the part of Jesus of God's activity in history and become again a reminder to us of a proper understanding of the scriptures. For they do unfold the message of God at work in the world, seeking ever to redeem, but never shrinking from righteous judgment. Jesus saw this as a principle in life itself, not always recognised, but to those who have ears to hear, evident in the unfolding story of God's relationship with man, and exemplified in the history of the Hebrew people.

These four uses which Jesus made of the scriptures serve to guide us in our own attitude. We cannot stand where Jesus stood because, as we have already seen, we have to point to him as Interpreter, and must, therefore, refer to the New Testament as our guide to him. But when we have done this we should not shrink from bringing new insights to scriptural truth as he did. Nor should we be afraid of discovering the broad sweep of God's revelation recorded in the scriptures as a foundation for our own teaching. But above all we should recognise, as he did, that the greater weight of interpreting the scriptures was given to the disciples following their confession of faith and not to the crowds or the critics. If we do these

things, both content and method of Christian educational programmes will be more, and not less, effective.

8. Learning by Doing

If there has been any single dramatic change in recent years in the approach to teaching it is surely the increasing emphasis upon involvement and activity as part of a true learning process. Many of the fundamental principles of the education of young children have been translated into the terms of educating the adolescent, and the adult as well. There is now a ready appreciation of the project method, of self-learning through personal research and endeavour, and of the involvement of the whole of the person in a learning situation. And these aspects have been applied to all ages and for all subjects.

Already we have seen in earlier chapters the close relationship which Jesus established between the content of his teaching and the challenge to action. For him the meaning of the Kingdom of God, the right attitudes expressed by those belonging to it, and the faith demanded as the way into it, are all charged with an emphasis upon action. And while at an intellectual level we may find it necessary to distinguish between attitudes and actions, between faith and works, between words and deeds, as indicative of the right response to God exemplified by Jesus, for Jesus himself these facets of human psychology and behaviour were invariably interrelated.

We all need to look again at the extent of Christ's teaching and see afresh the tremendous stress he places upon learning by doing. It is evident in the illustrative material he used, in the stories he told, in the instruction he gave, in the questions he raised. All this can be summarised simply in the words Jesus spoke to the lawyer at the end of the parable of the Good Samaritan. "Which of these three do you think was neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" he asked. And when the lawyer replied, "The one who showed him kindness", Jesus said, "Go and do as he did".¹

The whole process of discipleship, of course, stemmed from this same principle of learning by doing. From the moment when the disciples first heard Jesus say, "Follow me", until the time when he turned to them with the words, "Enough! The hour has come. The Son of Man is betrayed to sinful men",² their close association with Jesus was in itself a wonderful and unique learning experience. By sharing his thoughts and words and

¹ Lk 10:36-37

² Mk 14:41-42

deeds, by seeking to do what he did, their own lives were fashioned anew. The intimate involvement which was possible for them in the three years of Christ's ministry was sufficient to enable them so to learn that not only were their lives transformed, but the whole of life had been transformed.

At this level it is possible to say that whatever demands are put upon any of us in grappling with the intellectual aspects of Christian belief, the true Christian can never be satisfied with intellectual assertions. His faith has to be lived out in practice. And his faith is confirmed by what he does.

This general principle can, however, be broken into specific illustrations which are revealed by a study of the Gospels. And when such an analysis is made there stand out clearly three types of illustration which we may use in order to see how Jesus himself encouraged the process of learning by doing.

In the first place we can see that running like a thread throughout Christ's ministry was his concern that people should come to trust him, and that this was developed through their WILLINGNESS TO OBEY him. There is a key phrase used by the mother of Jesus at the feast of Cana when it is recorded that the supply of wine had run out and he was asked to supply some more. Whatever we care to make of the story, Mary is quoted as saying to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you".¹ And this phrase sums up at a relatively simple level the lessons which the disciples of Jesus had to learn. It was their willingness to do whatever he asked, however strange the requests might seem, which laid the foundation of their discovery of his trustworthiness. The events which led to the preparations of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem² and to the celebration of the Last Supper are typical of this readiness to "obey orders". There is also the fascinating story of the challenge to Peter to walk across the water to meet Jesus.³ However such events may be interpreted or understood they clearly represent the general teaching and learning experience through which the disciples passed, whereby they discovered the need to do what Jesus asked, and learned by so doing.

It was from this base that they also discovered that the practice of what Jesus taught led to the fulfilment of God's purposes. There is no problem more complicated than the problem of suffering, but whatever solutions we find that may satisfy us, there can be no doubt that given the right attitude suffering can be a means of fulfilling God's purposes. We may reject certain theological interpretations of the sufferings and death of Christ himself, but such rejection does not imply an unwillingness to

¹ Jn 2:5

² Mk 11:1-7; Matt 21:1-7; Lk 19:28-35

³ Matt 14:22-23

accept the reality of such challenge to the world, as it sees the suffering and death of one whose life was so innocent. Nor should we pass lightly over the biblical view that Christ himself was made perfect through suffering.¹ Christians may well become “the salt of the earth”, but they only learn what it means to be a Christian by practising it, even if it means suffering “insults and persecution and every kind of calumny”² in the process. It is out of such experiences that God does somehow bring nearer His kingdom.

One aspect of learning by doing with which we have to come to terms is the risk of failure that is involved. Yet, as we all readily recognise from experience, THERE ARE MANY THINGS WHICH CAN BE LEARNED THROUGH OUR MISTAKES. Jesus was aware of this, and he never discouraged his disciples from seeking to put into practice what they felt to be right. Whenever they went wrong, however, he was careful to point out the error of their ways, and pointed to what they might learn from the experience.

So, for example, when the disciples in the absence of Jesus sought to exercise a healing ministry, but failed in the attempt, Jesus did not question their motives and desires. But he did have to indicate to them that a healing ministry becomes possible only when the inner resources of mind and spirit are strong.³ Good intentions are not enough. Or again, when they resisted the attempts of mothers to bring their children to Jesus, partly out of regard for Jesus himself, whom they believed to be too tired, and partly because it did not seem important enough for Jesus to be concerned, Jesus took the opportunity to remind them that children should not be prevented from coming into his presence. “The kingdom belongs to such as these,” he said. And then he underlined yet another lesson they needed to learn. “I tell you, whosoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will never enter it”.⁴

One other illustration may be offered since it is particularly appropriate at such a time as today when there is temptation to assume that the revolutionary teachings of Jesus justify a revolutionary and violent approach to the solution of some of the world’s acutest problems. No situation was more critical for the disciples than when, in the Garden of Gethsemane, it was clear that their Master was to be arrested. One can readily understand one of the disciples, on the impulse of the moment, drawing a sword and striking out at the enemy. Indeed, all the disciples

¹ Heb 2:10

² Matt 5:11

³ Mk 9:14-29; Lk 9:37-42; Matt 17:14-20

⁴ Mk 10:13-16

were ready to defend Jesus to the last. “Lord, shall we use our swords?” they asked. But Jesus not only healed the injured man, he turned upon his follower with the words, “Put up your sword. All who take the sword die by the sword”.¹ This was the way in which many of the Jews expected the Kingdom of God to be established, by warfare and violence and victory at arms. The disciples still needed to learn that Jesus knew differently. The kingdom might well come through the endurance of suffering; it would not come by deliberately inflicting suffering.

Again, we notice that within the process of learning by doing Jesus recognised THE VALUE OF FORMING HABITS OF DEVOTION AND BEHAVIOUR which would enrich the spiritual life and strengthen the right attitudes to life. Earlier we have shown that the larger part of Jesus’ teaching was directed to life situations rather than to religious exercises. But here we indicate that for committed disciples there are disciplines in the religious life to be observed. These disciplines are built up by obedience to Christ and the acceptance of regularity of practice.

There is no need to enlarge upon the popular practice among religious leaders at the time of Jesus in their ostentatious and public displays of devotion to God. Suffice to say that their vain repetitions meant very little. The disciples themselves saw that this kind of thing was far from the habits which Jesus himself had formed. Yet his communion with God was more real than anything they had ever seen. They were also aware that John the Baptist, before Jesus, had opened up lines of communication with God not at all like those of the Scribes and Pharisees. “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples,” they said. And Jesus gave them the pattern of prayer which has become known as the Lord’s Prayer.² We may memorize and repeat that prayer. But even more important is the forming of a habit of prayer which reflects the pattern of that prayer.

Equally important is our acknowledgement of the duty as well as the privilege of regular attendance at Holy Communion. This is an obligation which carries with it the promise of Christ himself that as we receive the bread and wine, we feed on him in our hearts, and we are thankful. And it began when Jesus broke bread and passed round the cup at the Last Supper before his betrayal and death.³ The custom of remembering Christ in this way, beginning with the disciples in the early Church, has become central to the worship of all Christians and remains so today.

Jesus was equally concerned with the development of an attitude of life in which the readiness to forgive was a prime factor. This was an essential

¹ Matt 26:51-54; Lk 22:49-51

² Lk 11:1-4

³ Mk 14:22-25; Matt 26:26-29; Lk 22:17-19

part of his revelation of God's attitude to men; it must become an essential quality in men's dealings with one another. And as the disciples became aware of it, so they began to question what it meant in practice. Peter, as seems to have become customary, was the spokesman for them. The need to practise forgiveness was accepted; but how long should it be practiced? Was there a limit? "Lord," said Peter, "How often am I to forgive my brother if he goes on wronging me? As many as seven times?" Here, surely, was the limit. If one no longer operated on the rule, "An eye for an eye, or a tooth for a tooth", forgiving a man once was enough. But perhaps because of what he knew of Jesus, Peter calculated that once would not be enough. So "seven times" seemed a reasonable attitude to adopt. The answer of Jesus was startling. "I do not say seven times; I say seventy times seven."¹

A forgiving attitude to life for Jesus was not based on mathematical calculations. It was a way of life. In effect he was saying to Peter, as to all of us, "You keep on forgiving; you form the habit of forgiving. You turn the other cheek, you go the second mile; each day and every day you ask God to forgive your trespasses even as each day and every day you forgive your fellowmen the wrong they have done to you."

Learning by obedience; learning from mistakes; learning by the formation of good habits; these are not lessons to be learned in abstract, to be learned by heart and verbalized in catechisms. They are discovered only in practice. And our Christian education programme will never be complete until we expose pupils to the process of learning by doing. Every act of involvement, whether planned or spontaneous, every project completed, whether within the classroom or church or in life itself, becomes an important means of discovering the inner realities of the Christian truth. This is important for the pupils; but in this realm we are all learners, and therefore it is equally important to ourselves.

9. Teaching by Example

There is a sense in which the whole of this book has been about teaching by example. Its thesis has been that there is so much for us to learn from the methods of teaching used by Jesus, and that he is, in his teaching, an example to us all. There is, however, a deeper level at which the same phrase is true. Since the purpose of Christian education is to open up channels of communication between God and man, and to encourage man to respond to God so that his whole way of life is transformed, it is important to recognise that Jesus himself practiced what he preached; he

¹ Matt 18:21-22

lived out all that he taught, and therefore became an example to all who might seek to follow him.

The challenge to ourselves to set forth a good example of the things we teach in our daily life is such that no amount of teaching skill can make up for it. It can very well be argued, therefore, that teaching by example is not a method at all, and ought not to be considered here. Its place may be in the pulpit or in wider discussions on theology or Christian ethics. Nevertheless, because no teaching method can render a personal example unnecessary, the final word should be spoken. The effectiveness of what Jesus taught and the success he achieved by his methods, did stem from his willingness to put into practice what he asked others to do. And we cannot do better than remind ourselves, as we are challenged by the teaching methods of Jesus, to acknowledge this fact and to apply it to our own position as teachers.

When we examine the Gospels to discover what evidence there exists to support the notion of teaching by example, we find that this very thing is what all the Gospels are about. The teachings of Jesus, in detailed application or in broad generalizations, are all bound up with the life that he lived and the situations in which he found himself.

There are two key phrases which may be quoted to illustrate the emphasis of his teaching and their expression in a way of life to be followed. "The Son of Man," he said, "did not come to be served but to serve, and to give up his life as a ransom for many."¹ On another occasion he said, "If anyone wishes to be a follower of mine, he must leave self behind; he must take up his cross and come with me".² Here we find the echoes of the Old Testament prophecies which suggested that the Messiah was to be thought of in terms of the Suffering Servant to whom we have already referred. And it was in the life of Jesus, of which his teaching was only a part, that the prophecies were fulfilled. From its beginning, in the dawn of consciousness of a particular mission given to him as he attended the Temple in early adolescence, to the end when, on the point of death, he committed his spirit into the hands of God, service to others and the acceptance of self-sacrifice were the dominant features in his life.

Self-effacement can be expressed in many ways, and the history of the Church shows a wide variety of ways in which Christians, from time to time, have thought it should be practiced. For some it has meant a retreat from the world; for others the deliberate abstinence from pleasures afforded by the world. Many have emphasised the negative aspects of self-denial to the exclusion of everything else. For Jesus the denial of self

¹ Mk 10:45

² Matt 16:24-26

sprang out of a conscious act of will whereby he identified himself at one and the same time with God as his Father and with the world of men who were to be his brothers in God's kingdom. Only the two-fold paradoxical process of identification makes sense of his ministry of reconciliation and his work of atonement. These two facets of the relationship which God sought to establish with men find their reality in what Jesus was and what he did. He personified the truth he sought to proclaim.

This is exemplified in his attitude to the baptismal ministry of John the Baptist, which was directed to those who recognised their need to repent of their sins before God. The participation of Jesus in such a baptismal rite has raised many difficult, and sometimes obscure, theological questions. But the words of Jesus himself are significant. When John demurred at baptising him, Jesus said, "Let it be so for the present; we do well to conform in this way with all that God requires".¹ For one whose life was in complete harmony with God, a baptism of repentance was unnecessary. Yet by conforming to it Jesus was deliberately not thinking of himself in any self-centred way. He was identifying himself with his fellow-men, and by so doing was preserving and expressing that oneness with God which was his only experience in life.

In more general terms we also note that whatever Jesus taught about the way of life to be lived by those who belong to God's Kingdom, he himself was a living example. The essential meanings of the parables and their applications to all sorts of situations; the demands made upon his followers in terms of mission and service; the challenges thrown out in such teachings as we have in the Sermon on the Mount; all these can be illustrated in practice by reference to Jesus himself.

Again, we may note the concern for others and the genuine compassion he felt for those in need which find expression in his healing ministry and his attitude to all sorts and conditions of people as he met them. If there were bad characters, already condemned by the respectable, Jesus was prepared to seek them out and sit down with them. "It is not the healthy that need a doctor," he said, "but the sick".² If there were those who came in desperation that he might heal, whether it was the Sabbath day or not, he would meet their needs.³ If the crowds who had eagerly followed him were far from home and in need of food, he would feed them.⁴ If children,

¹ Matt 3:13-17; Mk 1:6-11; Lk 3:22

² Mk 2:15-20; Matt 8:10-14

³ Mk 3:1-6; Matt 12:9-14

⁴ Mk 8:1-10; Matt 15:32-39

borne in their mothers' arms, were brought into his presence, however tired he might be, he would insist that he should receive and bless them.¹

The kind of life which Jesus was enabled to live was not sustained without the constant renewal of spiritual resources from which his strength was derived. His regular visits to the Temple as the House of Prayer, and the practice of private communion with God, were part of his disciplined life. And underlying the pattern of prayer he observed was the constant acceptance that it was the will of God which mattered and not what he himself might want.² To this should be added his own personal dependence on the scriptures (as distinct from the "traditions" and the misinterpretations of religious leaders) in times of crisis. Thus when the temptations came to fulfil his ministry in ways he believed to be contrary to the will of God, it was by recalling the word of God that he was able to overcome them.

But, of course, the supreme example of living out the things which he taught is to be seen in his acceptance of a way of suffering, the innocent for the guilty, which finds its culmination in death upon the cross. By his very loyalty to God he was caught up in the machinations of his enemies who plotted for his betrayal and death. Yet at no time was he a helpless victim unable to control the circumstances of his life. If, by his loyalty to God, death was to be the inevitable consequence, then it was a death that he himself chose.³

All who are engaged in teaching the Christian faith have much to learn from the teaching methods of Jesus, and we need to be responsive to this challenge. But, above all else, we need to learn from him in the life that he lived and the death he died. We too must always place the primacy of our teaching upon the example he himself has set us in the way in which we live our own lives. For to all of us comes the call, early or late, at the beginning and throughout our teaching ministry, which Jesus makes when he says, "Follow me".⁴

¹ Matt 19:13-15; Lk 18:15-17

² Matt 14:23, 26; 36-39; Lk 11:1, 22; 41-42

³ Matt 4:1-11; Lk 4:1-13

⁴ Matt 26:51-56; Matt 16:21-23