

THE IMPORTANCE OF PARABLES IN THE TASK OF EVANGELIZATION: THE NIGERIAN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Parables occupy a very special place in the task of Evangelization. This is even more so in Nigeria, a typical African nation where the worldview of the people is most often expressed in not only parables, legends, folktales and myths but proverbs or wise-sayings. It is most often laden with lots of practical spiritual and moral lessons. Using the expository and descriptive methods, the researcher tried to bring to the fore the significance of this genre of communication as the most penetrating, effective and enduring means of proclaiming the Goodnews in the contemporary time. The need for the evangelizer to have the background knowledge of the audience in question viz-a-viz the application of the dynamics with a new fervor, language and method is particularly underlined.

Key Concepts: Parables, Evangelization.

PREAMBLE

The Holy Father, St. Pope John Paul II had always reiterated the need for dynamism in Evangelization. In his own words, “today in particular, the pressing pastoral task of new evangelization requires a new fervour, new method and a new expression for the announcement and witnessing of the Gospel” (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, n.18). This point has been earlier stressed by Pope Paul VI in his *Evangelii Nuntiandi* when he observed that;

Evangelization loses much of its force and effectiveness if it does not take into consideration the actual people to whom it is addressed, if it does not use their language, their signs and symbols, if it does not answer the questions they ask and if it does not have an impact on their concrete life (n.63).

As a matter of fact, some preachers in Africa today, for instance, preach to Africans using some methodologies which befit more the 18th century European society than the present African society (Apochi 117). In his penetrating insight into the teething problems of the Church in Africa, Apochi opines that;

Today, we identify one of the reasons why the Good News which the early missionaries preached to the Africans was not relevant to the Africans, as their failure to speak to the Africans through African thought-pattern... it would therefore be costly to repeat the mistakes of the early missionaries (119).

This brings to the fore the fact that the Church's mission of evangelization is formed on communication and that the Church lives on communication. In this respect, it is true to assert that the medium is the message.

Granted, one of the means of keeping the memory of Jesus clean and clear in the minds of the people is to keep on retelling his story. The best way to achieve this objective being the constant repetition of his own words. That notwithstanding, contextualizing these stories also help in no small measure in the proper dissemination of the Good News.

First and foremost, we shall get some salient snatches on what parables are, and then attempt to define New Evangelization before we table its challenges and then we shall move into the importance of parables in the task of Evangelization. How the parables of Jesus could be retold in the Nigerian context would then be showcased.

DEFINITION OF PARABLES

Parable originated from the Greek "*parabole*". From this root derives the word parable. Literally, it means "a juxtaposition" in context with the word *parabollein*, the Greek verb, to juxtapose, to put side by side" (Mussner 1). According to Hank, it means "a short saying which is combined with a comparison of figures of speech..." it also means a "proverbial saying" (751 - 752).

Franz Mussner explains that, "in a parable, two things are juxtaposed, something taken from daily life or nature and a religious mystery, a religious doctrine, or a fact pertaining to the history of salvation (as for example, the "Kingdom of God"). The secular story is told to express a religious point in a manner that is figurative.

Ukpong defines it in relation to what is known in rhetorics as “similitude”. That it is “a more or less developed comparison in which two things or processes from different fields are set side by side so that in virtue of the similarity, the unknown may be elucidated by the known” (86). In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word *Mashal* or Aramaic *Mathla* is used to describe parables. In this sense, it was used to embrace proverbs, wisdom sayings, high comparisons, allegories, or simile, symbols or figurative speeches or metaphors.

The Greek rhetoric or orators distinguished the parable from the under listed figures of speech:

Simile: The short figure of speech introduced by the particle “like” e.g. He fought like a lion or he drank like a horse.

Metaphor: The non-literal figure of speech without such a particle e.g. He was a lion in the fight or she was the apple of his eyes.

Catachresis: A wrong but popularly accepted use of a word e.g. referring to the aborigines of America as Indian (American Indians).

Allegory: An extended metaphor in a story form with many points of comparison.

A parable usually has only one central point of comparison. It is sometimes referred to as an extended simile.

Among the Greeks and Romans, who lived before Jesus’ time “the parable was a familiar literary genre used by rhetoricians, philosophers and politicians” (Ukpong 86). Socrates and Aristotle employed this method in their time. The parables of Jesus belong to the “primordial stories of tradition” (Joachim Jeremias) and they are redolent still of the Aramaic and Palestinian background. They are generally regarded by scholars as among the sayings which can be confidently ascribed to the historical Jesus. They were not inventions by the Church. They are mainly authentic words of Jesus (apart from the Lord’s Prayer and the Beatitudes). And of this we must admit, Jesus’ parables were very unique. A comparison with his contemporaries reveals Jesus as very definite and personal in style, particularly clear and lucid, simple but masterly and yet down-to-earth. Hendrick (2) holds the view that Jesus spoke in parables at times because of “the urgency of his message”. For instance, the eschatological imminence is shown by the parable of the fig-tree (Lk. 21:29-31) and the reality of it is manifest (Matt. 24:43-44). At some other points, due to hostility of his audience by which means he desired to win others to his views. And yet on some other occasions, to keep them on their toes in active participation.

True parables are life-like. In his parabolic method, Jesus “approaches reality in a way that is vivid, memorable and challenging. This makes for quicker understanding” (Ukpong 93). A careful study shows he never

used them in a vacuum. As Franz Mussner puts it, most were true to life situations – “they also reveal a master narrator of parables who loves nature and who, while observing men’s daily lives and their actions sharply and critically, nevertheless takes an impartial view of life’s occurrences. Jesus was able to hit the target unfailingly with the themes of His parables” (3).

C.H. Dodd coined this unsurpassed definition: “at its simplest, the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought” (Cited in Vonck 5). In fact, every parable is a story which most distinctively conveys some religious or ethical message. Its purpose is to effect a change in the hearer and lead to decision or action.

WHAT IS NEW EVANGELIZATION?

In order to understand what New Evangelization is, it is pertinent to define the word “Evangelization”. Evangelization derives from the Greek verb “*evangelizesthai*” which means “to bring or proclaim good news of, to or about” (Acts 5:42; 8:4-12). Evangelization therefore means the act or process of proclaiming or bringing the good news of or about Jesus Christ to others.

Peter advised the members of his Church to be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls them to account for the hope that was in them (1 Pet. 3:15). The task of preaching lies on every Christian: “woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel” (1 Cor. 9:16) and again, “we cannot but proclaim what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20). In a nutshell, Evangelization is the “grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* n.12).

Pope Paul VI (n.18) defines evangelization as “bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within the making it new. “Now I make the whole of creation new” (Rev. 21:5; 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15). In other words, it is “above all else, bearing witness simply and clearly to God as he is revealed by our Lord Jesus Christ, proclaiming that he has loved the world in his son and that in the Incarnate Word he has given existence to all creatures and has called men to eternal life” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* n.26). As it were, the good news is a call to conversion of the whole person in both personal and community dimensions. “New” Evangelization however, is a response to the call of the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II for a new Era of Evangelization.

During the *Ad Limina* visit of the Nigerian Bishops to Rome in January, 1982, the Pope, in anticipation of his visit to Nigeria expressed the hope that it would usher in a “New Era of Evangelization”. In his own words, “this is my earnest wish and prayer, that zeal for evangelization will envelop the Church in Nigeria” (38). In 1983, he also expressed the same intention in Haiti, “look to the future with commitment to a new evangelization, one that is new in its fervor, new in its methods, and new in its expression” (Bassey 4).

To Bishops of Granada and Seville in Spain, he spoke thus in 1986: “we cannot hope for greater vitality in the Church if we do not at the same time intensify our new evangelization” (Cited in Bassey 4). The Kernel of the call to new evangelization is in the fervor or zeal, methods, and expression.

THE CHALLENGES OF NEW EVANGELIZATION TODAY

That in Igala land the Gospel has not fully permeated every nook and cranny, is a truth beyond all telling. Traditional Religion is still making its impact felt in many quarters and for some of those who have even accepted the Christian faith, it seems to be only at the surface level. Once any problem arises, they often resort to unorthodox means of seeking for solution.

That notwithstanding, the most formidable force which threatens the spread of the Christian message is Islam. G.A. Ojo brought home this point in his paper on “Evangelization in Africa in the Third Millennium: Challenges and Prospects” when he said:

Islamic resurgence, particularly in Africa, is challenging more than ever before the religious landscape of the African continent. This phenomenon of Islamic revival in Africa with an unveiled determination to dominate, and if possible exterminate, other religions on the continent, is undoubtedly the most critical challenge before Christian evangelization in Africa (14).

In Igala land, for instance, the threat of Islam is so spectacular. They adopt all available strategies to get the Christians converted into Islam. Some people are offered baits in form of money or what money can buy, job opportunities, promotion, sponsorship or even pilgrimage to Mecca provided they convert to Islam. They have also ferociously adopted the “Crusade” method of spreading the faith. Students or pupils who study in their schools easily fall prey too to their conversion tactics. And a good number of girls or young women have been impregnated by Muslim men. This is done in most cases deliberately so as to populate their fold.

The threat of so-called Christian sects to the Catholic faith and or interdenominational squabbles is no less formidable either. In other words, inner conflicts or misunderstandings which usually result into washing our dirty linens in public also causes division and stultifies the spread of the Good News.

In 1982, the Holy Father highlighted some of the critical problems in Africa, intent on directing the searchlights of evangelization on them, for necessary action. He drew the attention of the Church to the following arms of evangelization:

- i. Spreading of the faith
- ii. Strengthening of the existing faith of individuals and groups; implying a call to holiness
- iii. Becoming missionaries to ourselves (in Nigeria);
- iv. Involving all the people of God, particularly the lay faithful in the mission of the Church;
- v. Becoming good and disciplined citizens;
- vi. Participating in building a new society;
- vii. Tackling development issues of various kinds including poverty, illiteracy, health delivery programmes, polygamy and natural family planning;
- viii. Enculturation of the gospel
- ix. Witness to the charity of Christ through, among other things, love to each other;
- x. And initiating a new era of evangelization (Ojo 11).

THE IMPORTANCE OF PARABLES IN THE TASK OF EVANGELIZATION

In his *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Pope Paul VI says, “the Church evangelizes when she seeks to convert solely through the divine power of the message she proclaims, both the personal and collective consciences of people, the activities they engage, and the lives and concrete milieu which are theirs” (n.18). The human person to whom the good news is carried is not tabula rasa: God is present to him/her as creator and Redeemer and is affected or influenced by the environment.

It was Chinua Achebe, (Achebe 50) one of the best acclaimed African Novelists who said that, “proverb is the oil with which word is eaten”. Parables understood from the point of view of proverbs are necessary to African speech as oil is to their daily meal. They are so linked together in African Communication that it is almost impossible to utter anything reasonable without them. Ideals are better expressed and better understood through signs, symbols and proverbs in the African setting. In fact, “in absence of the written word, Africans have depended on “myths”, proverbs, invocations, prayers, incantations, rituals, songs, and dreams” to present

knowledge over the years (Chidili 124). That alone explains why Schineller would suggest, “African Christian Theology should develop its own book of proverbs, proverbs that are deeply rooted in African religious tradition and imagery, for the purposes of adult catechesis, for adults working in schools, the market place, and the business world”. Even though proverbs are not in the same category with the parables of Jesus, as such, they tallied with parables in the ancient world (Schineller 84). The Hebrew word, *Mashal* (or Aramaic *Mathla*) as earlier indicated is used to describe them and they are very close to the African mind. To the African proverbs also serve the same purpose as parables. Mbiti argues that proverbs are a source of customary theology” (Cited in Chidili 84). They are not just common daily words but are words that bring about the reality of God amongst the people. Thus any idea couched through the proverbs will definitely have a resounding effect on the people of Africa” (Vonck 7). The effect on faith and morals is immense.

Talking about Metaphors, Pol Vonck said: “it not only teaches about a reality, but it also makes the hearer participate in it. Hence, there is no point in trying to get at the reality which is prior to the text. There is indeed some truth in the adage: the medium is the message. Language itself is act. In the parable is the moment of truth” (7). They give pictures which linger in the human minds.

The evangelizer is exhorted to retell the parable in such a manner that the unexpected “teases the mind into active thought”. In every parable there is supposedly a new thing capable of shattering our daily routine, new avenues, goals or targets emerge. Past illusions are turned upside down and bold steps are taken in the direction of the gospel truth.

PARABLES IN THE NIGERIAN CONTEXT

It is pertinent that the milieu of the audience be brought into focus in explaining the Gospels to them. By this means, the signs of our time could also be used to impregnate the contemporary cultures so as to bring home the message of the Gospel to the people in question. The new evangelization also brings to bear the Gospel values on the progress and achievements of science and technology. In this case, the faithful are called upon to incorporate their findings and insights into Christian thoughts and morality. Some of the parables however may not necessarily be taken from native proverbs, myths, legends, folktales or folksongs only. A good deal of them could be drawn from daily personal experiences of the preacher and even the news media. A few examples might suffice:

A story was told on greediness by a grandfather: Once upon a time, there was a dog who came across a big bone. It carried the bone and ran away from other dogs in a bid to enjoy the bone alone. So the dog decided to

cross a river to a nearby forest to hide and crack the bone. While on the bridge, he looked into the river and discovered that “another dog” was carrying a bone in the river. The dog then dived into the river in order to snatch the bone from the other dog. But behold, it was only the reflection or shadow of itself that was in the river. On the long last, he lost the bone he had into the river and never met anything. It was then he realized he was making a terrible mistake.

A story was also told of a young trader who sold everything he had in his supermarket to enable him go overseas as he discovered a more lucrative business there. (This story is akin to the pearl of great price in Matt. 13:44-46).

A Muslim man in Enugu, east of Nigeria, alerted people to quench the fire that was beginning to burn a Catholic Church premises. Many Christians passed by and just felt unconcerned (this is quite close to the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:29-37).

A young man once carted away his father’s money and ran off to Lagos. He began to associate with certain glamour girls who duped him and left him empty-handed and dejected. His landlord drove him out because he had no money for rent. Then he began taking shelter under the overhead bridges. He was soon caught by the “Operation Sweep” and dealt with seriously. After a thorough beating, he came back to his senses and boarded a trailer down his home state. He then trekked for about two days until he reached the village. He felt quite unworthy to come home so he sat under an Iroko tree nearby their house. He saw his younger brother who was coming from school to whom he explained his plight and asked for a cup of water. The dad heard and carried his car there to pick him home. It was feasting galore (See the parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15).

A certain young king in feudal times wished to honour a friend of his boyhood days and gave him large estates and the title of prince. By the royal decree not only himself, but all his children and descendants and descendants, too, were to be princes and princesses and take rank equal to the royal family. Almost at once, however, the new prince and his wife revolted against the authority of their sovereign and tried foolishly to set up a kingdom of their own. They failed. The king was merciful and spared their lives; but they lost their estates and their princely rank, and became once more mere subjects. When their children grew up and realized that they would all have been princes and princesses if their parents had been more loyal, they were sorry, of course, but saw that it was the necessary result of their parents’ fall, and they never dreamed of blaming the king. This is a parable of original sin. God created Adam and Eve in a state of grace, that is, children of His own family with a right to heaven; but they lost this supernatural gift for themselves and for us. So now we are all born merely men,

without the grace God meant us to have. Only, to make the parable complete, the King's own son should come to live with the ex-princely family, and plead with his father to restore them for his sake.

A certain naval officer was very keen to get transferred to a particular ship. He made a novena and got all the prayers he could for this intention. He was very disappointed when he got orders from the Admiralty to join another ship. He was tempted to think his prayers were wasted, till one day he opened a newspaper and saw that the ship he had been so eager to join had been sunk and all on board had been drowned. In this case, the unexpected answer came soon and was easy to see, but if like God we could see the whole sweep of events, we should see that all prayers are answered somehow. A farmer could not get enough milk from his cows. He observed that they were too fat so he left their food on a high hill and made them climb the hill three times a day for their three meals. Within a month they slimmed down and began to produce more milk. In the sinners' case, sin is the fatness referred to fasting and alms deed corresponds to the hardship of climbing the hill, which should lessen or eliminate the sins. With sins cleared (fatness), grace is produced.

A boy punished by his mother for disobedience ran to the river nearby and shouted "you are wicked". The echo returned to him, "you are wicked". The boy ran back to his mother terrified. He reported that he did not know who was cursing him from the other side of the river. The lady took him to where he was and told him to repeat what he said. You are wicked, echoed once more. Yes, you are paid with what you put in the world, hatred for hatred love for love. Now say, "you are lovable," you are lovable reechoed. You get what you put in the world, love for love, wickedness for wickedness.

God cares for us as a Father, but we must not measure His Providence by our own minds. A boy found a snail crossing a motor road at a busy time of the day. He gave it advice and hints, with the point of his stick, but all in vain; so finally he kicked it gently with his foot into safety in the ditch. Doubtless the snail regarded this as a catastrophe of undeserved suffering. But the boy's knowledge and intelligence were far greater than the snail's. And God's knowledge is at least that much wider and His wisdom deeper than the wise man's. We must have confidence in His goodwill towards us.

Inikpi "om'ufedọ baba" (the beloved daughter) of Ayegba Ọm'Idoko, we were told, Reputed to have been very beautiful and of a very noble disposition and her father loved her more than anything else in the world, and she loved him. In Ayegba's reign, the Jukuns under Appah attacked Idah, and he was unable to make any headway against them. He asked a certain learned Nupe Mallam what he could do to change the fortune of the war. He replied: if you do not wish to lose your title and your land you must sacrifice the daughter you love so

much to the spirit of this place. When Ayegba heard this, he was overcome with grief, and appeared prepared to lose all that he had rather than carry out the sacrifice. She, however, heard what the Mallam had said, and went to her father and begged him to save himself by sacrificing her. She is said to have gone nine times before he consented. A large hole was dug in the market place, and she went down into it with nine slaves and with all her jewels and charms. She called to the people above to throw in the earth. This was quickly done. She was unmarried at the time of her death (Egbunu 18-19). This story is often likened to the sacrifice of Christ for humanity.

CONCLUSION

The necessity of the evangelizer to learn and have the knowledge of the background of his audience cannot be over-emphasized. Paul's outstanding strategy, for instance, was in his ability to speak to people wherever he found them in their worldviews. A famous preacher once said, the best way to evangelize is to have the Bible on one hand and the Newspaper in the other hand.

A sound knowledge of the Gospel parables and a good understanding of one's audience, coupled with a practical use of the dynamics or methods of new evangelization, would serve in no small measure in not only drawing or attracting people to the faith but would also give them a deep conviction on the message of the Gospel.

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