18 November 2018: Choral Matins
The Second Sunday before Advent
The Revd Canon Dr Edmund Newey, Sub Dean

‘I will open my mouth to speak in parables;

I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world.’

In nomine…

Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people; that they,
plenteously bringing forth the fruit of good works, may of thee be plenteously
rewarded; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

So says the collect for the coming Sunday, the Sunday next before Advent. As we prepare
to stir up our Christmas puddings next weekend, we might also wish to consider what
else needs stirring up in our lives, as the current church year draws to a close and the
dawn of a new one begins to break the horizon. ‘Stirring up’ is a resonant phrase: the
labour of manually turning over of ingredients in a recipe – even in the age of the food
processor it makes us think of electric motors straining as the paddle meets the hard
resistance of suet, breadcrumbs, spices, fruit and peel. ‘Stirring up’ is also what trouble
makers do – stirring the pot to sow confusion, stirring the embers to reignite an old quarrel.
But we may also stir our stumps, pushing ourselves from sloth and complacency to active
engagement. ‘Stir up thy strength [O Lord], and come among us’ (Psalm 80: 2), says the
psalmist. And most powerfully of all, the words of the Second Letter to Timothy:

Wherefore I put thee in remembrance, that thou stir up the gift of God,
which is in thee by the putting on of my hands’ (2 Timothy 1: 6)

These words are picked up in the ordination service when those about to be made
deacons and priests are asked by the Bishop: ‘Will you then, in the strength of the Holy
Spirit, continually stir up the gift of God that is in you, to grow in holiness and grace
[and] to make Christ known among all whom you serve?’, to which question they then
reply ‘With the help of God, we will’. For all clergy that promise is a vital source of
strength and renewal: a commitment and resolve, in God’s strength, to resist the devil’s old vice of *accidie* or sloth, that spiritual ‘routinisaton of charisma’ that threatens to drag all of us *off course and off pace* on our journeys of faith.

We have only one resource to draw on in resisting the vice of sloth, but what a resource it is: the love of God in Christ by the Spirit, made known in word and sacrament. ‘With the help of God we will’: by word and sacrament we will be enabled to stir up the gift that is in us. And the key lies in that pairing: not word alone, nor sacrament alone, but word and sacrament together.

In today’s second lesson we heard an extract from the marvellous thirteenth chapter of Matthew’s gospel. This chapter presents us with a torrent of parables of the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven is like someone who sowed good seed; the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, the kingdom of heaven is like yeast which a woman took; it is like treasure hidden in a field; like a merchant in search of fine pearls, like a net…

Parables, as has often been observed, are not a straightforward means of teaching. Their *modus operandi* is not exhortation or instruction; they work their way into our systems much less directly than that: they creep up on us, catch us unawares, burrow underneath: they pull the rug from under our feet and the scales from our eyes.

Rather like Jesus’s miracles, their purpose is to inaugurate the kingdom of heaven among us: they don’t just illustrate the things of God, they unfold them among us and beckon us in to explore. To my mind it is very helpful to place the parables and the miracles of Jesus alongside one another, rather as in our worship we juxtapose word and sacrament.

Parables and miracles, word and sacrament, are not distinct and parallel modes of encounter with God, but two sides of the same coin. When Jesus walks on the water in the next chapter of Matthew’s gospel, the disciples are not watching a conjuror at work, they are seeing the true nature of the one who has called them: not just a charismatic teacher, but one who is one with the living God. When Jesus heals the blind and the sick, when he raises the dead, he is taking his place in the line of OT prophets, but more than that he is revealing his unity with God in whom we live and move and have our being. When he calms the storm on the lake, we know him to be one with the one who brought order out of chaos at the creation of the world.

And, like his miracles, Jesus’s parables also lead us into the boundlessness of God. In the nineteenth century Adolf Jülicher famously re-read the parables of Jesus, drawing from each one a simple truth. Breaking with centuries of traditional interpretation, in his view
the parables were simple tales for simple folk. The parable of the Good Samaritan, for instance, teaches us that 'love’s demand knows no limit': this may of course be true, but it stifles the parable unconscionably, hampering its ability to touch us. Fortunately exegetical scholars have since reacted against this agenda and recognised once again that in the parables the medium and the message are inseparable. The similes and metaphors of Jesus’s parables don’t so much teach or even show, as ask us to re-evaluate the way that we understand the world. As Roger White puts it, we are used to thinking of God in certain terms:

We have sections in our Dogmatic Theologies entitled ‘God as Shepherd’, ‘God as King’, ‘God as Judge’, exploring the safe analogies. [But] there are no sections entitled ‘God as magistrate who ought to be struck off the bench’. It is an embarrassment to have to preach on, for instance, ‘The Unjust Steward’. And it appears that one purpose of the parables is to lead us to precisely such embarrassment. (Kenneth Surin (ed.), Christ, Ethics and Tragedy, p.56)

In other words the parables, like the miracles of Jesus, reveal by disturbing, unsettling, embarrassing, stirring. I said ‘reveal’, but even as they reveal the parables of Jesus also conceal and veil. ‘I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world’, says Jesus, citing the psalmist, at the close of today’s second reading. In his translation of the New Testament, Tom Wright gives this rendering of one of the parables we heard this morning:

The kingdom of heaven is like leaven,’ he said, ‘which a woman took and hid inside three measures of flour, until the whole thing was leavened.’

Hid inside. The kingdom of heaven is there, hidden and folded within life as we normally live it. Jesus’s parables and miracles and the word and sacrament of the Church have the power to unfold it in our midst, but they do so not by straightforward exhortation but by stirring our hearts and souls afresh

A book is ‘an axe to break up the ice that is frozen around the heart’, wrote Kafka. Maybe: but a parable acts less violently but no less surely: a net, a seed, a pearl, treasure to cure us of our sloth and lure us from accidie to action:

Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people; that they, plenteously bringing forth the fruit of good works, may of thee be plenteously rewarded; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.