

Jesus between Poetry and Philosophy

Gerald O'Collins SJ ¹

Early this year I heard a lecture by Hans Georg Gadamer (a retired professor of philosophy from Heidelberg University) on the history of relations between philosophers and poets. Gadamer mused on the ups and downs, the loves and hates, the convergences and divergences of that relationship. It runs all the way from Plato to the later Heidegger. Plato called the poets' stories of the gods 'theologies'. His ideal republic—he believed—would be better off if it severely controlled this kind of theology and even banished the poets. Plato refused to accept that his own master in philosophy, Socrates, had corrupted the youth of Athens, but he clearly believed that poets could be corrupting influences. Other philosophers have been much kinder to poets. In our own century Heidegger turned from his earlier work to draw from poetry the material for his later philosophical reflections.

All in all, it was a brilliant lecture by Gadamer. It set a number of questions buzzing in my head. Would a period that was high on poetic imagination prove likely to be low on philosophical thought? Do poetry and philosophy represent completely different ways of approaching reality, which neither match one another nor even have much to do with one another? And then came the question that gave rise to this lecture. *Would reflection on some of the ways poets and philosophers work throw light on the mind behind the preaching of Jesus?*

Let us explore that last question and see what comes up. First of all, the philosophers and their revolutions. Some philosophers like Wittgenstein have stood back from their culture, surveyed centuries of intellectual history, and quite consciously tried to take philosophy and human thought in new directions. In their own way such philosophers could appropriate the sentiment of Jesus, 'Of old such and such was said to you. But I say to you'. Beyond question, some poets have attempted a similar form of revolution. Wordsworth and T. S. Eliot creatively re-examined poetic language, rejected standard traditions and initiated new styles of poetry. But, on balance, more philosophers than poets have attempted such revolutionary changes.

When they made such radical breaks with the past, philosophers employed general formulae. The generalisations offered by Aristotle, Descartes and Kant separate them from Jesus. He expressed himself in concrete language, not general formulae. He often delivered his message in the form of parables. His instructions and invitations could

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often take very specific forms: 'Go, sell what you have and give to the poor. Then come, follow me'. Nevertheless, not all philosophers have indulged in lofty generalisations. Wittgenstein could introduce particular cases with a strong imaginative impact. Even Plato himself gave myths a key place in several of his major dialogues. But, after allowing for some exceptions, we can risk a generalisation. The vernacular vigour and earthy directness of Jesus' language sets him apart from most philosophers and their talk.

Of course, Jesus resembles the philosophers in their passion for truth. At the same time, he differs from the philosophers on two further scores. He is not interested in clear thinking, exciting speculation or accurate speaking for their own sake. His preaching aims at presenting the truth which will set his hearers free to live as genuine sons and daughters of God. Secondly, Jesus does not spend time clarifying concepts or hunting down ultimate truth through Socratic dialogues with lake-side listeners—let alone arguing matters out with close attention to logic. He already knows how things are and bluntly confronts his audience with his vision of reality.

Like a poet Jesus presents a vision—a vision of the Father who 'makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends his rain on the just and on the unjust' (Matt. 5:45). He presents that vision as poets might, and does not argue for it as philosophers do. When philosophers try to turn human thought in new directions and declare: 'Of old such and such was said to you. But I say to you'—they do not merely communicate their vision. They add their arguments: 'But I say to you X and Y—for the following reasons'. Jesus, however, confronts us with his insights. He does not lead us through his set of arguments.

All things considered, any comparison between the preaching of Jesus and the work of philosophers fails to yield very much. Normally philosophers have dealt with concepts, made speculation their medium and reached for generalising principles. At times Jesus shares their concern for logic. Is healing on the sabbath always to be avoided as a forbidden work? Jesus handles that issue by appealing to a calculus of values. 'I ask you, is it lawful on the sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to destroy it' (Luke 6:9). Doing good by restoring the sick and maimed to full human health logically takes precedence over observing the prohibition against work on the sabbath. For the most part, however, Jesus appeals to logic far less frequently and clearly than the philosophers. His style of preaching makes him no latter-day Socrates, nor some first-century anticipation of a Kant or a Wittgenstein.

What of the poets? Can we sort out and relate some ways in which Jesus and the poets match each other? His commitment to language suggests a significant point of likeness. He shows a striking respect for words and does not tolerate their misuse. 'On the day of judgment men will render account for every careless word they utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned' (Matt. 12:36f.). Jesus uses language with care, creates con-

cise, unforgettable parables, and like most poets speaks of what we see, hear, taste, touch and smell. 'Dogs came and licked' the sores of Lazarus (Luke 16:21). The crowds who heard John the Baptist did not go out in the desert to see 'a reed shaken by the wind' (Matt. 11:7). The disciples of the Baptist are told to go and tell him what they heard and saw (Matt. 11:4).

Furthermore, Jesus resembles most poets by talking as a man committed. Here poetry differs from philosophy. What philosophy accomplishes in the world of thought need not directly project what philosophers are as men and women. But poems like deeds tend to manifest the standards and personality of their makers. Not always, of course. Not every poet speaks with his or her own voice. Only feeble sentiments and a faint experience may back up what he or she says. Yet frequently poems express keen feeling and intense experience. We do not expect such strong emotion from the philosophers, but only rational clarity.

Under the headings of language and experience we can then spot some likeness between the preaching of Jesus and the practice of poets. But we would let ourselves off too easily, if we slipped over the differences. Poets as poets depend on language not only far more than philosophers but even more than Jesus himself. His ministry extends beyond his preaching to include his miracles and his symbolic actions. He eats and drinks with sinners. He thus offers them divine pardon, and conveys the promise that they will share in the great party which God will throw at the end of time. If Jesus depends on his chosen language more than philosophers, he depends on it less than poets. Language in its sound, meaning, music and overtones is all the poets have.

Poets use expressive language to order and interpret their experience. Strong experience and deep commitment may back up what they say. Nevertheless, once they publish their poetry, they leave it to speak for itself. Their texts take over from them. But we never hear of any impulse from Jesus to write and publish. He betrays no interest in getting his message down on papyrus. Nor does he seem attracted by the challenge as such of wrestling with words as such. Language for its own sake fails to preoccupy him.

A few words of summary may now be in order. The question triggered off by Gadamer's lecture on poetry and philosophy seems to have led me into a blind alley. We can sort out and list some resemblances between the preaching of Jesus and the work of poets and philosophers. But we run the risk of making strained and artificial comparisons. Jesus was neither a poet nor a philosopher, but a wandering rabbi martyred like John the Baptist and other prophets before him. Yet that is not quite that. By discussing the language of philosophers and poets, Gadamer ultimately left this question like a burr in my mind: Does the language of Jesus give us a clue to his imagination and sensibility? I would like to spend the rest of this article tackling that question. Does the language used by Jesus suggest anything about the way his imagination worked?

Before exploring the imagery of Jesus let me interject three disclaimers. Firstly, I am not dealing with—let alone calling into question—his divine identity. Of course, any appeal to his status as Word of God become flesh will tell us nothing significant about the actual way in which his human imagination functioned. We may get some clue about that from the material in the gospels. Second, the historical method—as developed in form criticism, redaction criticism and other techniques—has indicated that the gospels do not give us exact transcriptions of what Jesus said during his ministry. We simply cannot take the preaching, even as found in the Synoptic gospels, as an unmodified version straight from the lips of Jesus. However, in appealing to Matthew, Mark and Luke, I will select and use *only those sayings* which—at least in their substance, if not necessarily in the precise wording—seem to go back to the preaching of Jesus.

My third disclaimer is perhaps the most important. Obviously Jesus used much expressive language which others had provided. He inherited the Old Testament and extra-canonical traditions—a rich and diverse storehouse which he could adopt and creatively employ. This imagery drawn from the past appeared both to liberate—not block—his originality and to serve his strongly individual style of preaching. Nevertheless, in this article I am not trying to assess his degree of originality. The question is *not*: How uniquely inventive did Jesus show himself in his language? Rather my question is: Does the imagery and language that Jesus used suggest anything about his imagination and sensibility?

Let me single out three features of Jesus's preaching. The first thing we may note is this. He shows himself aware of and responsive to many forms of human activity, suffering and happiness. He observes what happens when farmers sow crops, sees how they may need to build extra barns to house the proceeds of a bumper harvest, and recalls their methods for forecasting the weather: '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 so it happens' (Luke 12:54f.). He has watched how people put patches on torn cloaks and use fresh wineskins for new wine. Jesus speaks of financial loans, taxation, the role of stewards in large households, the practices of fishermen, the work of shepherds in guarding their flocks, the soft clothing of the wealthy, dogs waiting for scraps to fall from the table, travellers turning up late at night and looking for food, the administration of the law, the current price of sparrows, and much else besides. Jesus's eye sweeps across a very wide range of human activity. If we put together all his images, we would have a fairly extensive picture of daily life in ancient Galilee.

Jesus does not flinch from facing human suffering. One of his most memorable stories features a traveller who is robbed, beaten up and left half-dead on a country roadside. He points to the greed of rich men which allows them to over-indulge, although sick men may lie starving in the streets outside. He recalls the calculations made by

princes before they lead their armies into war. Human happiness does not pass Jesus by: the joy of a father whose renegade son returns, the celebrations at weddings, a housewife delighted to have recovered some missing money.

For the most part, Jesus reveals an imagination that has grown to be sensitively aware of what is going on in his world. Nevertheless, there are some gaps in the picture. And this is my second point about his preaching. He delights in children, but he has next to nothing to say about the mother-child relationship. At times he glances at the father-child relationship. 'What father among you, if his son asks him for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?' (Luke 11:11f.). But Jesus somehow finds his way round the mother-child relationship almost without pausing to notice it. When his eye runs forward to the troubles to come, he sympathises over the sufferings that will afflict pregnant women and nursing mothers: 'Alas for women with child in those days, and for those who have children at the breast' (Mark 13:17). Except for one or two such tangential remarks, Jesus bypasses the mother-child relationship. Did he have such an utterly untroubled relationship to his own mother that this intimate area of life produced nothing for his language? Or was there such a deep and pervasive tradition against a rabbi using such imagery, that in this regard Jesus had no ready storehouse of language to draw on? Whatever the reason, his preaching does not derive imagery from the mother-child relationship.

Almost as remarkable is his silence about the husband-wife relationship. He defends married life by rejecting divorce, and insisting that even in their minds men should not go lusting after other men's wives. But nothing survives from his preaching about the loving and caring life together of married people. To illustrate the nature of prayer Jesus tells a story about troubling one's neighbour at midnight to borrow some food:

Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him: 'Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; and he will answer from within: 'Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything'? I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity he will rise and give him whatever he needs (Luke 11:5-8).

We might have expected the story to run: 'Do not bother me. The door is now shut, and my wife is with me in bed'. But Jesus has the man say: 'My children are with me in bed'.

Besides the mother-child and husband-wife relationships, there are other facets of human life which fail to get reflected in the language and imagery of Jesus. Despite his reference to the ravens and the lilies, he shows no delight in nature and natural beauty. Nor does he indulge

any pathos at the transience of things. He is so busy urging his audience to live like genuine children of God, that he has no time to indulge wistful sadness at the world—still less disillusionment with it. He could never make Vergil's sentiment his own: 'There are tears for human affairs and mortal things touch the mind (*sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt*)'. Admittedly Jesus does weep over Jerusalem and shakes his head sadly: 'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not' (Luke 13:34). But, by and large, Jesus says very little about his own failures and perplexities.

Finally, images drawn from non-religious literature, history and current world affairs hardly surface in the preaching of Jesus. There is a hereness and nowness about his language, a preoccupation with the scene right in front of him. He recalls, of course, a few episodes from biblical history or myth like the story of the flood and the destruction of Sodom. But Jesus betrays little interest in the past. The Maccabean revolt, the Hasmonean period, the capture of Jerusalem by Pompey, the switch of Jewish allegiance to Julius Caesar, the reign of Herod the Great (37-4 B.C.) and all the other crowded events of recent history never even get a passing nod in Jesus's preaching. That larger world of politics fails to come into sight. Apart from a brief remark about paying taxes to Caesar and a comment on some victims of Pilate's brutality, Jesus hardly even suggests that he is living under Roman rule. Once he draws a lesson from a military build-up—the king with 10,000 troops deciding not to risk war against a king with 20,000 troops. But Jesus names no specific king nor any particular cold-war situation in the Mediterranean world of the first century. Another time he speaks vaguely of 'a nobleman' who 'went into a far country to receive kingly power and then return' (Luke 19:12). But he mentions no historical figure as the peg onto which he hangs the parable of the pounds that follows. Jesus's mind reaches out to the immediate situation here and now. He neither scans history, not even the most recent history, nor lets his eye run around the Roman Empire for images and examples that he could press into service.

So much for my second observation that the language of Jesus did not represent the whole of the world in which he lived. One could, of course, argue that his preaching did actually introduce historical references, included imagery drawn from the mother-child relationship and so forth. But the early Church and/or the evangelists censored out nearly all this language. One can only respond, however, that there are no plausible reasons for believing that such censorship took place. In general, we do best to work with what we have rather than speculate about missing material.

Thirdly, we throw away any right to comment on the way Jesus perceives reality, if we ignore the earthly particularity of his language. Characteristically, he answers general questions like 'Who is my neighbour?' by telling a story (Luke 10:29-37). Of course, other rabbis have done that—both before and after Jesus. But the fact that

they can also display this habit does not make it any less his. He thinks from below, not by way of deduction from above. He offers cases from which his audience can draw general principles, if they want to. Even his generalising remarks stay close to the earth: 'No one after drinking old wine desires new' (Luke 5:39). There is a common touch in the proverbial sayings he cites: 'Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb: "Physician, heal yourself"' (Luke 4:23). He invites his hearers to perceive the particular things around them. His imagery is attuned to the earthy wisdom of ordinary people. All of this makes him the supreme preacher with the common touch. He speaks with us and to us, not merely at us.

To sum up. The imagery and language that Jesus uses suggests at least three conclusions about his sensibility. (1) A very wide range of things in his immediate environment catch his eye. If he is intensely aware of God, he also seems intensely aware of what he experiences on the human scene. (2) There are some surprising gaps in what he appears to notice. (3) His mind works from below—from the concrete case. In his own unique way he betrays the earthy wisdom of ordinary people.

That then is the yield from the question triggered off by Hans Georg Gadamer's lecture. I might have persevered with the job of comparing and contrasting Jesus with the poets and philosophers. Plenty of further points spring to mind. (a) Jesus could weep over Jerusalem. On occasions poets too can shed tears. But has there ever been a weeping philosopher? (b) By and large poets and philosophers have not been men and women of action. Admittedly Plato tried to put into practice his theory of philosopher-kings. Dante was deeply involved in the affairs of Florence and other city-states. But most poets and philosophers have dealt in words. Was Jesus a man of action? And in what sense? Clearly he showed himself concerned with what people did or left undone. (c) At the end Jesus went into action and died for his cause. How many poets have done that? One Greek philosopher died for the sake of truth. But no one has ever even claimed that the virtuous acts of Socrates remain with us in the sense that the virtuous acts of Jesus are believed to remain with us. Belief in Jesus and beliefs about Jesus constitute Christology. But there is no Socratology.

Nevertheless, as we admitted earlier, comparisons with the sincerest poets and the noblest philosophers fail to take us very far in understanding Jesus. All the same, poets and philosophers may lead us to reflect on language. The imagery that Jesus employed gives a clue to the way his imagination and perception of the world worked. To move through his language to some insights into his sensibility can only be a real gain.