

Ah, there is only one problem, only one in all the world. How can we restore to man a spiritual significance, a spiritual discontent; let something descend upon them like the dew of a Gregorian chant. . . . Don't you see, we cannot live any longer on refrigerators, politics, balance-sheets, and crossword puzzles. We simply cannot.

—Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Letter to a General*

To the Reader

To characterize the parables of Jesus as God's picturebook¹ may be somewhat provocative. Are seedtime and harvest, home and the far country, birds and flowers, are all these figures and latitudes of our world actually images of the divine mysteries? Is everything transitory merely a symbol, as Goethe says? If this were so, then it would be possible to read all the mysteries of the eternal from this picture writing of our terrestrial world and perhaps there would be no need for the explanatory word.

And yet the teller of these parables indicates that the lilies of the field and the birds of the air are not simply runes which can be employed to unlock and, as it were, spell out the riddle of our existence. On the contrary, the parables themselves are surrounded with mystery. They can lead—and this may even be their intention—to the listeners' "hearing" but yet not "understanding"; indeed, they may actually drive him to deafness and impenitence. Their purpose can be to obscure rather than to illuminate, to draw a curtain rather than to open windows to eternity.

Someone has said that either there is a point from which all the contradictions and seeming absurdities of a book can be resolved or the book had no meaning in the first place. So it is with the parables. For anybody who does not see the world from the point of view from which Jesus Christ, the *teller* of the parables, sees it, the whole profusion of parabolic images turns into a confused labyrinth; for him the doors are shut instead of opened. Are the birds of the air and the lilies of the field really nothing more than pointers to the Lord of creation, who cares for all his creatures? Or are they not also figures of a world

¹ The title of the German edition of the book. (Trans.)

of nature that is dumb, nature that is silent to *me*, that goes on its way, careless of my concerns and my loneliness. Are the stars just symbols of an eternal order or are they not also a sign of orderly processes that go on quite indifferent to my lot? May they not chill me with the cold of cosmic space rather than make me feel the pulse-beat of a Father's heart? And one thing more; may not the picture language of this world lead us to gods and idols instead of to God? Do not all the pseudo absolutes and all the isms, the hubristic attempts of philosophy to attribute to a single phenomenon—whether it be spirit, matter, or an idea—the prerogatives of ultimate reality—do not all these have their source in this same attempt to interpret the picture language of this world and derive its favorite symbols from it? So where does this transitory which we elevate to the position of a parable lead us? May it not be a “poetical fraud” (Nietzsche)?

In the parables of Jesus the opposite way is taken. He first shows us his Father and points to the “heart of all things.” Then from there the things themselves gain their meaning. We start with God and then learn to discover the world anew; but anybody who tries to discover God through the world sees only the distorted reflections of created things, a reflex of his own mind.

This is the reason why the picturebook of created things is in itself of no use at all. Indeed, it confines and limits us to this introverted creation. The mystery of our temporal and eternal destiny is disclosed to us only in the great textbook of God—the Word in which he speaks to us and tells us who he is and what his purposes are. But it is of the mercy of his condescension that in doing so he employs the images and figures of our world. And these images are helpful and comforting; they find us where we are at home. They are so homely that they make us feel at home and give us the certainty that God is not in some remote, inaccessible beyond, but that he gives to everything around us a relationship that leads to his heart, not only grain and fruit, but also the far country and the father's house, summer and winter, lamps and night, money and clothing, weddings and death.

When we read the parables we are surrounded by the scenery of a world that is very near, *our* world. But everything depends upon our finding the right entrance from which their meaning is discovered. We must remember that the pictures do not lead us to the textbook, but that the textbook interprets the pictures for us. The *heart* of all things discloses the things themselves; but the things themselves do not reveal the heart. We are dealing here not with just “any” picturebook but with *God's* picturebook.

The following addresses were delivered first in St. Mark's Church, Stuttgart; later—after revision—they were resumed in St. James's Church, Hamburg, and then continued, on account of want of space,

in the large St. Michael's Church in Hamburg. Always the listeners were greatly varied, young people in large numbers and also the aged, men and women of all stations and degrees of education, Christians and non-Christians.

It is primarily for these listeners and at their request that these expositions of the parables are published. For the author, to be sure, another wish is involved. There were all kinds of reports and picture stories concerning this series of sermons in the newspapers and magazines. Some were gratifyingly factual, but others were out after sensationalism. The talk that this produced did not really contribute toward making clear what actually happened and what was said in the sermons. As a matter of fact, the author has pursued exactly the same course that he followed in his earlier books of sermons.² Nor has his style of address changed in any way at all. It may be that some deeper soundings have been opened up to him, as often happens when one grows older. Quite certainly, however, the author has tried to dig deeper into the texts and probably also applied the file much more assiduously in order to achieve the right mode of expression. On the other hand, he has frequently left the plane and the polisher unused. The reader should know that this was done with intent. But that the author has not scorned these tools may perhaps have been noted by some of his friendly readers who have seen some of his works which belong more in the atmosphere of the lecture room than the pulpit. The language of preaching, which must dispense with all qualifying and safeguarding clauses and is essentially thetical, has cost the author far more effort and difficulty than the "carpentered" academic form of speech. In one case we are dealing with an intellectual and more or less homogeneous audience of listeners and readers; in the other we are addressing a mixed crowd of people who come with many different expectations and even more diverse presuppositions. And in the midst of all this diversity we must bear witness to the "one thing needful." On the other hand, however, this one thing must be said in many different ways. Perhaps the reader will therefore understand that the author wishes to acknowledge how far he has fallen short of the task with which he was presented, but also that he has spared no effort to serve the great cause.

The book is dedicated to my friend and co-worker,
the present student pastor at the University of Tübingen,
Hans Schmidt, D.Theol.

² *The Prayer that Spans the World, Addresses on the Lord's Prayer*, 6th ed.; *Life Can Begin Again, A Passage through the Sermon on the Mount*, 3rd ed.