longer speak to you in parables but tell you plainly of the Father" (Jn 16:25). The parables speak in a hidden way, then, of the mystery of the Cross; they do not only speak of it—they are part of it themselves. For precisely because they allow the mystery of Jesus' divinity to be seen, they lead to contradiction. It is just when they emerge into a final clarity, as in the parable of the unjust vintners (cf. Mk 12:1–12), that they become stations on the way to the Cross. In the parables Jesus is not only the sower who scatters the seed of God's word, but also the seed that falls into the earth in order to die and so to bear fruit.

Jesus' disturbing explanation of the point of his parables, then, is the very thing that leads us to their deepest meaning, provided—true to the nature of God's written word—we read the Bible, and especially the Gospels, as an overall unity expressing an intrinsically coherent message, notwithstanding their multiple historical layers. It may be worthwhile, though, to follow up this thoroughly theological explanation gleaned from the heart of the Bible with a consideration of the parables from the specifically human point of view as well. What is a parable exactly? And what is the narrator of the parable trying to convey?

Now, every educator, every teacher who wants to communicate new knowledge to his listeners naturally makes constant use of example or parable. By using an example, he draws to their attention a reality that until now has lain outside their field of vision. He wants to show how something they have hitherto not perceived can be glimpsed via a reality that does fall within their range of experience. By means of parable he brings something distant within their reach so that, using the

parable as a bridge, they can arrive at what was previously unknown. A twofold movement is involved here. On one hand, the parable brings distant realities close to the listeners as they reflect upon it. On the other hand, the listeners themselves are led onto a journey. The inner dynamic of the parable, the intrinsic self-transcendence of the chosen image, invites them to entrust themselves to this dynamic and to go beyond their existing horizons, to come to know and understand things previously unknown. This means, however, that the parable demands the collaboration of the learner, for not only is something brought close to him, but he himself must enter into the movement of the parable and journey along with it. At this point we begin to see why parables can cause problems: people are sometimes unable to discover the dynamic and let themselves be guided by it. Especially in the case of parables that affect and transform their personal lives, people can be unwilling to be drawn into the required movement.

This brings us back to the Lord's words about seeing and not seeing, hearing and not understanding. For Jesus is not trying to convey to us some sort of abstract knowledge that does not concern us profoundly. He has to lead us to the mystery of God—to the light that our eyes cannot bear and that we therefore try to escape. In order to make it accessible to us, he shows how the divine light shines through in the things of this world and in the realities of our everyday life. Through everyday events, he wants to show us the real ground of all things and thus the true direction we have to take in our day-to-day lives if we want to go the right way. He shows us God: not an abstract God, but the God who acts, who intervenes in our lives, and wants to take us by the

hand. He shows us through everyday things who we are and what we must therefore do. He conveys knowledge that makes demands upon us; it not only or even primarily adds to what we know, but it changes our lives. It is a knowledge that enriches us with a gift: "God is on the way to you." But equally it is an exacting knowledge: "Have faith, and let faith be your guide." The possibility of refusal is very real, for the parable lacks the necessary proof.

There can be a thousand rational objections—not only in Jesus' generation, but throughout all generations, and today maybe more than ever. For we have developed a concept of reality that excludes reality's translucence to God. The only thing that counts as real is what can be experimentally proven. God cannot be constrained into experimentation. That is exactly the reproach he made to the Israelites in the desert: "There your fathers tested me [tried to constrain me into experimentation], and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work" (Ps 95:9). God cannot be seen through the world—that is what the modern concept of reality says. And so there is even less reason to accept the demand he places on us: To believe in him as God and to live accordingly seems like a totally unreasonable requirement. In this situation, the parables really do lead to non-seeing and non-understanding, to "hardening of heart."

This means, though, that the parables are ultimately an expression of God's hiddenness in this world and of the fact that knowledge of God always lays claim to the whole person—that such knowledge is one with life itself, and that it cannot exist without "repentance." For in this world, marked by sin, the gravitational pull of our lives is weighted by the

chains of the "I" and the "self." These chains must be broken to free us for a new love that places us in another gravitational field where we can enter new life. In this sense, knowledge of God is possible only through the gift of God's love becoming visible, but this gift too has to be accepted. In this sense, the parables manifest the essence of Jesus' message. In this sense, the mystery of the Cross is inscribed right at the heart of the parables.

Three Major Parables from the Gospel of Luke

To attempt an exposition of even a significant portion of Jesus' parables would far exceed the scope of this book. I would therefore like to limit myself to the three major parable narratives in Luke's Gospel, whose beauty and depth spontaneously touch believer and nonbeliever alike again and again: the story of the Good Samaritan, the parable of the Prodigal Son, and the tale of the rich man and Lazarus.

The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37)

The story of the Good Samaritan concerns the fundamental human question. A lawyer—a master of exegesis, in other words—poses this question to the Lord: "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" (Lk 10:25). Luke comments that the scholar addresses this question to Jesus in order to put him to the test. Being a Scripture scholar himself, he knows how the Bible answers his question, but he wants to see what this prophet without formal biblical studies has to say about it. The Lord very simply refers him to the

Scripture, which of course he knows, and gets him to give the answer himself. The scholar does so by combining Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, and he is right on target: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself" (Lk 10:27). Jesus' teaching on this question is no different from that of the Torah, the entire meaning of which is contained in this double commandment. But now the learned man, who knew the answer to his own question perfectly well, has to justify himself. What the Scripture says is uncontroversial, but how it is to be applied in practice in daily life raises questions that really were controversial among scholars (and in everyday life).

The concrete question is who is meant by "neighbor." The conventional answer, for which scriptural support could be adduced, was that "neighbor" meant a fellow member of one's people. A people is a community of solidarity in which everyone bears responsibility for everyone else. In this community, each member is sustained by the whole, and so each member is expected to look on every other member "as himself," as a part of the same whole that gives him the space in which to live his life. Does this mean, then, that foreigners, men belonging to another people, are not neighbors? This would go against Scripture, which insisted upon love for foreigners also, mindful of the fact that Israel itself had lived the life of a foreigner in Egypt. It remained a matter of controversy, though, where the boundaries were to be drawn. Generally speaking, only the "sojourner" living among the people was reckoned as a member of the community of solidarity and so as a "neighbor." Other qualifications of the term

enjoyed wide currency as well. One rabbinic saying ruled that there was no need to regard heretics, informers, and apostates as neighbors (Jeremias, pp. 202f.). It was also taken for granted that the Samaritans, who not long before (between the years A.D. 6 and 9) had defiled the Temple precincts in Jerusalem by "strewing dead men's bones" during the Passover festival itself (Jeremias, p. 204), were not neighbors.

Now that the question has been focused in this way, Jesus answers it with the parable of the man on the way from Jerusalem to Jericho who falls among robbers, is stripped of everything, and then is left lying half dead on the roadside. That was a perfectly realistic story, because such assaults were a regular occurrence on the Jericho road. A priest and a Levite—experts in the Law who know about salvation and are its professional servants—come along, but they pass by without stopping. There is no need to suppose that they were especially cold-hearted people; perhaps they were afraid themselves and were hurrying to get to the city as quickly as possible, or perhaps they were inexpert and did not know how to go about helping the man—especially since it looked as though he was quite beyond help anyway. At this point a Samaritan comes along, presumably a merchant who often has occasion to traverse this stretch of road and is evidently acquainted with the proprietor of the nearest inn; a Samaritan—someone, in other words, who does not belong to Israel's community of solidarity and is not obliged to see the assault victim as his "neighbor."

In this connection we need to recall that in the previous chapter the Evangelist has recounted that on the way to Jerusalem Jesus sent messengers ahead of him and that they entered a Samaritan village in order to procure him lodging:

"But the people would not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem." The Sons of Thunder—James and John—became enraged and said to Jesus: "Lord, do you want us to bid fire come down from heaven and consume them?" (Lk 9:52f.). The Lord forbade them to do so. Lodging was found in another village.

And now the Samaritan enters the stage. What will he do? He does not ask how far his obligations of solidarity extend. Nor does he ask about the merits required for eternal life. Something else happens: His heart is wrenched open. The Gospel uses the word that in Hebrew had originally referred to the mother's womb and maternal care. Seeing this man in such a state is a blow that strikes him "viscerally," touching his soul. "He had compassion"—that is how we translate the text today, diminishing its original vitality. Struck in his soul by the lightning flash of mercy, he himself now becomes a neighbor, heedless of any question or danger. The burden of the question thus shifts here. The issue is no longer which other person is a neighbor to me or not. The question is about me. I have to become the neighbor, and when I do, the other person counts for me "as myself."

If the question had been "Is the Samaritan my neighbor, too?" the answer would have been a pretty clear-cut no given the situation at the time. But Jesus now turns the whole matter on its head: The Samaritan, the foreigner, makes himself the neighbor and shows me that I have to learn to be a neighbor deep within and that I already have the answer in myself. I have to become like someone in love, someone whose heart is open to being shaken up by another's need. Then I find my neighbor, or—better—then I am found by him.

Helmut Kuhn offers an exposition of this parable that, while certainly going beyond the literal sense of the text, nonetheless succeeds in conveying its radical message. He writes: "The love of friendship in political terms rests upon the equality of the partners. The symbolic parable of the Good Samaritan, by contrast, emphasizes their radical inequality: The Samaritan, a stranger to the people, is confronted with the anonymous other; the helper finds himself before the helpless victim of a violent holdup. *Agape*, the parable suggests, cuts right through all political alignments, governed as they are by the principle of *do ut des* ('If you give, I'll give'), and thereby displays its supernatural character. By the logic of its principle it is not only beyond these alignments, but is meant to overturn them: The last shall be first (cf. Mt 19:30) and the meek shall inherit the earth (cf. Mt 5:5)" (*"Liebe,"* pp. 88f.). One thing is clear: A new universality is entering the scene, and it rests on the fact that deep within I am already becoming a brother to all those I meet who are in need of my help.

The topical relevance of the parable is evident. When we transpose it into the dimensions of world society, we see how the peoples of Africa, lying robbed and plundered, matter to us. Then we see how deeply they are our neighbors; that our lifestyle, the history in which we are involved, has plundered them and continues to do so. This is true above all in the sense that we have wounded their souls. Instead of giving them God, the God who has come close to us in Christ, which would have integrated and brought to completion all that is precious and great in their own traditions, we have given them the cynicism of a world without God in which all that counts is power and profit, a world that destroys moral

standards so that corruption and unscrupulous will to power are taken for granted. And that applies not only to Africa.

We do of course have material assistance to offer and we have to examine our own way of life. But we always give too little when we just give material things. And aren't we surrounded by people who have been robbed and battered? The victims of drugs, of human trafficking, of sex tourism, inwardly devastated people who sit empty in the midst of material abundance. All this is of concern to us, it calls us to have the eye and the heart of a neighbor, and to have the courage to love our neighbor, too. For—as we have said—the priest and the Levite may have passed by more out of fear than out of indifference. The risk of goodness is something we must relearn from within, but we can do that only if we ourselves become good from within, if we ourselves are "neighbors" from within, and if we then have an eye for the sort of service that is asked of us, that is possible for us, and is therefore also expected of us, in our environment and within the wider ambit of our lives.

The Church Fathers understood the parable Christologically. That is an allegorical reading, one might say—an interpretation that bypasses the text. But when we consider that in all the parables, each in a different way, the Lord really does want to invite us to faith in the Kingdom of God, which he himself is, then a Christological exposition is never a totally false reading. In some sense it reflects an inner potentiality in the text and can be a fruit growing out of it as from a seed. The Fathers see the parable in terms of world history: Is not the man who lies half dead and stripped on the roadside an image of "Adam," of man in general, who truly "fell among robbers"? Is it not true that man, this creature man, has been

alienated, battered, and misused throughout his entire history? The great mass of humanity has almost always lived under oppression; conversely, are the oppressors the true image of man, or is it they who are really the distorted caricatures, a disgrace to man? Karl Marx painted a graphic picture of the "alienation" of man; even though he did not arrive at the real essence of alienation, because he thought only in material terms, he did leave us with a vivid image of man fallen among robbers.

Medieval theology read the two indications given in the parable concerning the battered man's condition as fundamental anthropological statements. The text says, first, that the victim of the assault was stripped (*spoliatus*) and, second, that he was beaten half dead (*vulneratus;* cf. Lk 10:30). The Scholastics took this as referring to the two dimensions of man's alienation. Man is, they said, *spoliatus supernaturalibus* and *vulneratus in naturalibus:* bereft of the splendor of the supernatural grace he had received and wounded in his nature. Now, that is an instance of allegory, and it certainly goes far beyond the literal sense. For all that, though, it is an attempt to identify precisely the two kinds of injury that weigh down human history.

The road from Jerusalem to Jericho thus turns out to be an image of human history; the half-dead man lying by the side of it is an image of humanity. Priest and Levite pass by; from earthly history alone, from its cultures and religions alone, no healing comes. If the assault victim is the image of Everyman, the Samaritan can only be the image of Jesus Christ. God himself, who for us is foreign and distant, has set out to take care of his wounded creature. God, though

so remote from us, has made himself our neighbor in Jesus Christ. He pours oil and wine into our wounds, a gesture seen as an image of the healing gift of the sacraments, and he brings us to the inn, the Church, in which he arranges our care and also pays a deposit for the cost of that care.

We can safely ignore the individual details of the allegory, which change from Church Father to Church Father. But the great vision that sees man lying alienated and helpless by the roadside of history and God himself becoming man's neighbor in Jesus Christ is one that we can happily retain, as a deeper dimension of the parable that is of concern to us. For the mighty imperative expressed in the parable is not thereby weakened, but only now emerges in its full grandeur. The great theme of love, which is the real thrust of the text, is only now given its full breadth. For now we realize that we are all "alienated," in need of redemption. Now we realize that we are all in need of the gift of God's redeeming love ourselves, so that we too can become "lovers" in our turn. Now we realize that we always need God, who makes himself our neighbor so that we can become neighbors.

The two characters in this story are relevant to every single human being. Everyone is "alienated," especially from love (which, after all, is the essence of the "supernatural splendor" of which we have been despoiled); everyone must first be healed and filled with God's gifts. But then everyone is also called to become a Samaritan—to follow Christ and become like him. When we do that, we live rightly. We love rightly when we become like him, who loved all of us first (cf. 1 Jn 4:19).