

THE MILLAR'S TALE (06/01/2002)

Life is like... re-examining our metaphors

I've been reading a great book by Parker J. Palmer, a quaker from the USA. In it Palmer talks about the use of metaphors in naming our experience of life. 'Metaphors do more than just describe reality as we know it', he says, 'animated by the imagination, one of the most vital powers we possess, our metaphors often *become* reality, transmuting themselves from language into the living of our lives.'

He cites the example of the person who says, '*Life is like a game of chance - some win, some lose.*' The danger with this metaphor is it's potential to create either fatalism about losing on the one hand, or an obsession with beating the odds.

For others, '*Life is like a battlefield - you get the enemy, or the enemy gets you.*' Once again, such a view can easily result in the expectation of enemies at every corner, in a kind of defensive siege mentality.

A far wiser metaphor, he suggests, is that of 'seasons'. When viewed like this life is 'neither a battlefield nor a game of chance but something infinitely richer, more promising, more real', he says. The notion that our lives are part of the cycle of the seasons does not deny the struggle or the joy, the loss or the gain, the darkness or the light, but 'encourages us to embrace it all - and to find in all of it opportunities for growth'.

I like what he's saying. To be honest I've been a bit wary of the seasonal metaphor, a bit new agey, I thought – a bit close to the fertility cults of the OT. Then again, it was the writer of Ecclesiastes who said, 'there is a time for everything, a season for every activity under heaven.' Such a metaphor has solid foundations in the biblical wisdom tradition.

Thinking about it now, it seems to me that the 'seasons' metaphor with it's emphasis on growth is a lot better than the more aggressive and destructive 'manufacturing' metaphor which so dominates Western society. In manufacturing you 'make' everything, and so we 'make time', 'make friends', 'make money', 'make a living', we even 'make love'. If we can't make it in reality, then we make it virtual reality!

In China a child asks, '*How does a baby grow?*', here, it's '*How do you make a baby?*' In our culture, from an early age we absorb the rather arrogant conviction that we can manufacture anything we want and in so doing, we reduce the world to mere 'raw material', stuff, lacking value until we impose our designs, our labour on it.