

ST ANNE'S CHURCH, WANDSWORTH

FOUR GOSPELS: ONE JESUS

The Gospel according to Mark

I was the first to write a gospel – really I invented the idea! All these stories were circulating about Jesus, his teaching, and his death and resurrection, and I put lots of them together. Of course I was lucky because I knew some who had really seen him. It's all so exciting – Christians are living a new life together - bursting the old divisions between Jew and Gentile and different races, and it all goes back to what Jesus said and did. People are still trying to understand it all – but even his first followers were pretty slow.



It hasn't all been easy of course. Here in Rome, where I wrote the gospel, there was a horrible pogrom of the Christians when we got blamed for the great fire in Rome under the Emperor Nero [64AD]. We got accused of witchcraft and all sorts of nonsense, and a lot of us were killed, including Peter and Paul. It's typical of people's reaction to the faith: either they come on board or they react against it. There's no middle way. But when people see the quality of life we live, really exemplary lives and caring for our neighbours and the poor, they pay attention. That's the power of Jesus today in us just as they saw his power in his healing miracles as well as in his teaching. Why else should I call it the Good News? – that's what 'gospel' means.

Mark 3.1-6: Jesus heals on the sabbath

Jesus entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, 'Come forward.' Then he said to them, 'Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?' But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

Questions

- How does the story of Jesus leave us feeling inadequate?
- How does it give us motivation and enthusiasm?



The Gospel according to Matthew

Between you and me I am surprised people still read Mark at all. I don't pretend I didn't use him – I included most of his material in my book – but you will certainly recognise the Jewish Jesus in my work better than in his. Of course I'm Jewish myself and proud of it: many Christians are, though the Gentiles are joining in big numbers. After the Jewish revolt against Rome and the destruction of the Temple [66-70AD] the rabbis are tightening up on what's "proper Jewish", and we Jews who follow Jesus the Messiah are being squeezed out. They don't seem to realise how Jesus fulfilled the hopes of our people and the prophecies of scripture. The Gentiles flocking in is exactly what the prophet Isaiah talked about, and now we have it! And the authority with which Jesus spoke! He was a second Moses. Moses himself received the Law from God on Mount Sinai but we have argued ever since how to follow it. Now Jesus the Son of God who knows the spirit and mind of God himself has given us a true way to understand and follow it.

Matthew 5.1-2,43-48: *part of the Sermon on the Mount*

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Questions

- How does the teaching of Christ give us guidance in a confusing world today? What sayings or stories do you hold on to?
- Many people try to define tightly what is right and wrong today. Do we sympathise with them or react against them?

The Gospel according to Luke

I'm a doctor and a historian, a scholarly sort of writer.

So I want to show that the coming of Jesus is a continuation of the Old Testament record of God's involvement with the world, not a departure from it.

But I wrote not as a detached, objective historian but as someone who has faith in Jesus, and I wanted to interpret Jesus for my own time (just as you have to do for yours).

One of my main interests is in people who are at the margins of the society I lived in, who had little power or influence – widows who had no family to support them, the blind who had no choice but to beg – and also those who were outsiders to the Jewish people. What I am trying to say is that the gospel is for everyone.



Luke 15.1-10: Rejoice over the restoration of the lost!

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'

So he told them this parable: 'Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.'

'Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbours, saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost." Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.'

Questions

- Luke was interested in people who were 'outsiders' in their world. Do you think this comes across in this passage?
- Who are the 'outsiders' – those who have little or no voice or power – in the world today? Do you think this passage has anything to say to us in our world about how we live and act, e.g. how we relate to those over us and under us, about what we presume to ask of other people?



The Gospel according to John

I wrote my gospel 20 or 30 years later than the others, and it is a different kind of read. The other three gospels can be described as biographies, but people have been likened mine to a poem. Think for example of how I begin: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God ...”

I included Jesus' “I am” sayings: “I am ... the bread of life, the light of the world, the true vine” - like a poet, the Jesus encountered in my gospel often uses metaphors. What I'm interested in is how people come to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God – the clues are all there but only some people catch hold of the truth. And each one of us has to answer that question for ourselves.

John 2: 1-11 *The wedding at Cana*

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, ‘They have no wine.’ And Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.’ His mother said to the servants, ‘Do whatever he tells you.’ Now standing there were six stone water-jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, ‘Fill the jars with water.’ And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, ‘Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.’ So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, ‘Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.’ Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

Questions

- Look at the people's different reactions – Mary, the servants, the chief steward, the disciples. How do you think you would have reacted?
- What do you think this miracle stands for – can the way it is done, or the occasion, or the wine itself, be read as symbolic? Does it have anything to say to us about how we see God in the world and our lives as Christians?