

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

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Rector of St James

Pentecost 9

2 August 2020

“Jesus: Rabbi, Healer and King”

Readings: Genesis 32:22-31; Psalm 17:1-7, 16; Romans 9:1-8; Matthew 14:13-21

Context and the Scriptures

There is a constant temptation when reading the Bible to decontextualize the texts and read into them what we wish to find, which is usually based upon our desires and prejudices. This method of interpretation has become especially prevalent in our own times because of the post-modern hermeneutic of suspicion on the one hand and the pietistic-literalist reading of the Bible on the other.

It would be good to let the scriptures speak for themselves, yet they are too often subjected to other agendas; be they the manic political agendas of zealots, the warm-inner-glow of religiosity, or the authoritarianism of theological imperialism.

One thing that the combined efforts of the Reformation, a liberal education, and the invention of the printing-press gave us was the opportunity to read the Bible for ourselves and make up our own minds about what it means. Nevertheless, to do this well we still need to develop an understanding of the historical, literary, and social circumstances in which the texts were written. We need not be mindless in our comprehension.

The early church was not a coherent organisation but rather had many emerging traditions within it that led to tension and conflict. At its origins, Christianity was principally a Jewish sect that expected the immanent end of the world, when Jesus would return to rule. Moreover, Judaism itself was not an homogenous religion but instead was riddled with numerous factions, sects, and political parties, all of which was thrown into turmoil at the sacking of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70AD. The early church also had a growing number of Gentile converts who brought their attitudes and beliefs with them. Unsurprisingly then, the early church was influenced by the teachings of both the rabbis as well as the then dominant pagan philosophies of stoicism and epicureanism.

The missionary endeavours and teaching of St Paul brought about some cohesion in those places over which he had some influence, but it was only partial. What tended to happen was the development of a localised authority and tradition. In time, consciousness of a more universal church grew with an increase in adherents, an awareness of other Christian communities, and improved communication and transport.

Why Write a Gospel?

But back to the 1st century - why write a 'gospel'? Given that early Christians expected the end of the world to happen soon, there was little initial interest in writing down the sayings and activities of Jesus. The earliest Christian writings are, in fact, several of St Paul's epistles to new churches. These included practical advice on how to manage a congregation and teaching on the nature of the gospel and Jesus.

The 'Scriptures' of the early church were principally the scriptures of the synagogue, which probably consisted of the first five books (also known as the Torah or Books of Moses), as well as some of the histories, the Psalms, and a few prophetic writings of the Hebrew Bible. These books are the 'Scriptures' referred to in the 2 Timothy 3:16 – the letter is not referring to the New Testament texts!

Obviously, because the world did not come to a quick end (although Jerusalem had been destroyed), those who knew the story of Jesus turned to producing records of his life, teaching and works, culminating in the passion narrative about his death and resurrection.

Scholars understand that the first of these documents was the Gospel of Mark, written around 65-70AD. It is a short and direct narrative about the life of Jesus, beginning with the commencement of his ministry and ending with his resurrection, and is thought to be based on the recollections of St Peter. It is also understood that Matthew and Luke had a copy of Mark's Gospel when they wrote their own.

The literary genre of a gospel is a little ambiguous; is it history, myth, theology, biography, or whatever? I have previously speculated that the Gospel of Mark is tragic theatre with Jesus as an enigmatic protagonist who is misunderstood by most around him. With an element of irony, it is the outsiders that understand him - the crowds, the sick, the poor, and finally the pagan soldier at the cross who delivers the punchline by giving him the title of the Emperor – 'Son of God'.

The Gospel of Matthew, however, is of a different type. Written away from Jerusalem (possibly in Antioch) in the late first century, it is often referred to as 'the teacher's gospel' because of its ability to be used as a manual of instruction on the Christian faith. The writer of this Gospel sought to address the needs of an emerging Christian community that had strong Jewish cultural roots. Matthew therefore employs an especially Jewish approach to his Gospel by presenting it as a new Torah or Law.

The Gospel portrays Jesus as the embodiment of the new Law by fulfilling it in himself and calling others to follow him and do likewise. He described this as becoming part of God's kingdom or 'rule'. For Jesus, however, fulfilment of the Law was about revealing its true purpose rather than any sense of legal literalism (or black-letter law). The Matthean Jesus therefore presented a contextual or spirit-of-the-law approach to life.

The Matthean Jesus

By compiling the stories about Jesus and his sayings into a cohesive narrative, Matthew's Gospel manages to reveal what it is to be a person living under a new covenant with God. In this way, Jesus becomes a new Abraham called to be the founder of a new nation or people, he is also called to be a new Moses who teaches the law to God's people, and finally he is a new David chosen to rule in God's kingdom.

To emphasise this, Matthew highlighted Jesus' credentials. His ancestry was described as going back to the patriarch Abraham via King David, he had a miraculous birth, was recognised by both Jews and Gentiles as a king, and like Joseph (son of Jacob and grandson of Isaac) he went to Egypt only to return when it became safe. In the first two chapters (known as the Prologue) Matthew presents Jesus as the embodiment of God's people.

Chapter three sees Matthew beginning to borrow from Mark's Gospel, with the commencement of Jesus ministry. Here the last of the Prophets, John the Baptist, metaphorically anointed Jesus for ministry through baptism.

Like the Hebrews escaping Egypt, Jesus then wandered into the desert; but unlike the Hebrews and the incident of the golden calf, he resisted the temptations to worship idols. He returned strengthened for his ministry, called his disciples, healed the sick, and began to teach by revealing the new Torah through the Sermon on the Mount. The Gospel therefore emphasises teaching, healing, and revelation of God's reign – which is meant to be reflected in the life of church.

This was Jesus the teacher, but it was also Matthew the teacher who was keen to institute a new world order through his narrative about Jesus. He reinterpreted Judaism in the light of Christ and proposed a faith that is universal and corporate. This was reflected in the final passage of the Gospel in what is called the Great Commission to the disciples. Here the risen Jesus said, 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.'

Jesus and the People

So, now we come to the feeding of the five thousand. The location was Galilee, a world away from Jerusalem with its Temple, priests, and politics. This was Jesus in his own country and with his own people. The Gospel describes his ministry as having taken place in this region for some time and that Jesus was therefore well known.

Immediately before the story of the feeding, John the Baptist reappeared in the narrative with an account of his death. It was an incident that prefigured Jesus own death as an innocent man. In response, Jesus sought to find a quiet place, but the crowds followed him. Jesus' response was to have compassion on them, which is a sign of God's kingdom.

The people were hungry, it was a lonely place, and Jesus' answer was to share his food with them. The account was likely to have brought together two images in the minds of the readers; the first being the feeding of the Hebrews with mana in the wilderness during the Exodus, and the second would be the feeding of God's people in the Eucharist. The actions of taking the bread, blessing, and breaking it, and then giving it to the crowds would have linked the story of Jesus to the worship actions of Matthew's fledgling church. The feeding of the five thousand was therefore a sign of the presence of the kingdom – and all ate and were filled!

Interestingly, the story does not say that the crowds 'marvelled' at the miracle. For Matthew's readers this was a revelation of the nature of God's world rather than an extraordinary story of the supernatural. Nor did the story need further explanation or commentary. In short it said that this was a lonely place, the people were hungry, some food was provided, and God fed them. It was an act of justice – NOT of the rules-driven kind, but rather justice worked out through the common good – generous, welcoming, loving, and with a real concern for the well-being of others.

This was the ministry of the Matthean Jesus; to reveal the nature of God's world through teaching, compassion, and drawing people into God's kingdom. This is fulfilment of the Law, and we are called to do likewise - without prevarication, without provisos, without strings attached.