

The Four Gospels and Jesus

My intention is to consider how important developments in New Testament studies, particularly narrative criticism, offer new insights into the portrayals of Jesus presented by the four evangelists. The images they convey are both dynamic and challenging, and their aim is to open the mind in order to provoke a response from readers of the four Gospels.

1. The Gospel of Mark

It is as an adult that Jesus appears for the first time in the Gospel of Mark, and he does so on the edge of the Jordan river on the occasion of his baptism. And the note struck by this evangelist from this very first event onwards is that Jesus embarks at once, both dynamically and enthusiastically, on the mission of proclaiming the kingdom of God. Each of the four Gospels in fact records a mission statement uttered by Jesus, a programmatic description of the aims of his public ministry. Mark presents Jesus' opening words as follows: 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news ('gospel')' (1:15).

Attention can be drawn to the note of urgency to be detected in Jesus' words, who then goes out to choose twelve disciples, heal the sick, cast out demons and move swiftly from one Galilean village to the next. Each event follows another in quick succession, and each one is characterized by one of Mark's favourite idioms: 'immediately, at once' (in Greek *euthus*): 'At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee' (1:28). 'Immediately he spoke to them and said "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid"' (6:50). This turn of phrase occurs over forty times in Mark's Gospel alone. One apparent reason for this is that Jesus' public ministry, according to Mark's chronology, lasts only one year (as compared with three years according to John's Gospel). Jesus carried out all his marvellous deeds and pronounced all his powerful words within the confines of twelve months; swift action and movement are therefore required. But this also echoes Jesus' first words in Galilee: 'The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near'.

The perceptive reader, who has persevered with his or her reading of Mark's Gospel from the beginning, will also be struck by the distinctive change in tone

that takes place towards the centre of the Markan narrative, namely on that occasion when Jesus gathers with his disciples at Caesarea Philippi and where Peter acts as a representative of the twelve by confessing: 'You are the Messiah'. This confession takes place more or less right in the middle of Mark's Gospel. It is undoubtedly the focal point of this memorable scene, but it also marks a watershed in that the pace of events now changes; everything slows down and calms down.

Jesus does not totally reject Peter's confession about his messianic status, although he does take this opportunity in Caesarea Philippi to inform the disciples of his imminent fate: 'Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again' (8:31). Mark then adds the comment that Jesus said all this quite openly. Why? After all those earlier occasions when Jesus warned that his true identity should not be proclaimed - in particular by rebuking the demons for declaring that he is the Son of God - why is the secret transformed into a proclamation in Caesarea Philippi?

The explanation is to be found in Jesus' words about the suffering of the Son of man, for it is at this point that the shadow of the Cross becomes discernible for the first time in this Gospel. Jesus must suffer and die. No one can recognize Jesus as the Messiah, Son of God without appreciating that it is by means of his death and resurrection that his true identity is made manifest. After Caesarea Philippi, Jesus turns his sights towards Jerusalem and predicts his fate not on once, but on two further occasions.

And so, after ten chapters of narrating Jesus' words and deeds, during a public ministry which is condensed to about a year's duration, Mark dedicates the six final chapters of his Gospel to describing events which lasted a little over a week. After all the frantic activity in Galilee, the mood of Mark's Gospel now changes. Here we encounter his capacity, as a theologian and storyteller, to encourage his readers to perceive the crucial nature and significance of Jesus' final days on earth. One now reads about Jesus cleansing the Temple, predicting the destruction of Jerusalem, being arrested and placed on trial in the presence of the Sanhedrin. And it is on this occasion that Jesus for the first time openly and publicly acknowledges his true status and identity. When the high priest questions him and asks: 'Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed', Jesus

responds with the words: 'I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven' (14:62). At this moment, with the clear sealing of his fate, Jesus can proclaim that he is indeed the Messiah, the Son of God, which is the truth already known by those readers who have been following Mark's Gospel from its opening title: 'The beginning of Jesus Christ, the Son of God' (1:1). This is the christological claim that will also mark the final confession in this Gospel when the centurion, following Jesus' death, stands at the foot of the Cross, and proclaims: 'Truly this man was God's Son' (15:39).

Mark's Gospel is therefore a unified Gospel, since words of confession dominate its beginning, middle and end. But there is also development in the narrative; the messianic secret recedes as Jesus' death draws near. For this reason the mood and tenor of the narrative also changes. The frantic activity in the villages and towns of Galilee gives way to the more solemn and controlled movement in the direction of Jerusalem.

2. The Gospel of Matthew

One of the most significant contributions of biblical scholarship during the past century has been its careful analysis of the relationship between three of the Gospels, namely Mark, Matthew and Luke. Mark's Gospel is understood to be the earliest of the four Gospels (written shortly before, or immediately after, the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD), whereas it was also one of the major sources used by Matthew and Luke when they composed their Gospels some decades later.

Since Matthew is dependent on Mark's Gospel, it resembles its predecessor in a number of ways. But important differences also exist, not least in their presentations of Jesus. Without doubt, Matthew provides a much fuller and more detailed portrayal, beginning with Jesus' birth and ending with the appearances of the risen Christ. But it is also noteworthy that Mark's emphasis on the secrecy of Jesus' true status finds no echo in Matthew's Gospel. Already in Bethlehem the wise men worship Jesus, as also happens in the case of the disciples when they encounter Jesus walking on the sea. Matthew's Gospel is not a Gospel of

secrets and mysteries, for already in the infancy narratives Jesus is presented as the revelation of God's presence.

One of Matthew's most distinctive techniques as a storyteller is the way in which key aspects of his christology, his presentation of Jesus, are already set out in the first two chapters. It is these key aspects that provide the Gospel with its framework and offer a point of reference to those who persevere with their reading of this Gospel from beginning to end. Matthew's opening claim, therefore, is that Jesus is the son of David, the son of Abraham, and, by making this claim, Jesus is set firmly with his Jewish context. He is the Son of David, the Messiah upon whom Israel has pinned its eschatological hopes; but he is also the Son of Abraham, because Jesus is the one who fulfils the promise made to Abraham that all the nations would be blessed in or through him. And we are already presented with a foretaste of this blessing of the nations in the infancy narratives themselves. Son of David, son of Abraham - but Jesus, according to Matthew, also fulfils the prophecy of Isaiah; he is the Immanuel, 'God with us'.

And as Matthew's narrative proceeds from Jesus' birth to his ministry, it is these exact christological themes that continue to be highlighted. Jesus, as son of David, comes to teach and heal his own people, thus acting as shepherd among the lost sheep of Israel. But Jesus' ministry is a ministry full of conflict and opposition, while it is the people of Israel, represented by their religious leaders, who challenge Jesus and finally reject him.

How does Jesus respond to this? Each one of the evangelists is eager to incorporate a turning-point or watershed in the narrative and, in this respect, the turning-point in Matthew's Gospel occurs when Jesus proclaims to the religious leaders of Israel: 'Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom' (21:43). The disciples form the nucleus of this new people and, as in Jesus' case, they will be rejected by Israel. It is for this reason that the disciples are called upon to carry out their mission among the Gentiles; they are the ones who will receive the blessing given by God to Abraham, but will do so through Jesus, the son of Abraham.

But Jesus is also the 'Immanuel', God with us. One of Matthew's ways of conveying this truth is by placing Jesus regularly on a mountain, which acts, in the Old Testament in particular, as a powerful symbol of God's presence. It is on

top of a mountain that Jesus is tempted by Satan, preaches his major sermon and discloses his role as the teacher of Israel, as the new Moses. But Jesus is also located on a mountain before he descends and walks on the lake, he is on a mountain during his transfiguration and, finally, when he appears as the risen Christ to commission his disciples: 'Go', he says to the nucleus of the new people, 'and make disciples of all the nations'. And at this point, as Jesus pronounces his final words in Matthew's Gospel, we are reminded of the christological theme which has sustained this Gospel from the first chapters: 'And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age'. These are the words of the Immanuel.

3. The Gospel of Luke

If it is Mark's intention to disclose gradually the meaning of Jesus' identity as Messiah, Son of God, Luke, like Matthew, establishes this as the overriding theme of his Gospel from the beginning, from the narratives about Jesus' birth. This is yet another example of what a musician would term an overture; the setting out the themes that will dominate the presentation of Jesus in the main body of the Gospel.

The Jesus of Luke's Gospel is well known as the figure who takes the side of the poor. And the good news of salvation in Jesus comes to such people who are forced to lurk in the shadows, people like Elizabeth and Zechariah, Simeon and Anna - righteous individuals who are found praying in the Temple. These figures are the recipients of the message that God intervenes in their midst by reversing the status quo; he has brought the powerful down from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. Jesus brings mercy, peace and salvation.

Therefore, when Jesus, according to Luke, embarks on his public ministry, he does not explicitly proclaim the coming of the kingdom (as happens in Mark's Gospel), but opens the scroll on the sabbath and announces to the people of Nazareth that Isaiah's prophecy is today fulfilled among them: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour' (4:18-19). This is Jesus' opening mission statement, the mission that will determine the direction and nature of his ministry; he is to be a sign that God

intervenes, by reversing the status quo, offering physical and spiritual healing to those who reside in the shadows - lepers, tax collectors, women and sinners.

Luke's narrative is also characterized by its orderly presentation, a feature which is of course in accordance with his promise to Theophilus in his opening statement: 'I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you...' (1:3). But whereas Mark displays a particular fondness for the phrase 'at once' or 'immediately', Luke is more interested in depicting Jesus as one who prays during key events in his life - on the occasion of his baptism, before choosing the disciples, during the transfiguration and in the garden of Gethsemane. Clearly Luke's frequent references to Jesus at prayer do create an image quite different from Mark's portrayal of Jesus' energetic activity in Galilee, although Luke is also eager to emphasize that Jesus' public ministry follows a particular geographical sequence.

I have already mentioned the significance attached to turning points in each of the Gospels, and in the case of Luke this occurs at the end of the ninth chapter. After several narratives which focus on Jesus' activity in Galilee, Luke adds the following brief comment: 'When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem' (9:51). From this moment onwards, Jesus turns towards Jerusalem and Luke incorporates numerous examples of such scattered comments as 'during his journey to Jerusalem' and 'on his way to Jerusalem'. This points to a deliberate movement and journey, which again agrees with Luke's emphasis on the necessity placed upon Jesus to reach the city: 'Yet today, tomorrow and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem' (13:33). As Jesus had earlier informed his audience in the synagogue at Nazareth, this prophet who had been anointed with the Spirit is now fulfilling the divine plan. But to his last moment Jesus demonstrates his care and concern for others - for the women who weep and even for those responsible for his death in the city which is his earthly destination.

4. The Gospel of John

If Luke's Gospel ends with a series of narratives about Jesus' resurrection and ascension, the heavenly world is in fact the starting-point of John's Gospel. This evangelist does not begin his story by the Jordan river or in town of Bethlehem,

but takes an immense leap backwards and upwards by proclaiming: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God' (1:1). The Prologue to John's Gospel has been the subject of much scholarly debate, with some commentators even proposing that the first eighteen verses are a later addition to the Gospel. That assessment of the Prologue's status is not as popular today, particularly in view of the current emphasis on studying the Gospels as unified compositions. Indeed, more and more commentators are now proposing that the Prologue should be regarded as the interpretative key for a proper understanding of how the fourth evangelist portrays Jesus in the main body of his Gospel.

For that reason the words 'in the beginning was the Word' and 'the Word became flesh' function as the christological lens through which to read John's Gospel. The one who has been dwelling with God in the heavenly heights from eternity has become flesh. Jesus comes from above, sent into the world as Son by the Father in order to save the world. This means that he is the definitive revelation of the divine, offering light to those who dwell in darkness, life instead of death, love rather than hatred, truth and not lies. But the dominant message throughout John's Gospel is that all those who encounter Jesus must respond to him in some way, whether positively or negatively; no one in this Gospel walks away without disclosing whether they believe in Jesus or reject him. And in this respect the readers of this Gospel have already been prepared for this message in the Prologue: 'He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God' (1:11-12). This will be the plot of the Gospel from beginning to end.

Since Jesus is the one who has come from above, he speaks and communicates a language of heavenly origin, one which people in the world find difficult to comprehend. On one level John's language is straightforward and accessible - light, bread, truth, judgement, life - but its simplicity is deceptive. It becomes apparent to the readers of this Gospel, certainly by the time one reaches Jesus' conversations with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, that the evangelist uses his vocabulary on more than one level; whereas the woman from Samaria believes that the living water of which Jesus speaks is fresh

running water, Jesus is seeking to communicate spiritual realities - the kind of water that quenches all thirst.

Using language on different levels is one of John's favoured literary techniques. The fact that people continually misinterpret Jesus' words means that he must speak at length and expand his basic message. But it also points to the immense distance between the heavenly and earthly worlds and that Jesus has come into the world to bridge that gap. Therefore, as in the case of Nicodemus or the woman from Samaria, John invites his readers to move from one level to another - to cross from the earthly to the heavenly, from the physical to the spiritual - in order for them to receive eternal life.

Not once in John's Gospel does Jesus lose sight of this heavenly perspective. He speaks about himself as the Son who has been sent into the world and announces that, after accomplishing his work in the world, he will depart to the one who sent him. For this reason John is able to interpret Jesus' death as the moment of his glory, as the hour of his glorification - it is by means of his death and resurrection that he will be lifted up and return to the Father. And because it is the hour of glory, Jesus can openly and fearlessly face death, in complete control of his own fate. Jesus steers all the events that lead to the Cross - he comes out of the garden to meet Judas and the arresting party, he carries his own cross and he yields his own spirit unto death after uttering his last word: 'It is finished', 'It is accomplished'.

5. Four Portraits, One Jesus

Four presentations of Jesus have therefore been brought together within the New Testament canon. He is an active, dynamic figure, according to Mark, and is adamant that his status as Messiah, Son of God, can only be understood in the light of his death and resurrection. The emphasis in Matthew's Gospel is also on Jesus as one who acts, teaches and heals, but this evangelist is willing for it to be proclaimed openly from the outset that Jesus is Immanuel, 'God with us', to which the only appropriate response is an act of veneration and worship.

The distinctive feature of Luke's presentation is the image of Jesus as a prayerful prophet who has been anointed for a mission of salvation, forgiveness and mercy open to all, even to those hovering on the boundaries. Clearly the emphasis in John's Gospel is on the Word become flesh, one the one who has

descended from above to be the saving and revealing presence of God in the world.

There are many differences between these christological presentations, but attempting to account for or even explain away these differences does not do justice to the Gospel traditions. This was already recognized by the early Christians when the decision was taken to include four Gospels in the New Testament canon. Although some of the Church's opponents suggested that it was forced to include four Gospels because none of them was 'perfect' on its own terms or a comprehensive presentation of the facts about the life and teaching of Jesus. The Church father Irenaeus sought to respond to this accusation by stating that it was necessary to include the four, since: 'the Gospel has been given in four forms, but united in one spirit'. He continues: 'It is not possible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer in number than they are, since there are four directions of the world in which we live'. The Christian faith needs four Gospels in the same way as four points are needed on a compass.

Indeed, the current emphasis in New Testament studies on the evangelists as theologians and storytellers serves as an invitation to respect, appreciate and even to embrace the differences between their presentations of Jesus. We should not believe that we are being disloyal to the Christian faith by noting that John has put his own stamp on his sources or to speak about the distinctive features of Luke's or Matthew's Gospel. Such variety challenges the churches today, as in the case of first-century readers and hearers, to reflect deeper and deeper on the profound question of Jesus' identity and significance.