

ST NINIAN'S POLLOKSHIELDS
LENT 2004
NEW TESTAMENT BASICS 2

THE GOSPELS AND ACTS

Although as I suggested last week, the Gospels and Acts are by no means the earliest of the NT writings, it seems reasonable to start with them because they are likely to be the most familiar to believers. We hear them all the time in church – the reading of the gospel is mandatory at every celebration of the eucharist. Each of us will no doubt have our favourite – I know that Kimberly's is Luke, that mine is John – what the Bishop's is (unless like all sensible bishops he carefully likes them all equally) you can ask him later on!

How do believers hear or read the gospels? Do they hear or read them as historical works hoping for information about Jesus and his time? Do they turn to them in joy to read about one they love and have given their lives to, Jesus? Do they hear or read them hoping for guidance and help in making decisions? Do they hear or read them expecting spiritual nourishment, the feeding of their faith? Do they use gospel stories in their prayers and meditations? Do they read them for inspiration by the example and teaching of Jesus? As they hear or read do they imagine themselves as characters in the story, journeying with Jesus, maybe identifying with the disciples or with the many hurt and unhappy people Jesus encountered and blessed with his presence? There are, in fact, so many ways to hear and read these texts – all of the ways I have mentioned and more. There is also the possibility of not *reading* them at all. Maybe some believers, maybe more than the clergy would like to think, only *hear* the gospels read in church, in bits and pieces, often disjointed, and never open them from one Sunday to the next, which is what I

suppose most Christians have done for most of the church's history, not least because so many of them could not read. But we *can* read and so I hope that today's talk might tempt you to read through at least one of the gospels this Lent – you can do it at a sitting, as if you were reading a short novel. Even better is to listen to one read on a cassette at a sitting – the Bible Society do these.

Let's ask some basic questions about the gospels – I'll talk about Acts briefly at the end. (It really deserves an entire talk to itself). First of all what kind of writings are they? Are they **history books** – no, though they do contain important historical material. Are they **biographies of Jesus** – no, they miss out too much of his life to be that, but they do tell us a lot about what he said and did and how he died and rose again. Are they **theological textbooks**, handbooks of Christian doctrine – no, but they certainly contain the theological perspectives of their authors and maybe of the church communities in which their authors lived and worshipped, and John especially has many verses which later became central in the discussion and formulation of doctrine. Are they a kind of **“Teach yourself Morals”** series of books – no, but they do contain vitally important teachings of Jesus. I could go on, but I hope you get the picture – it is not easy to fit the gospels into types of writing with which we are familiar. In that case, we should pay attention to what, if anything, they themselves say about their purpose. Of the four, three do this explicitly. Mark opens with these words: *the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God*. So, he describes his work as “gospel”, “good news” – good news concerning Jesus. It is meant to evoke faith in the present as it is heard or read, not merely, or perhaps not at all, stimulate interest in the past. Listen to St Luke at the beginning of his gospel – *Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things*

closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed. (Luke 1.1-4, RSV). And, at the beginning of Acts, he sums up what he has done in the gospel – *In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commandment through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.* (Acts 1.1-2). Many interesting issues are raised by these words, but of them I want to draw attention to only two - there is an element of history in the gospels, of the writer describing a time before his own of which he knows through oral tradition (and certainly by Luke's stage written sources too including Mark's gospel itself). But this history is presented not just to increase knowledge of the past (or even simply to keep it alive in the churches) but to encourage belief and faith in the present, because it is seen not simply as things in the past but as good news (gospel) for the present - *that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed.* John's Gospel makes this very clear indeed. In 20.30 we read *Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book, but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.* The story of Jesus, his words and deeds, is told to evoke belief and new life and the materials available are selected by the writer with this end in view, this is what makes it gospel, good news – *there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written* (John 21.25 RSV).

Now, Matthew does not explain himself, but I don't see that he is up to anything different – gospels are writings which tell the story of Jesus as good news, presenting him and his story, above all his passion and resurrection, as the object of life-changing faith *now*. If you look at the use of the word “gospel” in the gospels themselves – only infrequently in Matthew and Mark, hardly at all in Luke and never in John - and the rest of the NT

(overwhelmingly in Paul's letters and almost nowhere else) you will find that it is very frequently associated with the specific activity of *preaching* – either by Jesus himself or by his apostles later - or as a kind of catch all word to designate the whole Christian mission of which preaching was a central part and to which Paul and his companions gave themselves utterly. Good news is inherently oral, it is announced, the primary focus of gospel in the New Testament is not a text but speech about a person, oral proclamation of Jesus Christ – this suggests to me that what we know as *the gospels* are almost what you might, rather clumsily, call written preaching, and indeed they may very well have begun life as aide-memoires for preachers and teachers. For a person like me that is remarkably like what they in fact still are!! But I don't want to major too much on that for fear of suggesting that they should only be read by preachers and teachers of the faith. Even I think the Reformation debunked that one, though it made the Christian world far more dangerous for the clergy with lay people actually reading the gospels and thinking for themselves! Hm.....I bet they didn't teach you to think like that at TISEC, Kimberly!

To turn now, briefly, to timescale. Our consideration of the opening verses of St Luke has already alerted us to the fact that the gospels as we have them were written after the time of Jesus. Just how long after is something of which we cannot be entirely certain. I am no longer master of the detailed arguments deployed by scholars – if I ever was – so all I can do is convey what is still the consensus about dating and what, in practice, I myself take for granted. Mark is generally regarded as the earliest, dated 65-70 AD, before the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, about 35 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus; Matthew and Luke, who both largely incorporate Mark are dated a bit later, say about 80AD. John, whose method and style are very different from the other three, is usually put into the 90s. However, it is important to realize that these dates remain open

to challenge - as I shall try to show at the very end, for fun - and are anyhow only to do with the final form of the writings. All of the gospels include materials which were collected and written down much earlier, some of them, of course, going back to the lips of Jesus himself. For example, if you set out Mark, Matthew and Luke in parallel columns – a book which does this is called a *Synopsis* (looking at things together) – with Mark in the middle, you will quite often find passages where, while there is nothing in Mark’s column, the words in Matthew and Luke’s columns agree either totally or very closely. Sometimes in such contexts, as in the case of the Beatitudes or the Lord’s Prayer there are significant differences as well as correspondences – identity of subject but not of words. Most people, on the basis of such observations of the texts, think that Matthew and Luke must have had independent access to a range of material, some of it written down, some of it oral, which consisted mainly of sayings of Jesus and which was older than the existing text of Mark’s gospel – Mark seems occasionally to use stuff from the same source. Or think of the birth stories or the stories of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus – Mark has no such stories, Matthew and Luke top and tail Mark with them, John has no birth stories but some post-resurrection ones. In each of Matthew, Luke and John these stories are different. Did Mark know these stories but deliberately exclude them as not necessary to the gospel? Were they unknown to him for whatever reason? Are they later than his time? I (maybe that should be “we”) don’t know about the birth stories, but as far as the resurrection appearance stories are concerned we (and I!) know that some such traditions are very old indeed – in 1 Corinthians 15, written maybe twenty years before Mark, Paul hands on a tradition referring to such appearances which must have been current in the 40s, hardly any time after the death and resurrection of Jesus. So maybe Mark had theological reasons for leaving them out – anyhow it has always seemed to me that, if he is indeed the first

gospel, there was very good reason for Luke and Matthew to try again!

Within the four gospels, as you may already have picked up from what I've been saying, a distinction is usually drawn between the first three and John. Matthew, Mark and Luke are often known as the Synoptic Gospels, because, as I've already mentioned, you can lay them out in three columns and look at them together. This is possible because they are, as literary works, closely related – indeed, it is commonly held that Mark is the major source for the other two. They share a great deal of material, as well as having materials that are unique to each – an interesting, indeed endlessly fascinating set of literary relationships which has generated vast amounts of scholarship, not all of it, I have to say, either interesting or fascinating! But anyone turning from any one of these three to the fourth, John, will be immediately struck by the different style of the book and different presentation of Jesus. Clearly all four are telling good news about the same person, Jesus, but John tells it rather differently from the other three (of course, it is also true that Mark, Matthew and Luke have their unique insights and emphases too, and their clear differences one from another, but still I think it true to say that they are more like one another than any of them is like John). Just two examples of difference. In the first three gospels Jesus preaches the gospel of the Kingdom – but in John there is virtually no mention of the Kingdom of God – Jesus is rather presented as the bearer of eternal life, even as eternal life itself. Again, in the first three Jesus speaks in pithy sayings or parables, but in John in great symbolic “I am” sayings often followed by long discourses. And he certainly points to His own status far more openly in John than in the other three. Clearly, the presentation has been changed to make Jesus intelligible in a context different from those of the first three and you cannot help feeling that it is the result of much imaginative reflection.

This leads me to my final theme as far as the gospels are concerned – how might we characterize each of these four gospels? For this, I am indebted to what I think is an extremely helpful presentation by my friend David Brown in one of his books called *Invitation to Theology*. He suggests that Mark, who plunges in without birth stories and ends with the words “they were afraid”, poses more questions than he answers – his enigmatic presentation of Jesus, the powerful healer and exorcist who is in the end left abandoned and powerless to his fate, appeals to people who like asking questions and are not too concerned for definitive answers. He appeals, I think, to the kind of person who thrives on mystery and paradox, on loose ends, on puzzles and who is stimulated by them to explore further. It is the strangeness of Jesus and his story that comes through. And this constitutes Mark’s attractive power. It is not a surprise that Mark has made a dramatic comeback in the popularity stakes in our age. On the other hand Matthew, who includes so much more of the teaching of Jesus than Mark and presents him as a kind of new Moses, making very high ethical demands, particularly appeals to those of us who see the Christian life as a call to holiness, to perfection, who see it as demanding all of one’s life, with nothing at all held back from the purifying fire. That is not likely to make him the most popular of the four, and indeed in today’s church he is far from being that – though in the Prayer Book Sunday readings he gets a huge share, reflecting an earlier favour in the church. But who said that an evangelist’s worth was to be measured in terms of popularity, any more than our individual worth is to be so measured? Luke, with his presentation of Jesus the friend of sinners and outcasts, compassionate, forgiving – even from the cross – appeals to people who want to “get on with the purely practical task of following Jesus’ example of service, and in particular service to the outcast and downtrodden”, as Brown puts it. And what a challenging and uncomfortable example Luke, the well-to-do doctor, writing for a well-off enquirer after truth, is setting before

us: one to inspire selfless service of the poor and despised, much Christian social witness and action. And then there is my own favourite, John. Let me say why he appeals to me and people like me. First, his presentation is open to the doctrinal tradition in which I stand - in John you have all the raw material for the Christian confession and worship of God as Trinity. In John you have a conviction that the life of the church is dynamic and spirited into all truth, which encourages me to think that the future is just as important as the past for Christianity and that I will never grasp more than a fraction of what it is all about - that's exciting and hopeful. Above all, John, for me, is the Gospel of the Incarnation, the Word made flesh. It is at that part of the Creed that I bow my head - *and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary* - and used, in the days when I lived and ministered in Anglo-Catholic parishes, to get on my knees. It is the centre of my faith, for it reveals Jesus to me as the One who communes with us in our flesh, so that we may commune with him in his divinity. And so I unashamedly agree with the theologian Origen, who wrote in the middle of the third century: *the Gospels are the first fruits of all the Scriptures, but of the Gospels that of John is the first fruits. No one can apprehend the meaning of it except he have lain on Jesus' breast, and received from Him Mary to be his Mother also.* I haste to add that I am a long way from fulfilling the latter half of Origen's words, though he himself certainly did, great and holy Christian and theologian that he was.

And now, very finally, a few words about the Acts of the Apostles. They are written by St Luke as a follow-on from his gospel – uniquely among the gospel writers he tells us something of the story of the churches out of which the gospels came. And if you read the Acts immediately after reading his gospel they do set the story of Jesus and his disciples very much in the context of the church's early story in a way the other three do not – indeed, only Matthew shows any systematic interest in the life of the church and only his gospel uses the word translated church, a

word that is spattered all over the epistles. Above all, they insist that this is a great story which moves from Jerusalem, to Judea and to Samaria and to the ends of the earth, well at least to Rome where it ends with Paul under house arrest preaching the gospel freely nonetheless. Luke is proud of the story and no doubt hopes that his fellow-believers and interested enquirers will also be inspired and encouraged by it. It is, to my mind, an extremely exciting work, full of interest, telling historical detail, great characters, moving scenes which have become fundamental to the identity of Christianity – Pentecost, the Martyrdom of Stephen, the Conversion of St Paul to name only a few. There have been varying estimates among scholars of the historical reliability of Acts – but in recent times as notable a historian of the ancient world as Robin Lane Fox has commended it very highly from that point of view.

I said that, to end with, I would have a bit of fun with the matter of dating the gospels. So, let me leave you with a question I cannot answer to show that one must not be too rigid about such matters. Acts ends, as I said, with Paul preaching the gospel in Rome. And yet, if the dating scheme I mentioned earlier is right, it was written in the 80s, some considerable time after Paul's martyrdom at Rome in the early 60s under the Emperor Nero. Is it really conceivable if Acts was written then that it could fail to mention Paul's death at the hands of Nero? And if it isn't wouldn't that mean that it would have had to be written say by 60AD and wouldn't that make Luke much earlier, Matthew too and Mark, maybe by twenty years or so? If you have been, thanks for listening!