

Reflections on Gospel Images of Jesus

The Christmas feast of the birth of Christ leads us to thoughts of the entire Jesus event, its process and its meaning for us. The following are short reflections on aspects of the images of Jesus presented in the four Gospels. They are by no means comprehensive but focus on select key issues. Keeping this to two pages limits what I can say.

If you take the time to read any of the Gospels it's good to bear in mind that each of the writers is assembling in retrospect facets of the life and mission of Jesus that they believe are important for their community. This accounts for the many differences in the four portraits. The differences are not contradictions but rather give us a broader vision of the person and mission of Jesus.

Matthew

Writing for a mostly Jewish community, probably outside Palestine in the 80s, Matthew is presenting a figure who is the fulfilment of Hebrew prophecy. He is at pains to show that far from attempting to dismantle the law and tradition of Moses, Jesus is embracing and reinforcing it.

Matthew shows that in his prophetic and teaching role Jesus is wisdom in person and deserves to be listened to. Hence the importance of the wise men who are neither Jewish in faith nor Israelite by birth and yet are the first, outside the family, to come to faith in Jesus. Authentic wisdom recognises authentic truth. Here is Matthew presenting Jesus as a universal figure of wisdom and understanding. And later he will portray Jesus' teaching and parables as practical examples of wisdom and serenity at work.

Matthew's Gospel is saturated with references to the Hebrew Scriptures making it clear that Jesus is the summit of that ancient Jewish tradition. Matthew's genealogy of Jesus is designed to show us his unique Jewish background and heritage. In the Transfiguration scene Matthew shows Jesus totally at home in his beloved Judaism chatting with Moses and Elijah – Moses the great prophet and lawmaker, and Elijah, a towering prophetic figure who showed faultless loyalty to God and who, in Jewish tradition, would return to introduce the Messiah. In this scene Jesus is with kindred spirits who pay him due homage.

Mark

This is the first Gospel out of the four to be written. Even a surface reading of the three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) will make us aware that Luke and Matthew have borrowed from Mark. There are occasions where Mark explains Jewish customs for his community, indicating that he was writing for a mixed Jewish and non-Jewish audience.

Mark focuses on Jesus as a teacher or rabbi who explains the law with a kind of authority that is more convincing than the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees. Like John, Jesus teaches about the reign of God and what it takes to be part of that world of God. He portrays Jesus as Israel's Messiah and Son of God, but what stands out in his portrait is that Jesus is a suffering Messiah whose death is for others. This is significant because there is no tradition in Judaism of a suffering Messiah.

Mark is the first of the Gospels to show Jesus' mastery over evil and the figure of Satan. The exorcisms explain his rejection of Satan and the power of God's reign over evil. Mark gives us an apocalyptic view of the mission of Jesus with his focus on the themes of judgment, the end of the world, and the coming of God's reign or kingdom, which is preceded by suffering in this present time.

Mark presents the Galilean women who followed Jesus from the beginning as disciples and providers – not just followers but actual. It was unusual for the names of individual women to be preserved, but Mark has done this to show their significance in the mission of Jesus.

Luke

It's important to keep in mind that Luke's literary effort is made up of two parts: the Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles. His story of Jesus anticipates the story of the church in Acts. Luke is the only writer who tells us he has done the research, studied written resources and interviewed elders. He's telling us he has been thorough. He's also telling us that inspiration is not hearing voices or having visions.

One stand-out feature of Luke's Gospel is his focus on Jesus reaching out to the poor, the lowly and the disadvantaged. His infancy narrative introduces Mary and Joseph, Elizabeth and Zachariah as lower class people and this makes it clear that God has chosen such folk to carry out the divine plan.

In addition, it is the poorest of the poor that Luke puts forward as the first to hear the good news and come to faith in Jesus. In Jesus' day shepherds had a very low reputation. City folk regarded them with suspicion and social disapproval. Their coming to Jesus demonstrates their faith and sets the tone for Luke's Gospel that goodness cannot be measured by possessions, social status or natural ability. Notice that in both Gospels the shepherds and the wise men do not occur again. They serve their symbolic roles in the Infancy Narratives and leave the stage altogether.

Throughout his Gospel Luke will show Jesus reaching out to the poor, touching and healing the untouchable, restoring the lost, and paying attention to the socially insignificant. Luke is unique in the way he occasionally pairs an incident involving a male with a situation featuring a woman. For instance, the healing of a possessed man is followed by the healing of Simon's mother in law; the shepherd loses a sheep and goes out to look for it, after that a woman loses a coin and searches for it. Jesus cures the Centurion's servant and straight after raises the widow of Nain's son to life.

Writing for a mostly non-Jewish Christian community Luke points out that the Jewish Jesus stands for the salvation of everyone, Jews and non-Jews alike. The parable of the Good Samaritan throws a light on a man who doesn't have a prejudiced bone in his body. Everyone is a worthy human being deserving of attention and compassion. Compassion is the keyword in Luke's writing.

John

All Christians have noticed over the centuries that John's Gospel is significantly different from the three Synoptics but, sadly, not many have been given a satisfactory explanation of the differences. The church Father, Clement of Alexandria (c.150-215 AD) described this Gospel as a 'spiritual' work, that focuses on bringing out the deeper, mystical and spiritual meaning of Jesus' words and actions.

The three Synoptics organised their Gospels in chronological order, whereas John arranged the events in Jesus' adult life around the Jewish festivals. Why? In order to show how Jesus fulfils the spiritual message and impact of each festival. For instance, Jesus refers to himself as the Bread of Life in John 6 as he provides food for the crowd and is speaking during the festival of Passover, when the Jews celebrate their ancestors getting *manna* in the desert. Every word coming from the mouth of Jesus is true spiritual food and drink.

In John 7 Jesus goes to Jerusalem and talks about giving the people eternal water, i.e., the Spirit. This is during the festival of Booths (*Sukkot*), which commemorates the Israelites in the desert erecting booths for shelter. Water drawn from a well in *Sukkot* symbolises life, blessing and God's care of the people. Jesus had already told the Samaritan woman at the well that he was the source of the water of life.

John is not really interested in connecting the events in the mission of Jesus in chronological order. The spiritual significance of these events is far more important. Again, the Synoptics describe the Last Supper as a Passover meal, but in John the meal occurs before Passover. Why? Because John is presenting Jesus as the Passover Lamb and the lambs were ritually slaughtered the night before Passover. This is not a contradiction. It is John emphasising that Jesus' death marks a saving event, just as Passover marked the saving event of the Israelites under Moses escaping from Egypt.

The reaction of Jesus to the moneychangers in the Temple occurs at the beginning of his ministry in John. But in the Synoptics it occurs at the end, just before his arrest. Did the event happen twice? No. In John it introduces us to the prophetic Jesus and tells us what he is about. In the Synoptics this action is the last straw that marked Jesus out for arrest and execution. The Gospel writers have different points to make.

There are really two levels in John. There is a human reality and there is the higher level of a spiritual reality in which symbolism and the spirit of the Hebrew Scriptures come together to point to a deeper significance. It is not unlike the way the arts – music, poetry, sculpture, painting, dance etc – work on our deeper sensitivities to produce in us a transforming uplift to a spiritual realm.