

Fasting for Lent?..... Why not try

‘CORNFLAKES’



With no added sugar!

A series of six studies for Lent

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Cornflakes for Lent

Week 1

The Courage to Speak Out.

Week 2

The New Testament — St. Paul.

Week 3

The Synoptic Gospels

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Week 1 - The Courage to Speak Out

We have all heard the famous fable by Hans Christian Anderson concerning the Emperor's suit of clothes. It is a vivid portrayal of the courage which is demanded of the individual who would venture to proclaim the truth as he/she sees it and also the power of conformity.

<Ask someone to read...> *'The Emperor marched in the procession under the beautiful canopy, and all who saw him in the street and out of the windows exclaimed: "Indeed, the Emperor's new suit is incomparable! What a long train he has! How well it fits him!" Nobody wished to let others know he saw nothing, for then he would have been unfit for his office or too stupid. Never were Emperor's clothes more admired.*

"But he has nothing on at all," said a little child at last. "Good heavens! Listen to the voice of an innocent child," said the father, and one whispered to the other what the child had said. "But he has nothing on at all," cried at last the whole people. That made a deep impression upon the Emperor, for it seemed to him that they were right; but he thought to himself, "Now I must bear up to the end." And the chamberlains walked with still greater dignity, as if they carried the train which did not exist.'

It was a child who, perhaps in his innocence, pointed out the gross nature of power and control.

The fable serves to remind us that the Christian Church does not always encourage a critical, questioning attitude. Throughout its history, many who have questioned the teaching of the church have been persecuted, tortured or martyred. From the 4th century when Christian beliefs were enshrined in the Nicene Creed, The Apostles Creed and later the Creed of St. Athanasius, the persecution of heretics became a characteristic of the Church's mission; one has only to think of the times of the Spanish Inquisition or the public burning of so-called heretics in the City of Oxford, that great place of learning, to remember how wickedly the Christian Church has behaved. Do we wonder why?

The creed of St. Athanasius is a typical and vicious response to the threat of heresy which existed in those times and which still prevails in many parts of the church. It begins with.....

*'Whosoever will be saved; before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholic Faith. Which Faith except everyone do keep whole and undefiled; **without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.**'*

It goes on to state *'...and the Catholic Faith is.....'*

<Leader starter comments> – Circulate copy of St. Athanasius Creed with introduction and/or BCP prayer book. As Christians, in what sense do we believe the Jesus is our Saviour? **<discuss>**

In this 21st century, the persecution of heretics is not physically violent as in the past. Bishop John Robinson, author of 'Honest to God', published in 1963, and more recently Bishop David Jenkins, both of the Church of England and Bishop John Shelby Spong of the Episcopal Church of the USA, have suffered verbal abuse from many Church leaders and lay members. The Swiss theologian, Hans Küng, was stripped of the authority to teach Catholic theology by Pope John Paul II in 1979 for questioning the concept of papal infallibility, the doctrine of the 'Virgin Birth', and the doctrine of the 'Immaculate Conception', the latter of which claims that Mary herself was immaculately conceived by a mother who is not named in either the New Testament or in the Old Testament. Küng also suggests that Jesus may have been mistaken regarding the coming of the end of the world (referred to as 'the Apocalypse'). Chapter 13 of Mark's Gospel is often called 'the little Apocalypse' and in it, Jesus is quoted as saying that the end of the world will come during the lifetime of the disciples. (*Good News Bible, MarkCh.13 Verse 14.*)

<Leader starter comments>: - Hans Küng makes four highly controversial statements here. He questions the infallibility of the Pope; the doctrine of the Virgin Birth, the Immaculate Conception of Mary herself and the fact that Jesus was in error to suggest that those present would witness the Apocalypse. **<Discuss>**

Persecution is not reserved for Theologians. Scientists have also suffered greatly whenever it was seen by the Church hierarchy that scientific discoveries appeared to challenge Christian doctrine. Three famous examples are Galileo, Darwin, and Pythagoras.

Galileo. He was born on 15 February 1564 near Pisa, the son of a musician. In 1609, he heard about the invention of the telescope in Holland. Without having seen an example, he constructed a superior version and made many astronomical discoveries. These included mountains and valleys on the surface of the moon, sunspots; the four largest moons of the planet Jupiter and the phases of the planet Venus. His work on astronomy made him famous and he was appointed court mathematician in Florence.

It was in 1614, that Galileo was accused of heresy for his support of the Copernican theory that the sun was at the centre of the solar system. This was revolutionary at a time when most people believed the Earth was in this central position. In 1616, he was forbidden by the church from teaching or advocating these theories.

In 1632, Galileo was again condemned for heresy after his book 'Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems' was published. This set out the arguments for and against the Copernican theory in the form of a discussion between two men. Today we may think this a fair enough topic for discussion but no, Galileo was summoned to appear before the Inquisition in Rome. He was convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment, later reduced to permanent house arrest at his villa in Arcetri, south of Florence. He was also forced to publicly withdraw his support for Copernican theory.

Charles Darwin, who laid the foundations of the theory of evolution and transformed the way we think about the natural world is still regarded as a heretic by many Christian fundamentalists and his teaching is prohibited in many schools in the USA. The Vatican stated its official position in a 1950 papal encyclical, which held that evolution was not inconsistent with Catholic teaching.

Pythagoras, who incidentally was believed to have been born of a virgin, is well known as the father of mathematics and the discoverer of the famous right angled triangle theorem. He also founded a cult called the 'Pythagoreans'. Their basic creed claimed that every physical entity could be defined in terms of whole numbers. One of their members had the courage to raise the question of the length of the diagonal of a square. A unit square has a diagonal of length equal to the square root of two. (This is an irrational number ie: it cannot be expressed exactly in terms of whole numbers). The questioner was drowned for his sins! (*'The Emperor has no clothes on....!'*)

The persecution of those who have the courage of their convictions has a long history. Whenever old ideas are challenged, whether theological or scientific, many religious people react with anger and sometimes, as we know, with great cruelty. Even within the loving and forgiving church community there are many who refuse to deal with change.

Whenever the Church wields power over people instead of carrying out a service to them; whenever its institutions, creeds and laws become ends in themselves; whenever its leaders hand out personal opinions and requests as if they were divine precepts and directives; whenever these things happen, the Church's mission is impaired and betrayed. Objecting to such abuse of power and authority is however a task which requires both faith and courage.

Last week we considered the Church's response to those who have challenged its teaching from the very beginning. We ended with the statement ***'Whenever the Church wields power over people instead of carrying out a service to them; whenever its institutions, creeds and laws become ends in themselves; whenever its leaders hand out personal opinions and requests as if they were divine precepts and directives; whenever these things happen, the Church's mission is impaired and betrayed. Objecting to such abuse of power and authority is however a task which requires both faith and courage'***.

This week, following that same line of thought, we consider the following concerns:-

Is the church moving in directions the Council never intended? Was the Council a big mistake? Has the church lost its sense of tradition? Does church unity demand uniformity? Is pluralism harming the church? Are mixed loyalties dividing the church? Who exercises legitimate authority in the church?

These are not the headlines in today's religious press or on television. In fact they are all taken from the letters of St. Paul, with some additional material from the Acts of the Apostles. Obviously St. Paul is not referring to the Second Vatican Council, which was only held in 1962, he is considering the many challenges considered by the Council of Jerusalem in about 50AD (see Acts 15 & Gal.2) and his own subsequent mission to the Gentiles. In his New Testament letters, Paul writes of some very strong personalities. Every person and group involved is absolutely convinced that their position is firmly rooted in the authentic message of Jesus Christ. Down the ages to this present time, strong personalities and groups are at odds with both the teaching of the church and those who challenge its teaching, sometimes in very serious conflict.

Leader starter comments Check biblical references Acts 5 and Galatians Ch 2, made in this section. It makes for interesting thought and comment. If you are on the internet, try 'googling' 'Council of Jerusalem' – makes fascinating reading!

Discussion: There has always been question and challenge as to who is leading the church today – and where are we being led? Should we question or challenge long held views? Does church unity demand uniformity? Who exercises legitimate authority in the church? Do we accept the authority of the church as represented by our bishops and Archbishops?

LEADER - We have looked at some of the challenges thrown down by St. Paul, but before we go on, We need to consider what we know about him

Suggestions from group.

Leader to 'roundup'

We know that St. Paul was the first of the New Testament writers – he died in AD 62 before the first Gospel was written.

A close reading of his writings – often called 'Pauline material' - reveals that for him the resurrection of Jesus had nothing to do with the later stories that portrayed Easter in terms of the physical resuscitation of Jesus. Resurrection, for Paul, had to do first with God affirming Jesus' life (Rom.1: 1 – 4), and then with God opening the minds and eyes of the disciples to see who Jesus was – an experience that caused Paul to say, "Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?" (1 Cor. 9:1). Paul also said that God would raise us in the same way that God raised Jesus (1 Cor. 15: 1 f). There are no miracles recorded in the Pauline material. In fact miracles recorded in later writings, do not appear to be part of the earliest memory the church had of Jesus. St Paul had, for example, little to say about the birth of Jesus, save one reference to Jesus being 'born of a woman' (Galatians 4:4). Hence it is unlikely that St. Paul knew anything of the 'virgin birth' of Jesus or if he did, he certainly didn't think it to be of great importance.

We know also that before his conversion St. Paul was known as Saul of Tarsus, brought up as an orthodox Jew. The religion from which Paul was converted is described in the Acts of the Apostles as the "straitest sect", We see it through his eyes as a rather repellent puritanical system, severely legalistic and ridden with nationalist prejudice. Paul describes himself as a Pharisee; but not all Pharisees were as strict as he was. It appears that

this Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus, was engaged by the religious hierarchy of the day, to seek out the groups of people who were meeting together in one another's houses to share in the teaching of one Jesus of Nazareth, whom they proclaimed as the Messiah. He was to report his findings to headquarters. Such groups were regarded as subversive and dangerous not only to the High Priest but also to the Roman occupying army. Saul however experienced a moment of blinding vision whilst on the road to Damascus; an experience which changed him forever. His conversion is reported by St. Luke in the 'Acts of the Apostles'. Consequently, Saul, now renamed Paul, reacted against the fundamentalism of his youth in some extreme ways.

Leader starter comment. We know St. Paul was a strong character, dedicating his life's ministry to spreading the news about Jesus and His teaching. As we go on we find that his methods were quite different from those of St. Peter. How do we regard those whose views differ from our own? Can people change? As the church evolves, how do we view change? Is it a problem? If so, why?

Discuss

For some years, Paul had been a leading member of the church in Antioch, and the mission there had been successful in converting some Gentiles (non-Jews) to the Christian faith. However, the earliest incidents in church history reveal an uncomfortable tension between St. Paul, in Antioch, and those still working in Jerusalem, namely St's. Peter, James and John. Their mission in Jerusalem which included Jesus' family, his brothers James, Jude and others, disapproved of Paul's liberal attitude to the gentiles. The question arose as to how much of the Jewish Law these gentile converts needed to keep. Paul had adopted a liberal policy – roughly speaking they had to keep the moral commandments, but he turned a blind eye to the ritual laws. This decision then led to a series of difficult incidents, which Paul records in the letter he wrote to the churches in Galatia, central Turkey. The first of these incidents happened a dozen or so years after his conversion.

'False brethren' were sent to Antioch from Jerusalem, 350 miles away, as spies. They reported the lax ways of the Antioch church to the Jerusalem apostles, who wanted proper order to be maintained. Paul saw trouble coming and took Barnabas and Titus with him to negotiate a settlement. He saw James (Jesus' brother), Peter and John, and he speaks of them in rather sarcastic tones. ('those who are reputed to be something ...'). The Jerusalem meeting was in fact friendly, and the cracks were papered over (rather like General Synod), but the tension continued. (Gal. 2: 11 – 14).

'Fourteen years later I went back to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. I went because God revealed to me that I should go. In a private meeting with the leaders, I explained the gospel message that I preach to the gentiles. I did not want my work in the past or in the present to be a failure. (see Galatians 2 : 1 – 4).

Group check Galatians references

Paul's letters reflect his own experience which was at the heart of the revolution which Christ wrought in religion. In the long run, the teaching of Paul won, and Christians today do not have to observe the Mosaic Laws which include eating kosher meat or males being circumcised.

Although the issue about Jewish practice has faded away in the Christian church, the point about interpreting the scriptures has not – neither have the divisions between different denominations of the church. A visit to Ulster should open the eyes a bit. The story of the Englishman who visited Belfast is symbolic, if apocryphal. A reporter asked him, 'Are you a catholic or a protestant?' After a moment the man replied, 'I am an atheist.' To which the reporter continued, 'Yes, but are you a catholic atheist or a protestant atheist?'. There are some divisions which persist for years if not centuries. The Jewish Christians in Jerusalem (Petrine – Peter) continued to hate the Christians from Antioch (Pauline) and vice versa. The issue of the Law was not

the only difference between the parties. To understand this and other issues and how they arose, is to understand the New Testament.

Leader starter comments Why has there always been dissention in the church. Is it because we are all different and see things from our own point of view?

Regardless of all the dearly held beliefs and stories about Jesus, can we agree with St. Paul that the most important message in the New Testament is that Resurrection had to do first with God affirming Jesus' life (Rom.1: 1 – 4), and then with God opening the minds and eyes of the disciples to see who Jesus was

Discuss or Leader wind up:

Next week we will be looking at the Synoptic Gospels

Chronology

The resurrection of Jesus. (31 AD)	The event which gave rise to the Christian Faith.
The Conversion of St. Paul (35 AD)	Reported in Acts.
Paul, Letters to the Churches (49 – 62 AD)	Only those called 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Romans, 1Thessalonians, Philemon and Phillipians are without dispute Paul's writings.
Gospel of Mark (65 AD)	Most scholars agree that Mark's was the first gospel to be written.
Destruction of the Temple (70 AD)	In the year 66 AD the Jews of Judea rebelled against their Roman masters. In response, the Emperor Nero dispatched an army under the generalship of Vespasian to restore order. By the year 68, resistance in the northern part of the province had been eradicated and the Romans turned their full attention to the subjugation of Jerusalem. That same year, the Emperor Nero died by his own hand, creating a power vacuum in Rome. In the resultant chaos, Vespasian was declared Emperor and returned to the Imperial City. It fell to his son, Titus, to lead the remaining army in the assault on Jerusalem.
Gospel of Matthew (82 AD)	Composed largely of St. Mark's material with modifications and additions; notably the birth narrative and the teaching of Jesus.
Gospel of Luke & Acts of the Apostles (90 AD)	Also, most of St. Mark's gospel plus another different birth narrative and teaching of Jesus.
Gospel of John (100 AD)	Quite different in style and content from the earlier Gospels. It is structured around the seven signs of the Kingdom and the 'I AM' sayings which are not the <i>Ipsissima Verba</i> of Jesus.

There is no doubt that the Bible is a library comprising a wide range of literary genre. The Old Testament includes Myth, Legend, Poetry, History, Songs, Prophecy (insight not foresight) Law and Apocalyptic literature. The New Testament contains Gospels and Letters which draw heavily on the Old Testament material. In particular, the New Testament writers used themes and stories from the Old Testament in order to express their conviction that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah. Clearly such a wide spectrum of writing cannot be interpreted in a uniform way which ignores the particular literary genre. If the Bible is to be interpreted in a way which is understandable and credible to 21st century people care must be taken to appreciate the 'setting in life' - the times in which it was written.

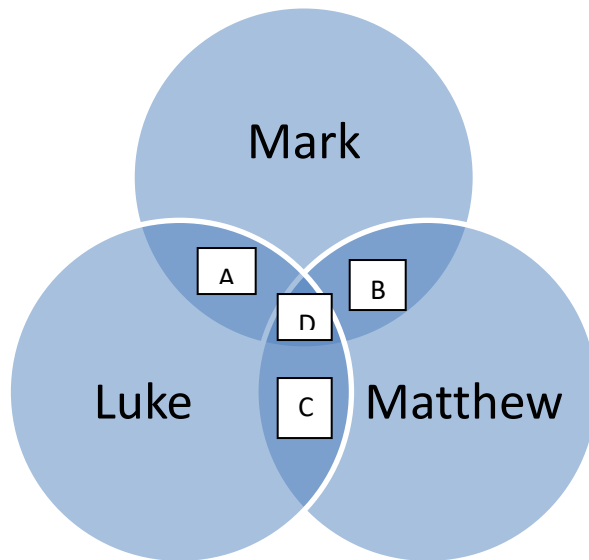
Leader – perhaps a few minutes could be spent looking at this chart

The 'Synoptic' Gospels.

The gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke are known as the **Synoptic Gospels** because they include many of the same stories, often in the same sequence, and sometimes exactly the same wording. Most scholars believe that these gospels share the same point of view and are clearly linked. The term synoptic comes from the Greek *syn*, meaning "together", and *optic*, meaning "seen". The synoptic gospels are the primary source for historical information about Jesus. According to the majority of biblical scholars, Mark's was the first gospel to be written. Matthew and Luke then used Mark as a source, as well as a hypothetical sayings gospel known as Q. Matthew and Luke also included unique material, and the sources for this material are designated M and L, respectively.

This sounds very complicated but the following 'Venn' diagram may make it clearer. *The areas of the diagram are not meant to be proportional to the volume of text.*

THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS



A + D: – Text shared by Mark & Luke. <i>Mark ∩ Luke</i>	‘Whoever is not against us is for us’ Mark 9: 38 – 40, Luke 9:49 – 50.
B + D: – Text shared by Mark & Matthew. <i>Mark ∩ Matthew</i>	Jesus feeds 4,000 people Matt. 15: 32 – 39, Mark 8: 1 – 10
D + C :- Text shared by Luke & Matthew <i>Luke ∩ Matthew</i>	Jesus calls the first disciples Matt. 4: 18-22; Mark 1: 16-20; Luke 5:1-11
C – Text shared by Luke & Matthew but not Mark. (Q).	The Birth of Jesus Luke 2: 1 – 7, Matthew 1: 18 – 24 The teaching of Jesus Matt. 5: 1 – 30; 38 – end and chapters 6&7.
D – Text shared by Mark, Matthew & Luke. <i>Mark ∩ Luke ∩ Matthew</i>	Preaching of John the Baptist Mark 1: 1 – 8, Luke 3: 1 – 18, Matthew 3:1 – 12 and ‘Little Apocalypse’– Mark 13; Matt. 24; Luke 21 .

Leader – perhaps time can be spent looking at this diagram and explanation then invite comments

St. Mark’s gospel – the first to be written - is not much interested in the earthly life of Jesus – there is no account of his birth and little reference to his family or his genealogy. He tells us that the mother of Jesus was Mary (Mark 6:3), and that his brothers were called James, Joseph, Judas and Simon (naturally any sisters were not named in Mark, nor was his ‘earthly’ father, nor did Mark say Jesus was a carpenter).. St. Mark’s main concern is with the manner of his death and his right to be called the Son of God. This status as the divine Son of God was demonstrated in his power over the works of Satan. There are no resurrection appearances except those referred to in later additions to the gospel. The gospel in its earliest form ends at verse 16:8. *‘So they went out and ran from the tomb, distressed and terrified. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.’*

Read the following sections of Mark’s Gospel and compare with the parallel accounts in Matthew and Luke.

A Mother’s request; Mark 10 : 35 – 45; Matthew 20: 20 – 28. [B]

A Canaanite Woman; Mark 7: 24 – 30; Matthew 15: 21 - 28. [B]

Healing of a Demon Possessed man; Mark 5: 1 – 20; Matt. 8: 28 – 34; Luke 8: 26 – 29 [D]

‘Little Apocalypse’; Mark 13; Matt. 24; Luke 21 [D]

Bible Study Exercises.... Read/Cross check/Discuss

Leader – if time allows

The earliest Christians expected Christ’s return and the establishment of God’s kingdom within one or two generations, so from their point of view it was natural to regard the three stages of Christ’s work, his earthly life, his present Lordship in heaven, and his future coming, as three acts of a single drama. Since the first Christians were all Jews, they naturally set this drama against the background of the Old Testament and saw it as the final phase of the salvation history of the Jews.

The early Christians held the following view of things, like the late Jewish view on which it was largely based:-

- 1 That the universe had been brought into being by a single act of creation by God
- 2 That God had a definite purpose for it
- 3 That throughout history God had exerted pressure on his creation to conform to that purpose
- 4 That under the influence of various powers it had diverged from that purpose
- 5 That at some point God would intervene to overthrow these powers and bring about a state of affairs that he had originally intended.
- 6 That this final state of affairs would involve for certain chosen people a life of unending bliss in God’s presence.

Leader starter comment Fact: God is unchanging. The various pictures of Him as conjured up in both the Old and the New Testaments are our projections of Him **seeming** to change, from Creator to a Judgemental God, a God of Wrath, a God of Anger and finally a God of Love.

Discuss What motivates us to love God, neighbour, and enemy more whole-heartedly?

Next week we will have a bible study comparing similarities
between the Old and the New Testaments.

Week 4

A Comparative Bible Study

There have been many great spiritual leaders, many great teachers and many great prophets in the history of the Jewish nation. The scriptures bear witness to them. They include Moses, Joshua, Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah etc. But none of these had been worshipped as Jesus is been worshipped - as the divine Son of God. Jesus became, in the eyes of many devout Jews during those 30 years after his death, a person of such stature that he could only be adequately described in terms of the sacred stories from the past. Hence, for example, Herod's massacre of the innocent children at the time of Jesus' birth (Matt. 2: 16 – 18); see also (Jer. 31:15), reflected the similar story from (Exodus 1:22) in which Pharaoh did the same in an attempt to kill the child Moses. Hence Jesus is portrayed as the new Moses.

Matthew 2:16-18

¹⁶ *When Herod realized that the visitors from the East had tricked him, he was furious. He gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its neighbourhood who were two years old and younger—this was done in accordance with what he had learned from the visitors about the time when the star had appeared.* ¹⁷ *In this way what the prophet Jeremiah had said came true:*

¹⁸ *A sound is heard in Ramah,
the sound of bitter weeping.
Rachel is crying for her children;
she refuses to be comforted,
for they are dead.*

Exodus 1:19-22

¹⁹ *They answered,*

The Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they give birth easily, and their babies are born before either of us gets there.²⁰⁻²¹ Because the midwives were God-fearing, God was good to them and gave them families of their own. And the Israelites continued to increase and become strong.²² Finally the king issued a command to all his people:

Take every newborn Hebrew boy and throw him into the Nile, but let all the girls live.

Further examples from St. Luke illustrate this method of using the Old Testament scriptures to interpret the birth narratives. In Luke 1: 46 f, we have the Magnificat of Mary which is clearly inspired by Hannah's song in 1 Samuel 2 : 1 – 10. And in Luke 2:29 – 32 we have the Nunc Dimittis which is drawn from Isaiah 42: 6 and Isaiah 49 : 6.

Leader: It may be interesting for the group to check these references. To say that the similarities in these stories are coincidences, would be to miss the point of the time and style of writings in the first century.

In Mark's Gospel the story of John the Baptist is introduced by quoting Old Testament prophecy. The quotation shows that Mark was apparently not a careful scholar of the Hebrew Bible. He was probably writing on the basis of a popular quotation already in circulation in Christian communities and did not check his reference very carefully. His main point is quite sound, but he has made two interesting mistakes in presenting it.

In the first place Mark has put together two separate quotations and attributed both to Isaiah. Actually the first quotation seems to be a version of Malachi 3:1, and the second one is from Isaiah 40:3. In Matthew and Luke this error is corrected (Matt. 3:3 and Luke 3:4) ; they use the Malachi quote later but do not identify it with Isaiah. (Matt. 11:10, Luke 7:27)

The Gospels writers were devout men brought up in the Jewish culture. Their style of writing was in the tradition of the times; a style called 'Midrash' (*Midrash is a Hebrew word meaning 'investigate' or 'study'. It is a Jewish method of interpreting biblical stories that go deeper than simply looking at the religious, legal or moral teachings. It fills in many gaps in biblical narratives about personalities and events which are only hinted at in the writings.*) If we have the desire to deepen our understanding of the gospels, we also need to go from 'Sight to Insight'.

If we turn to St. Matthew's and St. Luke's Gospels, we can see how this method is developed extensively by the Gospel writers.

The Gospel of Matthew

Ten times in his Gospel, Matthew uses a formula to introduce a quotation from the Old Testament. The formula is; 'this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet' ... (see 1: 23, 2: 15,17,23, 4:14, 8:17,12:17, 13:35, 21:4,27:9.). These quotations are additions which Matthew has made to his source, Mark. But there are other places in the gospel where we can be almost certain that Matthew has an Old Testament passage in mind as he writes. In Matthew 21: 1 – 5, Jesus sent two disciples to find 'a tethered donkey and a colt with her'. 'This took place to fulfil the prophecy: Say to the daughter of Zion: Look your King comes to you; he is humble, he rides on a donkey and on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden'. This is a quotation from Zechariah 9:9 which Matthew is keen to follow in every detail. It shows that Matthew used Old Testament images to convey his conviction that Jesus was indeed the expected Messiah. Matthew believed that he was describing events which had been foretold by God, in the Old Testament, many years before they happened. There, through the prophets, God had announced before hand what he would do in the last days. Now, with the coming of Jesus, Matthew believed these last days had come, and the events of Jesus' life were the events about which the Old Testament writers had been speaking.

Consider these words taken from 2nd Isaiah and Psalm 22 respectively, probably written during the exile – a time of great suffering for the people of Israel.

Leader comment Would someone like to read Isaiah Ch.53: v. 4ff

'Surely, surely, he hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows'..... 'But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.' (Isa. 53 : 4ff)

Leader comment In Psalm 22 the tormented mind of the psalmist shows the suffering of Israel is proof that the Lord has forsaken his people. With gestures of derision the psalmist's enemies mock his confidence and faith in an almighty God. Hence he begins with those poignant words "*My God, why hast thou forsaken me?*" Would someone like to read Psalm 22....

In all these and other Old Testament texts, the Christian tradition has seen the foreshadowing of Jesus of Nazareth. (e.g. Handel's Messiah) It would be quite wrong, however, to suggest that both 2nd Isaiah and the writer of the Psalm 22 had foresight of the events which happened 500 years later at the death of Jesus Christ. Such a 'magic mentality' is not acceptable in this day and age. What they wrote, they wrote for the people of their generation. Prophets are men of insight not foresight. However, there can be no doubt that in the struggle to find words adequate to describe the devastation felt by the followers of Jesus, the New Testament writers, themselves steeped in the culture and traditions of Judaism, should turn to these Old Testament texts to find imagery and language which seemed to ideally fit the enormity of the events of the passion and death of Jesus. The idea that God should pour out his wrath upon Jesus in order to make him 'pay the price of sin' is as unreasonable as telling a lady suffering the agony of cancer, that God was angry with her, or that the people who were slaughtered in the twin towers on 9/11, were being punished for their sins.

It was natural for the Gospel writers to see the fulfilment of the Old Testament in their first century accounts as they bore witness to Jesus as the one who is to be believed and obeyed. We would not use that method if we were writing a gospel today. Apart from anything else, it would be an insult to present day Jews to imply that their Scriptures were written with the sole intention of foretelling the coming of Christ. Today, if we were charged with the task of writing a Gospel of Jesus, we might show how Jesus fulfilled other laws – moral and spiritual laws, for example. However, it is still possible for us to believe what Matthew believed about Jesus - without expressing it in the way that Matthew expressed it.

Leader starter comments We are not looking to criticise Matthew in looking at his gospel in this way. Rather we are looking to understand why he writes what he writes. If we were to attempt to write the story of Jesus

now, in our own time, where would we draw our information from; our own experiences; our own understanding; our own reading; our church tradition?

Discuss

The Gospel of Luke

When Luke wrote his story, he had before him the Gospel of Mark together with other material; the hypothetical source known as Q, which contains some teaching of Jesus (the beatitudes) and some parables. Other stories of Jesus' ministry might have come through oral tradition. Luke incorporates about half of Mark into his gospel, but Mark was not sufficient for Luke's purposes. The world had moved on in the fifteen or so years since Mark wrote his gospel. A Jewish rebellion had brought disaster on the Holy Land. In the conflict Judea had been conquered and Jerusalem and its Temple destroyed. Christianity had therefore lost its Jewish centre, and by this time most of the first generation of Christian leaders, all of whom were Jews, had died. Chief among these leaders were Peter, Paul and James the brother of Jesus. Christianity was becoming a Gentile movement and so Luke was moved to be an evangelist to the gentile world. Luke was either a gentile himself or possibly a Hellenised (Greek) Jew.

Luke also wrote in a time of tension between the Christian communities and the Roman Empire. When Rome had burned while Nero, the mad emperor, had fiddled (64 AD), a scapegoat was needed. The Christians were an obvious target and many were crucified. Incidentally the violin had not been invented in this period! Also those Jews spread in neighbouring countries (the Diaspora) became even more strict about their adherence to the Law of Moses as they felt threatened by the Christian church.

About the year 81 AD the Emperor Domitian came to power, ruling until the year 96 AD. More persecution followed. It was in this context that Luke wrote to a Roman official he called "most excellent Theophilus" (this name might just refer to any person who was a friend of God). Luke hoped to counter the rising tide of hostility. Christianity, he was stressing, had outgrown its Jewish origin and had become a worldwide religion.

So we see in the birth narrative of his Gospel, Luke has a heavenly host in the sky herald, for all the world to see, the arrival of this child. The old priest, Simeon, announced that this child would be a 'light to lighten the gentiles' as well as 'for glory to thy people Israel'. In the genealogy of this Jesus, Luke had traced his heritage not simply back to Abraham, as Matthew had done, but to Adam, the father of the entire human race. Luke constantly fought against any limiting prejudice that would exclude people of a different race. Perhaps this is why only Luke told the story in which a Samaritan leper, alone out of the ten cleansed, returned to give thanks to Jesus. Also the Parable of the Good Samaritan was a Luke original.

The Christian life, for Luke, was barrier free and beyond language, race, sex, nationality and economics. When the Spirit came and the tongues of fire danced on the heads of the Christians, they found that they could speak to each other across any barrier.

Leader starter comment Realising the different times and thrust of Luke's gospel, does this help us to understand it any better?

Discuss

Next week we will look at the Gospel according to St. John

Week 5

The Gospel of John

We must realise that the Gospel of John is a portrait of Jesus not a photograph. The Fourth Gospel, called by the name 'John', is in many ways the Bible's most profound book. Many biblical scholars have made the study of this book the crown of their academic lives. Its magnificent lines are quoted perhaps more than any other part of Holy Scripture. *'Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me.'* *In my Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?'* Most people have heard these words at some time.

The Gospel contains what is probably the best loved verse of all, *'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life'*. (3:16). The prologue of John's Gospel was once read as the final blessing at every Roman Catholic Mass and at many Anglican services also.

Leader ask someone to read...

'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

The same was in the beginning with God.

All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made.

In him was life; and the life was the light of men.

And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.'

Yet this book presents those who believe the bible to be literally true (Fundamentalists), with some very serious problems. The words of Jesus, coming as they do in elaborate discourses, show evidence of long theological development and therefore cannot possibly have been the literal words of the historical Jesus. In what is called the great high priestly prayer (John: chapter 17) for example, Jesus reportedly says "that they may know thee, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent." It would be strange indeed if Jesus of Nazareth had talked about himself in the third person and in theological terms that did not emerge until the latter part of the first century. In the synoptic Gospels Jesus implored his disciples not to broadcast his divine origin or his secret identity (Mark 8: 27 – 30), (Luke 9: 18 – 21), (Matt. 16:20). In the Fourth Gospel, however, this identity was all but shouted from the rooftops.

The synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) suggest a public ministry for Jesus that lasted just one year, and Jesus came to Jerusalem only for the climax of his life at holy week and Easter. John, however, had Jesus involved in three Passover celebrations, which would imply a two or three year public ministry and he had Jesus go to Jerusalem on several occasions. Indeed, the cleansing of the Temple occurred in John at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, not at the end, as it is in the synoptics.

Leader suggest checking these references

Discuss

It is distressing that, taken literally, this Gospel has fed the dark side of anti-Semitism more than any other part of the Christian Scriptures. On most occasions when the Jews are referred to, the connotation is evil. The Jews are 'from below' – (John 8:23) *"You (the Jews) are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires."* (John 8:44). For Jesus to call the Jews *"children of Satan"* is out of character to the Jesus portrayed in the synoptic Gospels. It is not consistent with the Jesus who said *"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you"*. (Matt. 5:44).

Likewise the saying **'Before Abraham was, 'I Am' (John 8: 58.)**, can only seem outrageous to the Jewish mind of the first century as it does to Jews today.

Does this mean that John's Gospel ought to be abandoned? Certainly not, but to appreciate its beauty and depth requires some careful thought and understanding.

Some people find St. John's picture of Jesus deeply unsatisfactory. John portrays Jesus as someone who knows all that must befall him and as one who is in complete control of his destiny. He has insight into character (2:25), knows Judas will betray him (6:71) and above all knows when his 'hour' is to come. The result is that John's portrait of Jesus, taken literally, tends to make him into a superhuman figure; rather like the character, Clark Kent who is sometimes himself and other times is Superman. Unfortunately, this has the effect of creating an early heresy denying the humanity of Jesus, which John himself would no doubt have been horrified by.

Here we have a paradox: on the one hand it is commonly accepted that the Gospel of John is probably one of the richest mines for spiritual excavation that is to be found in the Christian tradition and on the other hand it is the least literal, least objective piece of literature in the Bible.

Leader starter comment It seems odd that, as is suggested here, this gospel, which contains some well loved verses also includes emotive anti-Semitic views.

Discuss

The 'I Am' sayings.

In the book of Exodus, God had confronted Moses in the wilderness while he was tending the flocks of Jethro, his father in law. In that narrative God's presence was manifested in a bush that burned without being consumed (Exodus 3). God called Moses in that moment to be the divine agent to free the Hebrew people from their enslavement in Egypt. Moses argued and twisted in the wind to escape this demand. In one of his escape attempts, Moses demanded to know God's name (Exodus 3:13ff). God responded with a Hebrew phrase, the best translation of which is "I am who I am". "Tell them 'I Am' sent you".

The author of the Fourth Gospel took that story and made it a key to his interpretation of Jesus. Jesus was to be understood as part of the great "I Am" of God. It was a startling and provocative claim. In case John's readers missed the point, he emphasised it in the conversation in chapter 8:57-59. 'They said to him "you are not even fifty years old – and you have seen Abraham?" "I am telling you the truth," said Jesus, "Before Abraham was born, "I Am". Then they picked up stones to throw at him," Also in Ch. 8:24 'I am who I am'.

The 'I Am' claim for Jesus was carried on throughout the entire text of the Gospel.

"I Am the bread of life" (6:35)

"I Am the light of the world". (8:12)

"I Am the door of the sheep". (10:7)

"I Am the good shepherd". (10:11).

"I Am the way, the truth and the life" (14:6).

"I Am the vine". ((15:5)

"I Am the resurrection" (11:25).

"I Am" was the constant claim of Christ in John's gospel. He was 'the Word' who was with God in the beginning, 'the Word' who was made flesh and dwelt among us. In the "I Am" sayings of his Gospel, John claimed for Jesus the very name of God.

Leader starter comment How do we feel about this challenge? Is John really saying 'Jesus is the bread of life'; Jesus is the light of the world? etc, but attributes the title 'I Am' to stress for us the true position of Jesus Christ? Should we continue to assume, or give the impression that the '**I Am**' sayings in the fourth gospel are the actual words of Jesus?

Discuss

Next week is the final session and will be a mixture of Music and Medication
on the Cross of Jesus

Week 6

The Cross

Leader This last session of our Lent Course will be quite different from the others. We have lit a candle – the symbol of Jesus, the Light of the World. We will read scripture, listen to music and meditate. We will need two readers, one for Isaiah and one for Psalm 22.

Leader to play ‘Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord.

Then someone reads the following from Isaiah Ch 53:

³He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

⁴Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.

⁵But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.

⁶All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Leader to play ‘He was despised’ from the Messiah. Hold silence for a little while at the end then

Someone reads the following from Psalm 22

¹My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring?

⁷All they that see me laugh me to scorn: they shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying,

⁸He trusted on the LORD that he would deliver him: let him deliver him, seeing he delighted in him.

¹¹Be not far from me; for trouble is near; for there is none to help.

¹⁴I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint: my heart is like wax; it is melted in the midst of my bowels.

¹⁵My strength is dried up like a potsherd; and my tongue cleaveth to my jaws; and thou hast brought me into the dust of death.

¹⁶For dogs have compassed me: the assembly of the wicked have enclosed me: they pierced my hands and my feet.

¹⁸They part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture.

¹⁹But be not thou far from me, O LORD: O my strength, haste thee to help me.

Leader play ‘Comfort Ye’ from Handel’s Messiah.

Hold silence for a while. Follow with:-

Rev. Ray Eveleigh, author of this course, remembers that on one of his first pastoral visits early in his ministry, he met a lady who was suffering from spinal cancer. She was in considerable pain most of the time. As he sat with her with little to say, she asked why God was punishing her. “What have I done to deserve this?” she asked. He tried to assure her that God was not a punishing God, but a loving God. Whether that comforted her he never knew. What he did know was that he had a firm conviction that God loved her and that therefore the idea that the cancer was a punishment from God was a contradiction.

Many years later, as he stood on the viewing platform at Ground Zero in New York, He heard the same cry from the lips of many Americans standing nearby. “What have we done to deserve this?” “Why is God punishing his people?” It was just a few weeks after the planes had demolished the twin towers and the smell of smoke and death was still in the air. Rev. Ray wondered at that time why so many people seemed to have the same response to tragedy *‘why has God done this to us?’*

It was over 500 years before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth that the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed. It is difficult for us to imagine what a tragedy and suffering this was for the people of Israel. This proud nation, convinced of their role in history as the people of God, believed that the Holy God Himself was present in the Holy of Holies in the Temple. But the Temple was in ruins, the people massacred and survivors carried off as slaves in Babylon. This caused a severe crisis of faith. “How could God do this to us?” Jerusalem has fallen, the nation is in exile in Babylon, and Cyrus the liberator is on the horizon. In 2nd Isaiah, the prophet depicts Israel as the perfect servant of God; this servant proclaims the true faith and suffers to atone for the sins of his people, but God exalts him at the end.

Thinking of the words we heard from Psalm 22, it is possible that this psalm also originated during the exile which was a period of great suffering and despair for the people of Israel. He begins the psalm with those poignant words “My God, why hast thou forsaken me?” To the tormented mind of the psalmist the suffering of Israel is proof that the Lord has forsaken his people. With gestures of derision the psalmist’s enemies mock his confidence and faith in an almighty God.” He cries out ‘...For dogs have compassed me: the assembly of the wicked have enclosed me: they pierced my hands and my feet.

Leader to play ‘Surely, surely he hath borne our griefs’ chorus from The Messiah

Leader to repeat the words ‘Surely, surely, he hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows’..... ‘But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.’ (Isa.Ch. 53 : 4ff)

The Christian tradition has always seen the foreshadowing of Jesus of Nazareth in these and various others Old Testament texts. What both 2nd Isaiah and the writer of the Psalm 22 wrote, they wrote for the people of their generation. It would be quite wrong however to suggest that they had foresight of the events which happened 500 years later at the death of Jesus Christ. Such a magic mentality is not acceptable in this day and age. Prophets are men of insight not foresight. However there can be no doubt that in the struggle to find words adequate to describe the devastation felt by the followers of Jesus, the new testament writers, themselves steeped in the culture and traditions of Judaism, should turn to these old testament texts to find imagery and language which seemed to ideally fit the enormity of the events of the passion and death of Jesus. The idea that God should pour out his wrath upon Jesus in order to make him ‘pay the price of sin’ is as unreasonable as telling the lady who was suffering the agony of cancer that God was similarly angry with her or that the people who were slaughtered at 9/11 were being punished for their sins.

Leader starter comment Do we have any thoughts on why some people suffer? Why does God allow it?

Discuss

It may not be appropriate for us in the 21st century to interpret the passion of Jesus in terms of metaphors and poetry from first century Palestine. But one thing is surely certain; there must have been something about him that was so powerful that it seemed appropriate for his disciples to portray him in terms of the sacred symbols of their worship and heritage, and the myths of their messianic hopes, magnified to supernatural proportions. There was something about him that caused them to conclude that the God in whom they believed was present in and with the Jesus they had known and followed throughout his ministry.

Leader We end this session with a reading from St. Mark’s version of that turning point in human history; the crucifixion of the Son of Man.

And when they came to a place called Gol'gotha (which means the place of a skull), they offered him wine to drink, mingled with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. And when they had crucified him, they divided his garments among them by casting lots; then they sat down and kept watch over him there. And over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus the King of the Jews." Then two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left. And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." So also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him; for he said, 'I am the Son of God.'" And the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way.

Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, la'ma sabach-tha'ni?" that is, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" And some of the bystanders hearing it said, "This man is calling Eli'jah." 27.48 And one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with vinegar, and put it on a reed, and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Eli'jah will come to save him." And Jesus cried again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit

Leader lead closing prayers and blessing, then extinguishes candle
