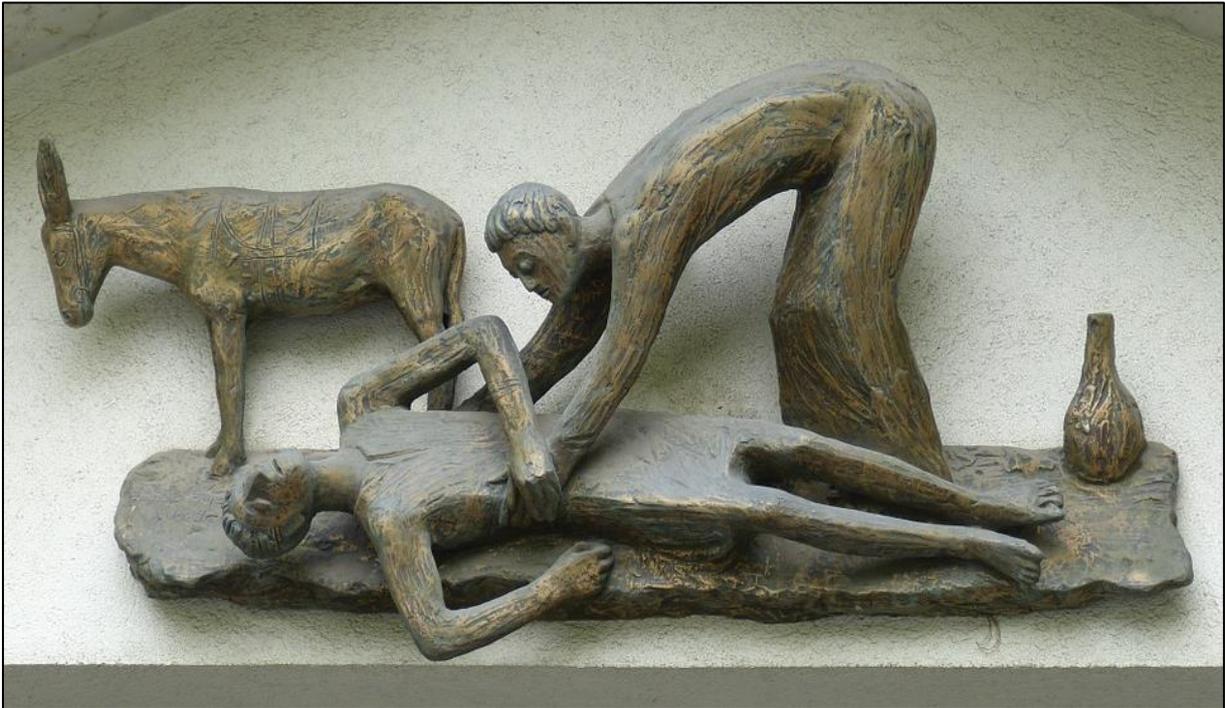


ECHOES OF GOD: JOURNEYING WITH THE WORD OF GOD



Week Six: The Gospels

The Gospels give us four pictures of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. The inspired authors look back through the history of God's chosen people for the ideas that help them to understand what they had experienced in him. They see him as:

- a new Adam (Mark) initiating a reconciled and renewed humanity;
- a new Moses (Matthew) inviting them to step out to encounter God in a renewed covenant as merciful forgiving Abba;
- a new universal saviour (Luke) speaking for the destitute and abandoned, and creating anew through acts of healing;
- a new King (John) living out the full Word of God from the throne of the Cross.

Throughout, the Gospels point to a new way of life, the Kingdom of God, which Jesus embodied. And through which the divinely creative Spirit now abides once more, among the hearts and homes of all God's people, beyond bounds of race and culture.

Main Text: Mark 1:1-13.

Hear the echoes of Creation in Genesis, of Adam among the animals, the liberation of the Exodus through the waters, and the fulfilment of the Prophets.

¹ The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

² As it is written in the prophet Isaiah:

*"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;*

*³ the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,'"*

⁴ John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶ Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸ I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

The Baptism of Jesus

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

The Temptation of Jesus

¹² And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³ He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

(New Revised Standard Version)

Mark's is the first of the written gospels. It's the gospel that establishes the life of Jesus as a story form, from his early career, through the main points of his life and ends with his death. Mark is the one that sets the stage for all the later Christian gospel writings.

For Mark, Jesus is a somewhat enigmatic figure and that's very important to his way of telling the story. Jesus is mysterious, just as the God he reveals "*I am who I am*" was mysterious throughout Israel's history. At times, Jesus seems to keep people from understanding who he really is, such as when he silences the demons who would announce his true identity. When he performs a miracle, he tells people not to say anything to anyone about what he has done. He even takes the disciples away, off into a corner, and teaches them privately so that others won't hear too quickly or perhaps misunderstand the message.

Now, why would Mark tell the story this way? It seems that he uses this theme of secrecy and misunderstanding as a way of re-thinking the image of Jesus. There's something about the previous understandings of Jesus, even within the Christian community, that Mark feels compelled to correct and to give a renewed meaning to. Perhaps, it has something to do with the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. Why had it all happened? What had gone wrong? Why was the beautiful Temple in Jerusalem destroyed? Mark tells the story in such a way as to make sense out of this in the light of the death of Jesus. Mark is doing something similar to what the Prophets and the Psalm writers did in trying to come to terms with the Exile and the destruction of the first Temple. They are gradually teasing out what God is revealing to them in these events.

Mark is writing in difficult times and yet his job is to pass on the **Good News** but note what that meant in his Roman dominated world. Chapter 1 verse 1 states: "*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, son of God...*". We are so used to these words we don't really hear them. But the first time the gospel was read in public this would have been dynamite. "*Evangelion*" is "*Good News*" in Greek and refers to the equivalent of banner headlines on the National news. It was the news the imperial heralds proclaimed across the Roman Empire when the emperor won a great battle or his wife gave birth to an heir. It was news of international import. So here, Mark is claiming that what follows is as important as imperial news. Then comes an ordinary unknown Jewish man, Jesus, unexpected to say the least. Then the title Christ, the anointed one. All kings and emperors were anointed in the first century world, so here is a claim that there is a great but unknown king among the Jews.

Then “*son of God*” - the Roman Emperors called themselves ‘sons of God’ and had that title on their coins. At about the time Mark was writing his gospel, the General who had ruled in Judea and built a pagan temple on the Temple Mount, Vespasian, was having himself declared ‘son of God’.

Mark tells us of the brutal farce that the Roman Soldiers played out in Pilate’s court only hours before Jesus’ death. This was where they mocked Jesus in an imitation imperial crowning with purple cloak, and a mock victor’s crown of thorns. Hours later, Mark recounts how one of their number, an officer, the centurion, looking up at Jesus on the Cross devoutly confessed: “*Truly this man was Son of God.*” So from the opening declaration of the gospel to this statement by a pagan soldier, Mark is gradually showing us the depth of the meaning of that original title. Read in certain circles this could be seen as a declaration of regime change! Dangerous stuff!

Mark shows us that it’s easy to respond generously to Jesus initially, when he tells the Parable of the Sower in Mark 4:16. Then when difficulties come it’s not so easy. His gospel focuses with wonder on the person of Jesus from the opening sentence to the cry of the pagan centurion at the foot of the cross. And in a sense, his gospel is the working out of what that cry means.

Mark stresses faithfulness in the face of persecution, and the dignity and humility of service as opposed to status seeking. It makes us wonder what was going on in the early Christian community for Mark to rub their noses so starkly in this way of thinking.

Early in his Gospel (Luke 1:46-56) Luke describes Mary, Jesus expectant mother, meeting her old but also pregnant cousin, Elizabeth. The spirit of Miriam from Egypt in the Book of Exodus flames forth again as the child dances in Elizabeth’s womb, like King David dancing before the Ark of the Covenant coming to Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6:5). Now it is John dancing in Elizabeth’s womb before the Word of God made flesh in Mary. And the two women sing out the pure freed memory of their people. Two free women with extraordinary intensity expressing the prophetic imagination of their people. They anticipate the coming close of “*the God*” again in sovereign freedom, starting not in the Temple, or the Royal Court, or the holy places, but from the little ones of the earth, the poor, the oppressed.

Mary’s song, *The Magnificat*, speaks of a community of freedom, promised from the time of Moses and remembered by the prophets; which is our challenge to envision and celebrate today. A community of freedom that is still evolving in new and unexpected ways because it is the community of the living God; and a community that we can anticipate in hope.

Mary’s song predicts the visionary teaching and liberating practice of her son Jesus, set out in the Beatitudes. This forms the basis of the values underpinning the new Christian community that Luke will map out in his second book, the *Acts of the Apostles*. Acts that are still happening in the Christian community today.

Both Luke and Matthew give accounts of the Beatitudes, literally “*the happinesses*”! In Matthew 5:1-11 they form the Charter of the Kingdom of the Merciful Abba. Jesus tells the disciples to love these teachings and to live out of them is to be the salt of the earth. They are his gift to humanity. They are not so much pathways to heaven as the practice of a free and gracious life.

So Jesus up the mountain may be seen as a new Moses but the Beatitudes are not a set of rules, or “*Counsels of Perfection*”. Instead, the acts of weeping, identifying with the little ones, making peace and joy in the midst of persecution, are for Jesus all signs and sacraments of the coming of the kingdom of heaven. They are what holiness looks like. There is no “ought” here, no enforcement, no uniformity. It’s not a members-only club. God’s love and mercy is outside the magic circle of the committed as well as within. This is echoed

in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-35) where God's merciful compassion is ministered, not by the leaders of God's holy people, the Priest and the Temple official, but by the national enemy, the Samaritan trader. Mahatma Ghandi read the *Beatitudes* and said his life was totally changed; but he couldn't understand why they didn't have the same effect on all Christians! But all those who do practice this alternative way of seeing and being, will be salt for the whole meal of life. In some ways, the vision is modest but it leads us into the strange power of God which all too often looks like powerlessness.

“Blessed are the merciful; they shall have mercy shown them”. Like forgiveness, mercy is unearned, undeserved, not owed; otherwise it is not mercy. Mercy and forgiveness are the heart of Jesus' Gospel. In his song, *The Benedictus* (Luke 1:67-79) Zechariah proclaims that it is precisely through the forgiveness of our sins that we experience God's salvation. The longer we live and the more honest we become, the more we know that mercy is not what God does, but who God is. Mercy is how we translate the Hebrew phrase – *faithful-loving-kindness* which echoes through the books of *Deuteronomy*, *Leviticus* and the *Psalms*. It describes the quality of God's relationship with God's people. St Paul will call this “*grace*”. It's the unbreakable God-given covenant love. We have the echo of this mercy at the beginning of the Bible in the idea of the abiding image of God within men and women. (Genesis 1:27)

The divine mercy is a given (as in the story of the Prodigal Son) and is never taken back. But it requires humility to live in and out of it. In so much religious life, we waste time trying to persuade God that we are worth loving, by expressing our virtues and practices. There is no need. The practice of mercy alone teaches us this. In that practice we truly experience the image of God within us.

Not to be merciful, not to forgive is a form of power over another. It is a form of manipulation, shaming, and controlling, and diminishing of the other. God in Jesus never uses such power, indeed he refuses it. Isaiah speaks of God thrusting all our sin behind God's back (Isaiah 38:17b). The spiritual life is not a series of holy steps advanced and achieved, but the daily surrenders to mercy, allowing ourselves to receive this mercy. The beatitude, the “happiness” is in becoming the forgiveness itself, allowing mercy to grow within us, receiving it and sharing it with all those we meet.

Reflection

Think of an example where lack of forgiveness is blocking the happiness of people, whether in your own life, at school, in your community, nation or internationally. What would it take to turn the situation around?

Pray to continue to see life through Gospel spectacles and to grow ever more to act as Jesus' disciple.



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