

## Extracts from **The Puzzle of the Gospels** Dr Peter Vardy and Mary Mills

Each of the four gospels presents the story of Jesus in a distinctive way. Much in the four accounts is the same, but there are significant differences in the manner of presentation used by each gospel writer. The same scenes are inserted into the story at different points, and some traditional material is expanded whereas other material is abbreviated. In each case a chronological order is preserved with the climax being the death of Jesus on the cross. Matthew and Luke take the reader from cradle to grave to resurrection. John follows a similar model but does not start with Jesus' birth – instead he starts with Jesus' position as the Word of God which has entered in the world. Mark produces the shortest version of the story, beginning with the adult Jesus and ending with the empty tomb.

### **Matthew**

Matthew presents Jesus as the fulfilment of the sacred scriptures of Judaism and of the Law and the prophetic tradition. This is a major focus for Matthew's portrayal of Jesus' adult life. Chapters 5-7 describe Jesus as a teacher and an interpreter of Law. It is important to understand that these chapters echo the work of Moses. In Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, Moses features as the great law-giver appointed by God. As Moses was given the commandments by God, so Jesus performs a similar role, although the content is different. Jesus does not lay down a long list of laws but instead gives an interpretation of the laws that already existed. He cuts through the *letter* of the Law to arrive at the *spirit* that lies beneath the surface. Jesus focuses on the generosity of spirit. It is not enough to be generous to friends and fellow citizens – it is necessary to be equally generous to one's enemies.

Instead of having to take tablets of stone from God's hands as Moses did, Jesus knows himself what has to be said. Moses brought the tablets of stone containing the Ten Commandments given by God down from a mountain (Exodus 19). Similarly Matthew portrays Jesus as teaching from a mountain (5:1). However Jesus is of greater significance as a source than Moses since he does not have to wait for God's intervention. Matthew shows Jesus as understanding the true significance of the Law from within his own heart so that he can validly explain it. Jesus' degree of intimacy with God is thus shown to be even greater than that of the great hero, Moses. However Jesus uphold true Judaism. Matthew sees Jesus' roots as firmly within the Jewish tradition, so Jesus can say:

Do not think I have come to abolish the law the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil them (5:17)

Jesus, in Matthew's gospel, emphasizes the great demands he makes on people. It is:

- not enough to simply obey the letter of the Jewish Law, people have to be faithful to the spirit that underlies the Law, which is much more demanding;
- not enough not to commit murder, people should not even be angry;
- not enough not to commit adultery, people should not even think about it;
- not enough not to break vows, people should not make vows at all, simply being bound by "Yes" or "No";
- not enough not to demand "an eye for an eye", people must exact no revenge at all;
- not enough to love your friends; people must love their enemies as well;
- not enough to give to charity, people must give in secret so that their gifts are not known;
- not enough to pray or fast, people must pray or fast sincerely and privately (5:17-6:18)

## Mark

Jesus' power is revealed in his healings but also in his forgiving sins, a power that, in Jewish tradition, was reserved for God alone. So when Mark attributes this power to Jesus he is making a very special claim, which is rejected by some (2:7).

Jesus has a mysterious aspect to his ministry. He heals but tells those whom he heals not to explain what has happened to them. He teaches, but tells his disciples that most people will not understand his message. This mysterious side of Jesus is emphasized by Mark's use of the phrase "Son of Man". Of course, the term "Son of Man" appears more widely in the gospels than in Mark alone, but it is used by each evangelist to express a message about his own particular idea of Jesus. In Mark, the title is used as a way of emphasizing Jesus' enigmatic character. In a vital scene, Peter identifies Jesus specifically:

On the way [Jesus] asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others say Elijah; and still others one of prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah". Then he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. (8:27-30)

After Peter's proclamation Jesus replies by talking of how the Son of Man must die. In Mark's gospel, Jesus does not use the title of "Messiah" about himself until his trial. By having Jesus describe his own work less directly, through the title "Son of Man", Mark preserves the ambiguity in the figure of Jesus. He creates a gap between the visible healer and teacher and the invisible heavenly figure authorized to a kingship role by God. (cf. pp. 13-15).

Mark's Jesus is a radical and harsh figure. His own family and their ties of kinship are rejected and he teaches his followers that they must give up family and social setting if they are indeed to be part of the kingdom of God. Following God is portrayed as incredibly demanding and all human relationships and worldly wealth must be put firmly into second place (10:17-31).

## Luke

Jesus is portrayed as a servant and this points forward to his work with prisoners, the blind and the oppressed, and to his teaching and healing ministry on which he embarks in Galilee. This concern with the weak and the underprivileged is not quite unique to Jesus – it was a common theme of the OT prophets who had a strong commitment to justice, particularly for groups like orphans and widows.

It is significant however, that in Luke's gospel the poor literally mean the poor – the word is used in a straightforward sense. Thus Luke records Jesus as saying:

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. (6:20)

It is this idea that has led many modern Christian writers to maintain that it is necessary for anyone who wants to follow Christ to take a preferential "option for the poor". In Matthew's gospel, by contrast, this working is significantly changed:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (5:3)

Matthew, therefore, alters the emphasis. This could be an indication that he was writing for a more affluent community who would not have liked the idea of Jesus singling out the literally poor as being blessed. Matthew's audience might have found it more congenial to identify with spiritual rather than material poverty.

Luke sums up the entire tradition about Jesus in a way which makes him a prophet as well as a king. Jesus will act as Messiah by bringing relief to human needs and in this way extend the kingly rule of God, taking power over demons and human opponents alike. Just like Elijah (1 Kings 17) and Elisha (2 Kings 4), Jesus raises a widow's son (Luke 7:11-17). He is therefore portrayed, like them, as a famous prophet of power. Jesus is shown as being compassionate to the weak and vulnerable, and with the power to give back life to the dead. Jesus is thus the paradigm of the prophet-king.

## Outsiders

In Jesus' work, Luke focuses on his openness to the outsider, to the marginalized. In 7:1-9 Jesus not only heals the servant of a foreigner (a Roman centurion!) but wonders at the depth of faith such as a foreigner, an outsider, can have. Later in the chapter, Jesus allows a sinful woman to touch him and to wash his feet with her tears, even though the touch of such a woman made him ritually defiled (7:36-49). Again Jesus rejects the "outsider/insider" distinction.

Luke introduces controversy here. The Pharisees criticize Jesus' wisdom and leadership because of the latter event. It implies, after all, that Jesus is rejecting the Torah, the Jewish Law. Jesus, however, is proclaiming the spirit that underlies the Law rather than its letter, and he shows an openness to outsiders who are genuinely wanting to come closer to God. Luke frequently expresses this through stories about Jesus being happy to share his table-fellowship with many types of people, people with whom those who kept to the letter of the Law would never consider eating.

## John

The members of the early Christian community were prepared to put absolute trust in their memories of Jesus. This absolute trust in Jesus led to further reflection on the meaning of him. And this further thinking is set out in the great discourses which are woven into the Book of Signs. These portray Jesus as making long speeches in which he explains his significance.

There is a similarity in the discourses as each of them portrays Jesus as the fulfilment of major themes of Jewish tradition. In addition, the opening phrase in each of the discourses is "I am..." and this draws the reader's attention to who Jesus is. This is a common formula used in Jewish and pagan texts in the ancient world when a messenger reveals his identity.

In a difficult passage in John 8, Jesus ends the debate about himself with the statement:

I tell you, before Abraham was, I am. (8a58)

This points back to the Prologue and the idea that Jesus is God's unique, eternal Word. Indeed, Jesus as God's Word was present at creation (1:3-4). This makes a clear link between Jesus and God which can be seen as expanded and enriched in Jesus' self-descriptions in the discourses when he says, "I am... (Water, Bread, Life, Light, Shepherd, Gate)". Each of these descriptions is taken from the Jewish tradition.

**Water** This is an absolute but scarce necessity in Palestine and in Jewish tradition is the means of cleansing and purification. Living water in rivers, springs and wells becomes a symbol for life and health in Ezekiel 47 and is used as such in John 4:14 where Jesus talks of giving the woman by the well "living water".

**Bread** This source of nourishment from heaven is what God gave to the Israelites after they left slavery in Egypt and where in the desert (Numbers 11). It seems that by the first century this text has been interpreted by some Jews to mean that the Law given by God through Moses in the desert was the true bread which nourished the soul. In 6:35 this tradition is given a new understanding. Jesus is portrayed as the ultimate bread from heaven. When an individual meditates on the person of Jesus he or she feeds the inner self with God's own food.

**Life** God alone has eternal life and Jesus, representing God, offers this eternal life to all believers. The story of the death and resurrection of Lazarus reveals that Jesus is *life* here and now. If anyone believes this, then he or she will share already in God's own life – a foretaste of what lies beyond the grave. (See the chapter on "Eternal Life" in *The Puzzle of God* by Peter Vardy where the significance of John's account of eternal life for contemporary philosophy of religion is explained.)

**Light** God is the source of light, and light (sunlight) creates life in the world. OT visionaries such as Ezekiel and Daniel saw God in a blaze of light. When Moses came down for Sinai his face shone so much with God's reflected glory that people could not bear to look at him and he had to go veiled (Exodus 34:33-35). Jesus now appears as the bearer of this same light to the world. He brings God's life-giving rays in the darkness of the world. (The Prologue also emphasizes this same theme.)

Each of the discourses begins with a theme and then explores it through the words of Jesus. The story then returns to show that the best way to understand a deeper truth is to see how it points to the fact that Jesus of Nazareth is the means by which heavenly truth is brought to human beings.