

“One Thing the Four Gospels Have in Common”

Luke 19

And when he was come nigh, even now at the descent of the mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen; Saying, Blessed be the King that cometh in the name of the Lord: peace in heaven, and glory in the highest. And some of the Pharisees from among the multitude said unto him, Master, rebuke thy disciples. And he answered and said unto them, I tell you that, if these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out. And when he was come near, he beheld the city, and wept over it, Saying, If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace! but now they are hid from thine eyes. For the days shall come upon thee, that thine enemies shall cast a trench about thee, and compass thee round, and keep thee in on every side, And shall lay thee even with the ground, and thy children within thee; and they shall not leave in thee one stone upon another; because thou knewest not the time of thy visitation. And he went into the temple, and began to cast out them that sold therein, and them that bought; Saying unto them, It is written, My house is the house of prayer: but ye have made it a den of thieves. And he taught daily in the temple. But the chief priests and the scribes and the chief of the people sought to destroy him, And could not find what they might do: for all the people were very attentive to hear him.

Mark 10

And they were in the way going up to Jerusalem; and Jesus went before them: and they were amazed; and as they followed, they were afraid. And he took again the twelve, and began to tell them what things should happen unto him, Saying, Behold, we go up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man shall be delivered unto the chief priests, and unto the scribes; and they shall condemn him to death, and shall deliver him to the Gentiles: And they shall mock him, and shall scourge him, and shall spit upon him, and shall kill him: and the third day he shall rise again. And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, come unto him, saying, Master, we would that thou shouldest do for us whatsoever we shall desire. And he said unto them, What would ye that I should do for you? They said unto him, Grant unto us that we may sit, one on thy right hand, and the other on thy left hand, in thy glory. ⁸But Jesus said unto them, Ye know not what ye ask: can ye drink of the cup that I drink of? and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? ⁹And they said unto him, We can. And Jesus said unto them, Ye shall indeed drink of the cup that I drink of; and with the baptism that I am baptized withal shall ye be baptized: But to sit on my right hand and on my left hand is not mine to give; but it shall be given to them for whom it is prepared. And when the ten heard it, they began to be much displeased with James and John. ²But Jesus called them to him, and saith unto them, Ye know that they which are accounted to rule over the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and their great ones exercise authority upon them. But so shall it not be among you: but whosoever will be

great among you, shall be your minister: And whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all.

- I. We've looked at differences in the four gospels in recent weeks. One thing all four of them have in common is, the twelve disciples (and everyone else) all misunderstood Jesus: saw him in ways that would benefit them, saw him initiating a earthly kingdom in which they would either play an important role, or simply benefit from his being king (feeding of the five thousand). Their perception of who Jesus was and what kind of king he would be and what kind of kingdom he intended to establish were all colored by what they personally wanted and how they would personally benefit.
- II. We think today, with the help of the Bible, that we understand what the disciples and everyone else did not understand, that we see Jesus clearly when they did not. And yes, with biblical hindsight, we do understand some things that we are told the disciples did not understand at that time, the time of Jesus journey from illiterate, poverty-stricken Galilee in the north to wealthy, capital city of Jerusalem in the south, things like Jesus' prediction of his passion in Jerusalem and his subsequent resurrection.
- III. While this biblical hindsight about the passion and resurrection is necessary in order to tell the story of Jesus, it seems to me utterly unnecessary to tell that story in such a way that the disciples, the twelve men closest to Jesus, were utterly clueless people. It seems perfectly possible to tell the story of Jesus without including the recurring motif of the disciples not understanding Jesus, of the disciples misunderstand and misperceiving who Jesus really was and what Jesus really meant.
- IV. Which brings me to this question: Why depict the founders of the Christian church as being so clueless, so three stooges like? Remember these Gospels are each written to tell the whole story: the writer of the Gospel of Mark is not writing his Gospel with the idea that his Gospel will be part of a larger collection of Christian writings called the New Testament. Absolutely not. His gospel, just like the gospel of John, Matthew, and Luke, are written independently to give the whole story, and that story, in all four gospels, includes the recurring motif that those people closest to Jesus did not understand him correctly: they were wrong about Jesus, and less explicitly, I come to see they were wrong about Jesus in ways that would have personally benefitted them.
- V. Conclusion: the founders of the Christian Church are depicted as not understanding Jesus correctly as a paradigm for the Church, as a word of warning to all the followers of Jesus after that first century: Be careful, for when you think you are the closest to Jesus and you understand him better than anyone else, you, like the founders of the church, may be wrong. We,

like the founders of the church, may be misunderstanding Jesus because we are looking for Jesus to be whatever is personally beneficial, looking for Jesus to be what we need him to be, rather what he is. We read the Bible the same way: if our personal fortune and way of life is dependent of slave labor, then we read the Bible as supporting slavery; but if our personal fortune and way of life is in no way dependent on slavery, then we are more likely to read the Bible as being opposed to slavery. Neither interpretation is more virtuous than the other since both are predicated on whether or not our personal fortunes are at stake. We are prone to “read” Jesus in the same idolatrous, self-centered ways, and this is why, I suspect, each of the Gospels is written with regularly recurring motif of the Disciples being clueless.

Many Christians like to read the Gospels imagining how they are so unlike the Pharisees, scribes, and Saducees, so unlike the obvious antagonists of the stories, but then imagine themselves as post-resurrection disciples, disciples who fully understand and correctly embrace who Jesus is. The problem is that in the Gospel of Mark in particular, but I think also in the other three as well, even after the resurrection, there is not full understanding. There are momentary glimpses, elusive encounters, yes, but even then there is also still fear, silence, and uncertainty. We miss these things in the story, we fail to see them because we do not like them: we want a Jesus who do away with all our fears, who will give us a song instead of silence, who will make us certain, rather than uncertain. The most religious people are generally those who cannot tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty, and that is why religion has and does become so fanatical—absolute certainty.

The Gospels are written the way they are written in order to save us from such certainty, in order to save us from making Jesus to be whatever it is that will personally benefit us. It is not all about us: it is about Jesus, and embracing this is the first step on the journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, the journey from self-centeredness, the journey away from idolatry and towards worship that is “in spirit and in truth.” (John 4:24) Amen.