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Scripture

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THE GOSPEL AND THE GOSPELS

Although the historical approach to the Scriptures characteristic of the last two centuries has done some excellent work and left us with certain considerable advantages, it has nevertheless left behind it an unfortunate emphasis, a distraction from the theological message of the Scriptures. This fact is usually discussed against an Old Testament background, but it is clear that the discussion is relevant for the New Testament also because here, too, we are dealing with the Word of God—that is to say with a message of salvation. It is needless to say, of course, that the transference of the principle has to be made with the greatest care. There is, for instance, all the difference in the world between the committal to writing of a seven-hundred-year-old tradition about Abraham and a written account, perhaps as early as fifteen years after the event, of the main outlines of our Lord's career. And yet, once this has been said, it does remain true that the purpose of the evangelists themselves is less biographical than theological. It is enough to remember, or at least it is a symptom of this, that not one of the evangelists offers us a description of the Crucifixion itself but all four remark briefly: They crucified him. No doubt we are right in this connection to investigate all there is to be known of the Roman process of crucifixion for our own information and devotion and for the benefit of those we are called to teach, but even while we are doing so it would be well to bear in mind that we are doing what the evangelists did not do, and that the further we go along this line the more risk we take of missing the evangelists' primary lesson. And since we have mentioned this point rather at random it might be well to suggest immediately, lest our approach seem negative, that side by side with this historical research there must go a theological and biblical research into the function of suffering in Old Testament and New. This might sound idealistic and beyond the powers of a busy teacher. It is not in fact. I am simply suggesting that when we come to the Crucifixion in the Passion story we should read for ourselves and for the children the Song of the Suffering Servant in the 53rd chapter of Isaias, Psalm 21—begun by our Lord himself on the Cross

and so revealing to us his mind—and the famous hymn to the Cross in the second chapter of Philipians. Or, to take another example, that we should spend at least as much time pointing out that when our Lord walked the waters or calmed the storm he was displaying the powers the Psalmist ascribes to God, as to verifying the size and depth of Lake Galilee. After all, the evangelist's conclusion of the Storm episode is not 'How did he do it' but 'Who is this?'. I believe that the approach just outlined is dictated to us by the literary form which we call 'gospel.' It is therefore necessary to examine what the word 'gospel' itself implies. Later we shall discuss how the evangelists interpreted their task.

The first and most certain thing we all know about the gospels is that there are four of them ; and in a sense this is the very thing we should try to forget ; to stress it leads to unfortunate consequences we shall try afterwards to show. It is only fair to say that the word 'gospels' in the plural dates back at least to Justin in the second century. This makes it respectable but not necessarily helpful. It is much more useful to remember that there are not four gospels but one gospel in four forms : the gospel *according* to Matthew, *according* to Mark, and so on. The term gospel (early English god spel, good news) closely translates the Greek *eu-aggelion* which in the first half of the story is the good news brought by Jesus Christ and then becomes the good news about Jesus Christ. We have to do, therefore, not simply with a record but with a message. Of this message there are four presentations, four written forms, four written approaches to the one unwritten message.

This message is a religious one. Already in classical Greek the word *eu-aggelion* has a religious flavour : it meant the sacrifice offered on the receipt of good news, thanking the gods for the message which, usually, was proclaimed from the temple steps. In the first century before our Lord it came to mean the good news itself : but it is still religious in tone because it is commonly used of events connected with the 'divine' emperor—accession or victory or birth of a royal son, or a visit for which all roads to the privileged town were to be repaired, the paths made straight and the rough places plain. And it is not without interest that the bearer of such good news was greeted with the waving of palm-branches. But since the true literary background of our gospels is first and foremost the Old Testament, it is important to notice that there the subject of the 'good news' is the enthronement of God as king, that is to say the assertion by God of His royal rights and his coming as Saviour and Giver of Life. The prophet Isaias speaks of an 'evangelist' who tells the towns of Judah : Here comes your God, and proclaims how beautiful are the feet that bring good

news, ' who announce salvation, who say to Sion : Your God is King.' Within the word itself, therefore, we have both a royal and a religious significance. But if the pagan emperors, to judge by so many of their coins, were styled ' Lord and Giver of Life,' we have in the Christian use of the term ' gospel ' an element of defiance—it is *God* who reigns, it is the gospel of the kingdom of *God*, it is God who is Lord, God who gives life. When St Mark, therefore, heads his work ' The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ,' he is telling us that his book contains the news that God has determined here and now to display His kingship (this is the good news *from* Jesus Christ), and this through His son the appointed king, as Jesus himself claims before Pilate (this is the good news *about* Jesus Christ). And what this good news means to man is expressed clearly by our Lord himself when he deliberately chooses to read this passage from the prophet Isaias in the synagogue :

The spirit of the Lord is upon me ;
 he has sent me to bring the good news to the poor ;
 to announce deliverance to the captive,
 new sight to the blind,
 freedom to the oppressed—
 a time of pardon from the Lord. (Lk. 4:18-19)

It is the content of this good news, therefore, which must be our first concern, and I hope I am not being too mysterious if I sum it up by saying that it is better to teach the gospel than to teach the gospels. To speak practically and clearly, it is more important to spend our time on the common doctrine of the gospels than to spend it on explaining away their divergencies. We shall return to this question later, however.

The remarks we have just made will, I hope, serve to guide our general outlook, but, after all, we are faced also with more particular problems of gospel interpretation which, I think, cannot be adequately met without some knowledge of how our written gospels came into being. The vague idea that they are desk-compositions written at a sitting can do much harm in the field of interpretation. Against this unrealistic notion can always be quoted the prologue of Luke : Several people have undertaken to compose an account of the events that have taken place in our midst . . . so I too have decided to write an ordered account. But even earlier than these apparently fragmentary attempts at written records came the apostolic preaching, the *kerygma* : in the beginning was the spoken word. The outline of this *kerygma* can be drawn from a comparison of the earliest apostolic speeches in the Acts of the Apostles with the Epistles of St Paul. Briefly, the

earliest form this good news took is as follows: A descendant of David has recently moved about in Palestine doing good and showing by many 'works of power, prodigies and signs' that God was at work in him. He was put to death at the instigation of many of his own people but he rose again and sits enthroned at the right hand of God. From here he pours out the Spirit on his faithful ones and from here he will return to 'restore all things.' Here in a nutshell is the kerygma, the gospel. We notice immediately that what might be called the biographical element is reduced to a minimum and that the theological note is struck straight away, for the first sermons in the Acts are careful to point out that this is not just the career of a great Rabbi or even of the greatest of prophets; they insist that it is a unique career of which all the prophets spoke, towards which the whole of the Old Testament looked; the horrifying fact of the Crucifixion itself, they are anxious to note, was according to the 'determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God'; and as for the biographical events, they are but the necessary prelude to the present theological reality of the victorious and presiding Christ. It is important also to notice that this kerygma always closes with an appeal to repentance. I say it is important because it shows us that the purpose of proclaiming the good news was always practical, that the purpose of the gospels themselves, therefore, was not to convey idle information but to create an impact, to move the reader to repentance. This observation brings us back once more to the relative unimportance of biographical detail as compared with lasting spiritual results.

We may come now nearer to the gospels themselves which are an expansion of the kerygma. This is most noticeable in Mark. He does not speak of his own work as 'memoirs'—a term used of the gospels by some early writers—but as a 'gospel,' that is to say (for the terms are interchangeable) as a kerygma. Like Peter in his first sermons Mark asserts in his first words that the career he is going to describe is a fulfilment of prophecy, like him he appeals for repentance: The time is fulfilled. . . . Repent and believe the good news. He then proceeds to describe in more detail how this Jesus 'went about doing good' and narrates how Jesus died and rose again. In Matthew and Luke the pattern is not so clear, though it is evidently there and Matthew even expands two elements of the kerygma not emphasised by Mark—namely, the fact that Jesus was a descendant of David and that he was the fulfilment of the prophets; but Matthew also departs from the primitive kerygma by collecting so many of our Lord's sayings on moral matters—what the scholars call not kerygma but *didache*, not proclamation but doctrine. The question we ask ourselves now is how this development took place.

There is no doubt that the early Church could not long be satisfied with the bare outlines of the kerygma as we have described it, especially as those who had lived with our Lord had many things to recall that he had said and done. His sayings in particular would be carefully stored in their retentive memories : the disciples of every Jewish Rabbi were capable of that—and how much more of this much greater than a Rabbi ? Thus the first three great discourses of Matthew would soon be formed—no doubt before the gospel itself came into being—I mean the Sermon on the Mount, the programme for Christian living, the Missionary Discourse, the programme for Christian preaching, and the Parable discourse, the presentation of the mystery of the Kingdom. This process would begin, doubtless, when the death of Stephen in 32 or 34 led to the dispersal of Christian missionaries ; and in all of it memory played a large part. And since before printed books came to kill memory men picked up more with their ears than with their eyes, certain oral aids were used to assist memory—rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, striking formulae, repetition, graphic comparison. Our Lord, the wise teacher, pursued this method and distinct traces of it have come down to us in our present gospels—so many witnesses to the antiquity of their sources. Take repetition, for example. It is no impiety for us to confess that this makes wearisome reading for us, so long as we remember that it was not done to please us but to help the disciples. Take for instance our Lord's comparison of the wise and the foolish man which could have been put into half a dozen words ; notice the balanced contrast and the measured, leisurely style, facilitating memory :

He who hears my words and keeps them
 is like a wise man
 who built his house on a rock.
 The rain fell,
 the storm came,
 the winds blew
 and were let loose against that house.
 And it did not fall,
 because it was founded on a rock.

But he who hears my words and does not keep them
 is like a foolish man
 who built his house on sand.
 The rain fell,
 the storm came,
 the winds blew

and beat upon that house.
 And it fell,
 and great was its fall. (Mt. 7:24-7)

Here surely we are in touch with the words as they came from our Lord ; this is not the manner of an editor but of a careful teacher. And he was indeed careful. By those who have examined our Lord's sayings in the light of their original language (so far as this is at present known) we are assured that they bear the impress of well-prepared deliverances. In the kindly sayings the sounds are soft and gentle : thus, 'Come to me all you who are heavy laden' is *'etho lewathi kullekon delahain ute'inin* ; whereas, for example, when hypocrites are contrasted with simple Christian disciples the sounds are strongly guttural and mockingly sibilant : thus, 'As the hypocrites do in the synagogues and streets' is *hekma da'abadu shaqqarin bkenishatha ubeshuqin*. It is touching to think, as we rarely think, that our Lord must have worked hard to prepare all he had to say, for when the Son of God became man he became like to us in all things, sin alone excepted.

To return to the phenomenon we have noticed, that of balance or parallelism : it is the characteristic of all solemn Semitic speech and it pervades our Lord's discourses as reported in the gospels, thus showing the fundamentally Jewish character of the sayings and witnessing to the fidelity of the evangelists. This literary trick is sometimes helpful in interpretation or textual criticism of the Psalms, for example, and so it is at times in the gospels. There is a well-known couplet : Give not that which is holy to dogs / Throw not your pearls before swine. Dogs and swine are plainly parallel, but what of 'holy' and 'pearls' ? The rule of parallelism suggests a closer correspondence. And here the original language comes to our aid. In Aramaic the word *qedasha* means 'holy' but the same consonants vocalised *qudsha* means a golden ring. It should be observed here that if we are reluctant to admit a mistranslation on the part of an evangelist we must at least recognise that the possibility brings us very close to the Aramaic spoken word of our Lord himself. In any case, it seems that Gospel interpretation in detail will receive in the future considerable assistance from any further knowledge which may be forthcoming of the actual language our Lord spoke. Perhaps one of the most probable conjectures in this field concerns the very odd sentence of Luke : Give alms of what is inside, and then the outside will be clean. Matthew's form of what is evidently the same saying is : Clean the inside first and then everything will be clean. But where did Luke's strange text come from ? Probably from a confusion of the two very similar Aramaic words : *dakkau* to cleanse, and *zakkau* to give alms.

There is therefore powerful evidence that very many of our Lord's words have been closely remembered and recorded, and there are certain units (like the above example of the wise and the foolish man) which have certainly been preserved as units. But is this always so? It seems not. Thus for the Sermon on the Mount in Mt. 5-7: does this represent one long and difficult discourse addressed to the patient crowds, or is it a collection and ordering of many separate sayings made by the evangelist or by someone before his time? If we are to judge by the way these same sayings are scattered throughout the gospel of Luke (and any Bible with a good reference system will show this) we should be at least prepared to admit the possibility of a collection made by someone anxious to systematise. If we remember further that Matthew's is the gospel of five great discourses, five books of the New Law as it were, we shall be inclined to say that the unity is artificial, the historical element has been sacrificed to the theological purpose—which, I remind you, is well in keeping with the nature of 'gospel.' This example has been chosen only because it illustrates a useful principle of gospel interpretation. We have often been warned, and wisely, that the context of a saying must always be taken into account. But we must always remember that the context first has to be proved, and the first misgiving we have is when we find a saying of one gospel in a different context in the next. Indeed, within this very Sermon on the Mount we have a notable example. I have read in certain books now, it is true, somewhat out of date, that our Lord must have taught his disciples the 'Our Father' on two separate occasions, for Matthew gives it at the beginning of our Lord's public life in the Sermon, and Luke at the end. This is frankly incredible since Luke introduces his own 'Our Father' with a request from the disciples: 'Lord teach us to pray'—are we to say they had forgotten? Perhaps the whole question of chronology is here irrelevant, it is certainly unimportant, but if not, I should unhesitatingly accept St Luke's placing for, apart from Matthew's general tendency to group, a glance at his chapter six with its strict arrangement of three sections with a repeated refrain: Alms in secret, Prayer in secret, Fasting in secret, interrupted by the 'Our Father' section, betrays an old arrangement now interfered with.

We have so far tried to look behind the gospels as it were. It is time now to look at the gospels as we have them now. For the last hundred years scholars have laboured to explain their strange similarities yoked to their no less surprising differences. The problem is not yet solved, indeed it has been recently opened up all over again and what seemed an acquired solution (the dependence of Matthew and Luke on Mark) is again under fire. We can do no more here

than state what seems to be the most likely solution and the one which is, at least in part, rallying more and more scholars to it. Briefly it is this : that behind the gospels in their present form stands an Aramaic tradition and, it appears, an Aramaic written gospel having much in common with our present Matthew, of which the apostle Matthew was the author. This primitive gospel may be as early as A.D. 45. Various translations were made of it into Greek and from separate members of this little family sprang our present gospels. This is putting the matter much too simply, of course, but it will serve our turn. This theory does not of course deny an interdependence between the three first gospels also.

It would not be worth our while to describe this process were it not that it has various consequences in the sphere of interpretation. It at least opens our eyes to a fact we asserted from the beginning and arrived at from a different point of view, namely that the gospel is one in many forms. This realisation may have very practical results and so I dare here to propose what, except for one short experiment, I have not been able to put into practice myself. Namely, that we should teach the first three gospels not separately but all together. There are practical difficulties against this, of course, of which the greatest is the lack of a Catholic English text of all three gospels printed side by side—a 'Synopsis,' as it is misleadingly called. The second is the lack of a commentary on all three gospels together, though Father Cox has made a most useful step in this direction for popular use at least. The advantages seem to me obvious : first, we do not have to bore our students by treating the same incident or discourse three times in their course—instead we see it once from all three angles, and therefore we see it solid. Second, we secure a robust approach to the vexed question of harmonisation of which I shall say a word in a moment. Third, we learn by contrast of the different aims and characteristics of the various gospels.

We have mentioned the thorny question of harmonisation—more thorny for those who have not appreciated the literary form of which we are speaking or for those who have taken no hint from the fact that even the Beatitudes, the Pater, the inscription over the Cross, the Eucharistic words themselves are all presented in different words in our different gospels. We have already spoken of the fidelity in recording our Lord's words, but there is also a certain freedom used by each of the evangelists—as the texts themselves bear witness. I have read a learned article that set out to prove that when Matthew and Luke make our Lord forbid his missionaries a staff and Mark makes him allow them a staff, the word 'staff' means in one case an aid to walking, in the other a defensive weapon—though in truth the

Greek suggests no difference. But the truth seems to lie elsewhere : all three are preaching complete detachment but Matthew, with less sense of realism than Mark, makes this extend even to the poorest traveller's support. A similar answer should be given, one feels, to the famous blind man of Jericho problem: were there two or one, were they or he cured as our Lord was on the way into or on the way out of Jericho? Many would answer : there were two, and therefore it can be said there was one ; and the miracle was worked on the way out of the older Jericho but on the way into the new. As an isolated solution this may not offend us, though it sounds artificial, but when similar solutions are offered for similar difficulties one feels a sense of exegetical strain. Surely it is more natural to recall that a 'gospel' is a theological literary form in which historical detail may remain unemphasised and general statement admitted?

The same conclusion is arrived at, by a different route, in the school of interpretation known as Form Criticism which (to confine ourselves to our present purpose) has established one helpful conclusion amongst many other unacceptable ones, namely, that close analysis shows how the body of our first three gospels is composed of so many beads on a thread, of passages which can be displaced without losing their significance ; the thread itself, that is to say the connecting passages whether concerned with place or with time, is of secondary value and is not meant to have any more. A comparison of the gospels between themselves bears this out. So, for instance, the healing of the leper in Mark appears out of the blue, as it were : Mark says simply, 'And a leper came.' Matthew however says, 'When he came down from the mountain a leper came.' Luke says, 'When he was in one of the cities a leper came.' One may multiply the lepers and the incidents, of course, though all three accounts suggest the same event ; but it seems nearer the truth that the various indications are connecting links only—like the meaningless 'At that time' of the beginning of our Sunday gospels—links which are merely convenient methods of carrying on the narrative. If this is so, and the literary form of gospel is quite compatible with it, while the doctrine of Inspiration has nothing to say against it, we should be much more cautious of writing what are often called 'Lives' of our Lord as if we possessed an ordered chronological account of his career instead of the good news of his redemptive work.

From what has been said I hope it does not appear that the interpretation of the gospels is destructive work, a work of demolition. The purpose is not to destroy but to fulfil. I repeat that the more we can know of the historical side of the Scriptures the better, but if such investigation means a loss to the theological side—as experience has

taught us all that it does—then it must be allowed to fall into the background, because the gospels demand to be taken for what they are—not descriptions of life in Palestine over a period of two years, but the good and eternal news of God's salvation.

There is one last feature of modern interpretation that deserves mention because it may help us to intelligent understanding not only of the gospels but of the whole biblical literature. One of the most fashionable, and ugliest, words today is 'demythologisation.' Now we must insist that though the word is new, the thing it represents is as old as man himself. When human beings think and speak of the Infinite God it is plain that all they have at their disposal is human language. They are perfectly aware, and the biblical authors themselves say so clearly, that the human tongue is inadequate to express what is divine. Consequently, even when they are using human descriptions of God, their mind is for ever deprecating the human expression and stripping it of its limitations ; in other words they are taking what may be (unhappily) called 'mythical' elements out of it ; they are 'demythologising.' If I preach in England I may point up to heaven ; if I preach in Australia I may do the same ; but I presume this may be called the opposite direction. I feel no awkwardness about it, however, but what do I mean ? That heaven is neither up nor down but all about us. I have demythologised on a small scale. But let me quote St Jerome from the fourth century to show that the thing is not new :

In the Church, too, we have foolish speaking : as when a man, deceived by a passage in Isaias (6:4), a passage he has failed to understand, thinks that heaven is curved like an arch ; that a throne, too, is placed in heaven and that God sat upon it, and that as though he were a judge or a general the angels stood in a circle round about him to obey his instructions and to be sent on separate missions.

Here is demythologisation with a vengeance—fifteen hundred years old.

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