A Sermon

Preached
in the Chapel

of

ALL SOULS COLLEGE

by

The Chaplain

on

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My text is large and various: the four gospels in what is called 'The New Testament', the part of the Bible in which Christianity's earliest writings are collected – my erstwhile study. It is striking that there are four of these gospels, all telling the same story and all telling it differently. My approach to them is, in a phrase, 'vive la difference'. This way is not favoured by more orthodox critics who look beyond and behind the four for the Jesus who is central to their religion. They are like Schliemann at Troy, digging down until he found that haunting golden mask and he exclaimed 'I have seen the face of Agamemnon!'

The consequences of my approach are adverse for Christianity as an orthodoxy and positive for Christianity as a tradition – the four gospels themselves being a continuous and continuously changing (but recognizable) tradition. A tradition is available to anyone and everyone. No password or entrance fee is required, only attention – alert patience.

The English word 'gospel', contracting 'good spell / good news' is an exact equivalent of the Greek *euangelion*. The four were called 'gospels' because Mark's, the earliest of them, began 'The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God'. There was not, as Mark set pen to papyrus sometime between 68 and 70 of the common era, a literary genre called gospel. But in the previous generation there was St Paul. He had been a Pharisee, believing in the resurrection of the dead and venerating and practicing the God-given law of Moses. He was so outraged by a Jewish sect which revered Jesus, an outcast and hanged man, subsequently resurrected, that he got authority from the Jerusalem theocracy to arrest its members. He was as zealous in hunting down heresy as the

founder of our college. Until it struck him – and it really was 'struck' – that they were right and the law was superseded.

> Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us – for it is written 'cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree'

The noxious paradox was the good news of freedom. This transgressive shock he called his 'gospel', carried it over land and sea making Christians of gentiles as well as Jews, and defended it with furious rigour when his converts rationalised and watered it down. He seems unaware of the irony of 'it is written', quoting Deuteronomy 21.23. But then the Christians had no scriptures of their own, no gospels even, and read the old Hebrew scriptures as witness and prophecy of Christ.

So in Mark's Pauline Gospel, that opening sentence is followed, as we heard in the second lesson, by a scriptural quotation of 'Isaiah the prophet' applied to John the Baptist as Christ's herald, who promptly appears, dressed like the prophet Elijah, come back from heaven to bring on 'the great and terrible day of the Lord'. The pace is relentless.

> And there went out to him all the country of Judea and all the city of Jerusalem, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan.

No one to be seen or heard in the great city or the countryside, everyone here by the Jordan, all submitting to a ritual cleansing and renewal. This is not going to be a

story whose scope is limited to the probable or even the possible. Jesus arrives from Galilee, is baptized, and the Spirit like a dove comes down on him as he rises from the water (intimations of Noah). A divine voice confirms Mark's first sentence:

> 'Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased.'

But this hierarchical tableau does not slow down Mark's narrative energy, which turns violent:

> The Spirit immediately **drove** him out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness forty days, tempted of Satan [the heavenly prosecutor]; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered unto him.

After which he appears in public 'preaching the gospel of God'.

And so it charges on towards the bitter end, Jesus's passion. Which is the book's longest, climactic and most sequential part: Jesus going up to Jerusalem followed by his fearful disciples, his sufferings and death there, the terror of his empty tomb and the jolting end of the book:

> And they went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid.

And that's it. Before that last and fatal journey, Jesus had

travelled about, homeless among the wretched of the earth, transgressing the law time and again in his insatiable compassion, curing the blind and the deaf-and-dumb with his spit, epileptic convulsions with a word, expelling screaming demons, repeatedly and in vain commanding secrecy about himself and his doings. Children are preferred, St Peter dressed down. And for good measure Mark puts in a story about the death of John the Baptist of such cruel sensuality and horror as to appeal to Richard Strauss. Moral teaching is scanty, usually coming in the course of quarrels with the orthodox or in enigmatic parables which he has to explain to his dull intimates. This is Dostoyevsky on steroids, and similarly instructive about humanity *in extremis*. Jesus's longest utterance is a prophecy of the Roman suppression of the Jewish revolt in 68 – 70 and the destruction and desolation of the temple, followed by the collapse of the cosmos and his return in power and glory. It ends with the alarming word 'Watch!'. Historical angst is a strong mover to historical writing.

'Watch!'. This is a point at which Matthew steps in with plenty of moral advice. He is editing Mark to serve discipline and good order in a Jewish-Christian community – not at all Mark's main concern. So 'Watch!' is insufficient. Watch for what and how? Matthew answers the question with a string of four parables, a genre which was secretive in Mark, but with Matthew abundantly clear: about a servant behaving badly in his master's absence; about ten virgins with their lamps waiting for the bridegroom, five ready with oil, five not; about servants (again) entrusted with money by their absent master; finally the last judgement in an allegory of the separation of sheep from goats, of the philanthropic from the negligent. The

context is domestic and pastoral. Unlike Mark, Matthew believed that history had a little while to run before its end. There was an interim, lived in by him and his flock, in which to be busy and take care of things and people. How you spent that time would decide your fate at the end. Instruction is Matthew's forte. He is the master of the Sermon on the Mount (it's not in Mark) with its practical social ethics, still handy at, say, a college meeting. As to history, again he takes a more spacious view than Mark, heading his work 'The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham' and tracing Christ's ancestry through forty-two generations. (It will not be set for reading in chapel.) He follows this with narrative of Joseph's accommodating reaction to Mary's virgin pregnancy, the wise men and their star, the flight into Egypt and the massacre of the innocents. These incidents all feature angels and dreams and are prophesied in scripture, which is quoted ostentatiously as a source of the gospel which fulfils it. Then Matthew picks up Mark, his narrative source, but soon finds him wanting. After Jesus's baptism Mark told of Jesus being 'tempted of Satan', but gives no details. Matthew supplies them in the form of a debate of a particularly Jewish kind: the devil asking tricky questions and Jesus answering them with scriptural citations. The end of Mark's gospel tells of dumbstruck women running from the tomb in terror. Matthew changes that to 'fear *and great joy*': a confusing and tautologous editorial stroke. Then the eleven disciples meet Jesus on 'the mountain', worship him and are commissioned to baptize and convert all nations. 'And lo I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.'

On Luke and John I must be brief. John's Jesus is God,

Luke's 'a great prophet', taken up into heaven like Elijah. On the major topic of history, its value and movement, they are opposed. John prefers mystical doctrine. Abraham and the reader, for him, are equidistant from Christ. Luke's sense of history is more like our own, with something like a *longue duree*: at any rate, more so than Mark's or even Matthew's. His first two chapters consciously imitate the style and even content of his Greek Old Testament: miraculous births for John the Baptist and Jesus, their mothers meeting, all celebrated by psalms: poetry we know from matins and evensong, with their reaching back to 'Abraham and his seed', David and the 'holy prophets'. And then, fulfilling old Simeon's promise in his *Nunc Dimittis* of 'a light to lighten the gentiles', Luke extends his work forward into his history of the early Christians, the *Acts of the Apostles*. With Luke, Jesus stands, not at the end of time (Mark), nor in the time before the end (Matthew) but in the middle of time. For John, time hardly matters. Under Plato's shadow he begins with Jesus transfigured into the original and eternal creative Word in a dazzling cosmic myth ('Before Abraham was, I am') and ends softly with the risen Jesus's charge to Peter 'Feed my sheep' and prophecy of Peter's death. The second coming is neither here nor there for John. He insists on assent to mystical doctrines rather than good works (like Matthew) or just grimly hanging on (like Mark). Sometimes his key propositions emerge from psychologically probing conversations with characters not known elsewhere: nocturnal Nicodemus for example, and the woman at the well. His passion narrative has a distraught world surrounding a calm and stable Christ ('I am') but is marred, like Matthew's, by an incipient antisemitism.

Parables. As with Mark and Matthew, the parables in Luke and John hold their respective senses of history in nutshells. John's are static: the sheep are safe and sound in the sheepfold, Christ is the vine and his disciples the branches. With Luke it is all movement, leading up to a crisis in the middle and then on away from it. Luke's are not allegories, but realistic moral stories. If Mark and Matthew are the instructors of John Bunyan, then Luke, the only teller of the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan – which are replete with his vocabulary, his realism, his contrasted characters and his turn-arounds – can be seen as the remote ancestor of Jane Austen. Luke's insistence on carrying on beyond the crisis is flagrant in the parable (only his) of the corrupt steward facing audit who bribed his master's debtors into looking after him after his certain dismissal. 'And the lord [can it have been Jesus? A capital letter for 'Lord' would make all the difference] the Lord commended the unjust steward because he had done wisely.' But Matthew would have been appalled.

So what have we got here? Certainly not what might have been expected, the stable bedrock of orthodoxy because (as Galileo said on a different topic) it moves – and it changes as it moves. This is popular literature impelled by history, Mark aghast at the impending destruction of Jerusalem, Matthew in its wake concerned in a practical way for a community of Jews turned Christian, Luke setting it in history's *longue duree* and John, alas and for all his sublimity, turning it into a demand for belief in mystical propositions – an incipient orthodoxy. What we have here is a tradition like any other, in which what is inherited nourishes a present and moves on into fresh fields and pastures new. Not an orthodoxy.

I have treated the gospel tradition as literature. That is not exactly new – at least, not in Oxford. Benjamin Jowett of Balliol proposed it in *Essays and Reviews* in 1860. Canon Pusey of Christ Church moved, unsuccessfully, to have him tried for heresy before the Vice Chancellor. When *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, edited by Frank Kermode, appeared in 1987 the worst its contributors suffered was denunciation for insufficient fear and trembling by George Steiner. Otherwise, it went down well. Free from the strictures and constraints of orthodoxy, the sheer vitality of the evangelists could be admired and enjoyed. The intelligence, said Simone Weil, is led by joy.

A different temper prevailed in most theology faculties and among the clergy who predominated in them. It was characterized by a certain tightness and anxiety. There was so much in the gospels that is untoward to a rational Christian mind, not least in Mark – the earliest and so with a *prima facie* claim to credence – with his secrets, codes and miracles, yelling demons, possessed pigs, walking on water and apocalyptic prophecy. And then on the other hand, the Sermon on the Mount, a collection of sound and practical ethical instruction which any decent listener should take to heart. Surely, on the criterion of religious value, these are the words of Jesus? But how can you, someone with historical curiosity, tell? Appeal is scarcely an historical criterion. A good deal of the Sermon on the Mount appears in Luke in a sermon on a plain, not a mountain, setting Jesus as a teacher among humanity rather than a second Moses and super-exalted authority. The scholars' solution to this problem was a non-existent document called 'Q'. Matthew and Luke, images of the careful source-revering scholars themselves, transcribed reliable Q.

A similar manoeuvre helped with the treasured passages in Luke such as his realistic parables and his forgiving his executioners. They came from a source they called 'Proto-Luke'. It doesn't exist either.

This whole project – thrusting the evangelists aside to find Jesus – was called 'The Quest of the Historical Jesus' (1906) by Albert Schweitzer. He observed that the scholars engaged in this quest looked down the well of history only to see their own faces looking up at them. It was a tendency as old as that cautious man John Locke, evading the tyranny of James II in the Netherlands, who explained that Jesus's commands to secrecy were due, in a delightful phrase, to 'the admirable wariness of his carriage'. The rewards of the whole project have proved very disappointing. After all the wise sayings in the Sermon on the Mount are self-authenticating and practical, whoever they come from (and the first hearers would not have known much about him anyway). To prove that they come from Jesus is simply impossible and in the effort orthodoxy's authoritarian slip is showing.

This much we know: that Jesus was an oral teacher, not a writer. No sooner had he spoken than his words were beyond his control, either perishing in the air or taking root in the hearts of his hearers, there to change and be changed and pass on. He became his admirers. This chimes with another original fact. St Paul's Christians in Corinth, date about CE 50, identified themselves by participation in a common meal in commemoration of Christ, their Passover, their bread and wine. Here again, Jesus was consumed before the critics could get there. All Paul had to add to this quotidian occasion was that charity and concern for others should prevail. To be a Christian

was to be baptized like Jesus, take part in the fellowship meal and keep charity. For Mark it was grimly hanging on; for Matthew a matter of generous conduct; for Luke that and a movement in time; with John (alas) belonging to an exclusive group of right-thinkers, a model for today's Alpha courses.

And ourselves? Unconditional adherence to what the Church teaches, besides being impossible and abhorrent to intellectual honour, is not faith but social idolatry. The truths of religion – in its rituals, myths, rules and writings – have a claim on our attention and only our attention. Not a cursory attention like that of the footloose wanderers through the National Gallery, un-nourished by the riches available to them, but the patient inner supplication (prayer, if you like) which we owe to our neighbours, to the objects of our studies, to great works of art and music – that kind of receptive and patient waiting. I have tried to bring that to the gospels, enjoyed it and luckily lived in places where it is valued and where religious truths are more reliably conveyed by music, prayer and the eye than by sermons.

We have heard, in our first lesson, from St Paul at his most ferocious and obsessive. Let us end with him, a few decades on (or, he being a famous old man, it may be a follower of his) much mellowed now, confined in a Roman goal, writing to his people in Philippi:

> Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report: if there be any virtue, and it there be any praise, think on these

things. (Philippians 4.8)

I hope I have brought out some of the abundant vitality and vivacity of my subject. It takes us into a pre-orthodox world in which Christianity is light on control, fertile in invention – and worth our obedient attention.