

The Gospels

Ezekiel 1:1, 4-11a

Revelation 4:6-8

John 1:1-18

Text: John 20:30-31

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Introduction

The Book of Kells, held at the Trinity College Library in Dublin, Ireland, is an illuminated manuscript containing the four Gospels of the New Testament in Latin together with various prefatory texts and tables. It was created in a monastery in either Ireland or Scotland in the late sixth century AD. It is regarded as a masterwork of Western calligraphy and the pinnacle of Insular illumination. ('insular' means island and speaks of the post-Roman era art of Great Britain and Ireland).

When the Irish people were converted to Christianity under the fifth century bishop St. Patrick they discovered that the word of God came in written form.

Subsequently, they became lovers of literature and guilds of copiers developed who copied the Bible and classic literature motivated by love for the Bible. The artistic skill of these guilds created books with remarkable beauty. (Slide 1) One of the pages of the Book of Kells contains the symbols of the four evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Clockwise from top left, Matthew is symbolized by an angel, Mark a lion, John an eagle, and Luke an ox. You will notice they are all winged creatures.

These symbols for the gospel writers show up in church art in many places. (slide 2) Here is a sculpture with the four surrounding Jesus on a throne. (slide 3) Here is another in stained glass. Why were these creatures chosen as symbols for the gospel writers? St. Irenaeus, a leading Christian theologian of the second century, reflecting on the image of the four living creatures who were before the throne of God in Ezekiel's vision and in John's vision (Revelation) imagined this connection with the four gospel writers. Irenaeus matched one of the four living creatures to the particular emphasis he saw in each of the gospel writers.

The first living creature was like a lion; he matched this to Mark's gospel where Jesus is victor over the forces of evil. The second was like a calf or ox: he matched this with Luke signifying Jesus' sacrificial work because these animals were part of Israel's sacrificial system. The third creature had, as it were, the face as of a man; this he matched with Matthew because his gospel emphasises Jesus' entry into the world as a man. The fourth creature was like a flying eagle; this he matched with John because his gospel begins with the "lofty" prologue and "rises" to pierce most deeply the mysteries of God, the relationship between the Father and the Son, and the incarnation.

What I love about Irenaeus' reflection is how he connects the vision of the four creatures before the throne of God whose role is to serve God constantly with the wonder of how these four gospel writers are still constantly serving God in the world making him known. Their witness never stops. John's Revelation tells us, "Day and night without ceasing these four creatures sing, 'Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come.'" (Revelation 4:8) In a similar sense these four gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John sing without ceasing the glory of the One who was and is and is to come.

1. In a recent [essay](#) journalist Rod Dreher reviewed a new book by American philosopher Anton Barba-Kay, *A Web of Our Own Making: The Nature of Digital Formation*. The philosopher thinks that "The digital is the advent of a new religion—not literally, but effectively. We live in a culture that considers technological advancement to be the greatest measure of progress. If we associate perfection with divinity, then, he writes, "digital technology will continue to occupy a role undeniably analogous to that of religion in other ages." "If the present technological age has a lasting gift for us," writes the philosopher, "it is to urge as decisive the question of what human beings are for, what the point of us is at all."

Dreher continues "it's like this: in ages past, one became a Self to the extent one was like God. In the Christian view, the more like Jesus Christ one became, the more fully human. In the twentieth century, though, Religious Man ... gave way to Psychological Man. That is, instead of looking outside the Self for meaning and self-definition, people began to look inside themselves, picking and choosing from strategies that brought them pleasure, or at least relief from their psychological and emotional anxieties."

I agree with the philosopher that the question of our age is the question of what human beings are for. Where do people look to answer such a question? Is it

possible that our question is misguided? Why is this such a puzzle for this current generation? Is technology as reliable as we tend to think it is? When you ask one of the new AI (Artificial Intelligence) apps a question, or to write an essay, or craft a speech or resume, do you question the results?

In the great narrative or story of the Bible, humans were created for relationship with God and given the task of tending the earth God made for our habitation. We humans have turned away from that relationship with God and instead of tending the earth we seek to dominate it for our own purposes. In current culture it isn't that people are atheists—that is that they don't believe God exists—but rather apatheists—they don't think it makes any difference whether he exists or not.

The story of the Bible is that it is God who can't bear this fractured relationship; fractured by our sin. God seeks to reestablish this relationship first in calling a people to be his own in his conversation with Israel and they, in turn, were to bear witness to God in the world. This story comes to its climax in God coming among us himself in Jesus—this is the amazing, if not audacious, claim of the gospel writers. The gospel writers understand their story of Jesus to be a portrait of God. Jesus has so indelibly stamped himself in their hearts and minds with such clarity that they can write nothing else.

And these gospels aren't merely a record of events that happened to a first century Jew named Jesus from Nazareth, though they are surely that. These gospels bear witness to the same Jesus who stands among us today in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. As we read these gospels in faith Jesus himself looms before us in his ever present reality. In reading the stories of Jesus the Spirit of God moves on your heart to convince, convert, and consecrate so that you recognize that it is the same Jesus looming before you now. The believer reads a particular story of Jesus' tender love for hurting people, like the woman at the well, and she recognizes the same Lord is at work in her own heart and life in the present particularities of her life. The reader of the gospel soon senses that the gospel is reading them. Where should a young person look to know what their human life is for? The gospel writers say, look here to Jesus!

In that portrait of God painted in the gospels we find that Jesus could certainly hold his own among the scholars of his day. At twelve years of age he is found sitting among the learned and asking questions; all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and answers. (Luke 3:47) But that isn't where we see his ministry thriving. We find this as we journey with Jesus in Galilee among the working class and poor proclaiming the good news of the kingdom—healing the sick,

restoring sight, raising the dead, casting our demons. It was the marginalized and those who lacked influence who flocked to Jesus and found a ready welcome in him. You don't have to be a scholar to know Jesus; too often we let our scholarship get in the way of knowing him. This isn't to denigrate learning, we are to love God with all our minds. But it is to acknowledge that our learning has limits and so does technology. What the gospel writers hold before us is our profound need to have personal encounter with him.

2. C.S. Lewis held academic positions in English literature at both Oxford and Cambridge universities. He came to faith in Jesus Christ after years as an atheist and his writings have influenced many to embrace faith and helped believers grow in their faith. Lewis made this observation. "Christianity, if false is of no importance. But if true, it is of infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important!"

It is this last line of Lewis' observation that I want to highlight, "The one thing it cannot be is moderately important." There is no in-between with respect to Jesus. As many have noted, Jesus is either lunatic, liar or Lord. His claim, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life' can't be moderate. He either is or is not. And as I read the gospels it is clear that each of the writers regards Jesus to be of ultimate importance. They aren't writing a biography of a person they think readers may find interesting to read about. One of the purposes of crucifixion at the hands of the Romans was so that the person would never be heard of again and a clear warning to anyone else who might consider following in their footsteps. To write a story exposing the wrongful death of Jesus of Nazareth at the hands of the Romans is not written to sell books. And there is a certain amount of risk in so doing. These authors are all in with Jesus.

Consider Matthew. He was a tax collector in Capernaum. Given the lucrative business of collecting taxes Matthew lacks nothing materially in life. He could have stayed in Capernaum and lived comfortably enjoying the considerable fruits of his labour. So why does he answer Jesus' call to follow him and leave all that behind? Further he knows what society thinks of him as a tax collector. "Tax collectors and sinners' was a euphemism for those deemed unfit as God's people. Why would Matthew so readily get up and follow this Rabbi named Jesus? There must have been something so compelling about Jesus that Matthew knew he had to say, either I'm in or I'm out—there was no moderate stance to take.

Matthew's gospel highlights obedience in following Jesus. He is the one who gives us the details of Jesus' sermon of the mount. What Matthew finds in Jesus is

redemption and the way of walking with God. He focuses on Jesus the man living in this world. Perhaps this is why Irenaeus chooses the creature with the human face to match up with Matthew.

Mark was a follower who accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. He eventually accompanies Peter and his gospel is considered to be taken largely from Peter's preaching. Mark writes his gospel when he came to Rome just after Peter and Paul are executed by Nero to encourage believers to keep following Jesus even in the face of persecution. In Mark's gospel Jesus is victor over all the forces of evil—sickness, infirmity, evil forces, the devil and even death. Jesus is not moderate. So, Irenaeus matches Mark with the creature who has the face of a lion.

Luke was a physician and travelling companion with Paul. He is quite familiar with the persecution and hardships that came with proclaiming the good news of Jesus. Luke was concerned that people be certain that what they have been told about Jesus was true. He researches eyewitnesses for his story of Jesus. Luke emphasises how Jesus gave himself for the outcasts and healed the sick and infirm. Luke is also the one who gives us Jesus' parable of the prodigal son in which the fatted calf is sacrificed to welcome the lost son home. Thus Irenaeus chooses the creature with the face of a calf or ox, both animals for sacrifices, as the symbol for Luke.

John the Apostle, deemed a threat by Roman authorities, was exiled to the windswept rock of Patmos. He is the one Apostle who died a natural death as an elderly man. He served faithfully preaching the good news of Jesus even though it eventually led to the loneliness of exile. There was no moderation for John when it came to Jesus. He is the one who emphasises that Jesus is God come among us. To see Jesus is to see God. His gospel soars in this respect focusing our attention on Jesus the second person of the triune God who has existed from all eternity. And so Irenaeus matches John with the creature that has the face of an eagle.

Rightfully, these four writers are called evangelists. They believe Jesus to be of ultimate importance. I think the Apostle John speaks for them all when it comes to the purpose of their portraits of Jesus. "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."

So Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John continue to sing the praise of One who was and is and is to come and put their question to us—will you believe.