

REFLECTIONS . . .

Summer 2009 Volume 23, Issue 2



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The Gospel According to John as History

That the Gospels are theology rather than history has become a commonplace in some corners of the academic world. And, yes, certainly, the Gospels do intend to tell us about God and God's dealings with the human race. The Gospels do have a strong theological intent, that you and I and all others might know and ground our lives upon what God has done for us through Jesus.

Yet were the evangelists, the writers of the Gospel accounts, to be with us, they would likely point out that there is no need to make a dichotomy between theology and history, as if to be one excludes the other. Their intent in writing was to provide us with an accurate history of Jesus in order to bring us to the theology, to an appreciation of what the event of Jesus means for us and our relationship with God.

Indeed, recent studies of the Gospels have shown that, among the literary forms of the Graeco-Roman world in which they originated, the style of writing that the four Gospel accounts most resemble is the biography, the historical study of the life of a great person. Now, that by itself is not a guarantee of accuracy – biographies can contain mistakes, even lies. But the point is this, that nothing about the structure or form of our four Gospel accounts gives any reason to suppose that their writers or their readers would have had any doubt that they make the claim that every biography in the ancient world made: here we have accurate information that will allow the reader to make a sound judgment about the subject of the work.

Now, if we consider the Gospel accounts as biographies, the one among them that would have been most appreciated by the professional historians of the ancient world would have been the Gospel according to John. For one of the qualities most praised in a biographer was selectivity, was skill in picking out just those incidents that best shed light upon the subject, and developing those incidents at length, using them as windows that shed a true light upon character. By this standard, the Gospel according to John comes through with shining colors.

As opposed to the other Gospel writers, which tell, often hurriedly, of a vast number of healing miracles, the Gospel according to John speaks of only a few, but uses each of those to show us something important about Jesus. Here [John 4:43-54] we are back at Cana, where His disciples were first given grounds to believe in Him, because, we read, they saw His glory in the turning of water into wine. They saw the miracle, but more importantly they saw Him. Now, in this second sign, they and we see something more about Him, his ability to give life: "Your son will live."

Yes, by the standards of the world in which they lived, what the Gospel writers as a whole were producing was that form of history called biography, and the Gospel according to John could with justice be termed historical writing of the highest order. Each reader must decide whether he or she finds convincing the author's message – in truth, that point is made time and again in the Gospel according to John, that each of us must make a choice, in regard to Jesus and His claims. But what this document purports to be is not a theological essay, but history in the service of theology, providing us the facts that will allow us to make the right choice.

-Fr. James, O.S.B.

Discernment Tip:

- nothing is different until you make a decision
- when you're ready to make a decision, you'll make it, and not before

The Challenge of Forgiveness

How challenging the Gospels are when they speak of forgiveness in the light of events several years ago when terrorists killed thousands of people in New York, hundreds on a Pennsylvania farm land, and many persons in Washington's Pentagon.

The message and the values proposed in the Gospels are wrapped in mystery for us no matter how old we are. It is difficult to understand the meaning of love and forgiveness of enemies.

A little more than a year ago, a gentleman stormed into a one-room school house in a Pennsylvania Amish community and shot ten young girls, killing five of them and then turned the gun on himself. A few days later, families grieving the loss of their children, attended the burial services of the killer, hugged his wife and family members, and donated money to the killer's widow and her three young children.

These grieving families and the surviving students still struggle with the pain, but they use forgiveness to transcend that pain. The example of the Amish families shows that the values of the Gospel can be met. Difficult it is for us to understand the Lord Jesus' teaching on love of enemies. Let us pray we do as best we can to support and encourage each other by our own example in forgiveness and love of others, especially enemies.

-Fr. Michael, O.S.B.

Discernment Tip:

- be willing to ask the difficult questions
- it is possible to accumulate data forever

Jesus Christ is Lord

Christians of a number of denominations sometime ask why the Catholic Church has a feast celebrating the Triumph of the Cross right before autumn begins, and is this a duplication of Good Friday?

But it is not a duplication. This date has its roots in early Christian history, where it was on September 14th in 320 AD, that the first Christian Empress, St. Helena, mother of Constantine, the first Christian Emperor, found the true cross at the base of Golgotha. Then in

335 AD when the chapel on top of Calvary was dedicated, it was on September 14th that the true cross was raised in blessing. Therefore it was exalted, hence the Triumph of the Cross. By the seventh century, it was celebrated in Rome and throughout the Christian world.

And not a duplication of Good Friday, for we notice that the Gospel is not the story of Jesus on the cross as related in the Passion story. Instead, we have Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, that refers back to that incident in the Book of Numbers, when, in order to protect the people from being bitten by serpents, God told Moses to make a seraph, put it on a pole, and those who faced it would be saved.

So our question is, what is a seraph serpent? It was the python, in the ancient world, that was seen as civilization. A seraph serpent means a cobra and was accepted as a royal image. And so when Jesus uses that image, he refers to himself not only being lifted up on the cross and that those who looked at him in faith will be saved, but also, that he will be lifted up in the resurrection. So the cross becomes for us, a new tree of life. The old tree has brought death, but the new tree, the cross, though dead wood itself, brings life.

And the meaning of this feast comes out so strongly in Paul's Letter to the Philippians, where Paul is actually quoting an early Christian hymn, but adds something to it. The hymn has a certain structure beginning with Jesus as the Word of God who existed for all time. Then it moves on to his coming in time as human, being humble, obedient, unto death. And then, Paul adds a line, "even death on a cross," the lowest and most painful form of death in the Roman Empire. Then the hymn moves on, "But God exalted him – and bestowed on him the adoration of believers." So finally we are at the top of the hymn, that those who, in faith, proclaim the most holy name, would be saved. And that name is not Christ. God saves through the Messiah. But that name above every name is Lord, *Kyrios*. This then is the one who rules the cosmos. For Christians say, Jesus Christ is Lord.

In the Eucharist, we Jesus' death and resurrection. We receive the benefit of the cross, the forgiveness of sins, and the gift of the resurrection, the promise of eternal life.

We proclaim to the world in a very special way that the cross that had brought death to the world becomes for us a throne of our Savior. It not only gives us eternal life, but gives us the strength to express to everyone else in the world the love of Christ, the strength we need to show God's love.

-Fr. Julian, O.S.B.

Discernment Tip:

- once you make a decision, go for it, and don't second guess yourself

Mary and her Names

What is in a name? A well known phrase from Shakespeare's play involved Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*. She sought to disconnect the name and the person, because her family and Romeo's family were fighting like the Hatfields and the McCoys. So, she wanted to put some distance between the family and Romeo.

The names that we use to honor the most Blessed Virgin Mary are certainly numerous. The Fathers of the Church, the holy writers, always wanted to find a connection between the name of Mary and Mary herself -- her qualities. And they did. Some saw her as the Star of the Sea, others as the Bearer of Light. Recently, one favorite is 'Lady,' in the sense of royalty, somebody with power and somebody who is of great dignity.

In considering the Gospels, the name of Mary seems to be common enough. There are about a half dozen or so mentions of Marys, different Marys, in the New Testament. St. Paul mentions one. There are others such as Mary, the wife of Clopas, and Mary, the sister of Lazarus, and others.

Isn't that interesting that the Blessed Virgin Mary, during her lifetime, seems to have carried a name that was a pretty common one? Of course it is common now precisely because of her.

Here was somebody whom the angel addressed with a new name. We don't think of it that way, but the angel did. The Angel Gabriel addressed her when he came not with the name of Mary -- he addressed her with the word that we translate 'grace.' But he addressed that to her as though it were her name. Exalted in heaven -- lowly on earth, they go together. And this is central to the Gospel message.

Lowliness appears everywhere in Mary's prayer, the Magnificat. Lowliness. Humility. And this is what her name reminds us of when we think of her. She is the supreme example of those who are poor in spirit who will also share the kingdom of heaven.

-Prior Anthony, O.S.B.



*Two pillars of the Abbey were called by their Father since the publication of the last issue of REFLECTIONS in Lent. Father Kevin and Father Mel (l/r) were solid examples of service and dedication to the Abbey's **Ora et Labora**. They will be missed and we commend them to your prayerful remembrance. Both death notices are archived on the Abbey website (cf the site map).*

The Eulogy for Fr. Kevin

It's night. Snoopy bams on the door. Charlie Brown gets out of bed, opens the door, and crouches down next to Snoopy on the porch. "Are you upset, little friend?" he asks. "Have you been lying awake, worrying? Well, don't worry. I'm here. I'm here to give you reassurance. Everything is all right. The floodwaters will recede. The famine will end. The sun will shine tomorrow and I will always be here to take care of you. Be reassured." Snoopy walks back to his doghouse. Charlie Brown gets in bed, pulls the covers up to his face, looks out and asks, "Who reassures the reassurer?"

We monks, along with Fr. Kevin's sister, Margo Kelley, and Fr. Kevin's brother, Thomas Sheeran, have lost one of our reassurers. In the words of Brother Peter Pavlinak who used to yell out when a younger monk would die before him, "It is not fair." Our confrere, Fr. Kevin James Sheeran, died at the age of 70, and it is not fair. As a rule, monks at the age of seventy do not die this young in our community. Fr. Kevin was active. He was strong. Fr. Kevin was our procurator, our business manager and the treasurer of this community. He was one of our historical reassurers. And, even though he would cringe at the thought of someone standing here extolling his virtues (in fact, he would walk out), we gather tonight to share stories about our reassurer.

At Benedictine University he was business manager, chief financial officer, director of ministry and a life-long member of the board of trustees. With a knack of speed and a tendency for getting the job done as soon as possible, sometimes Fr. Kevin appeared impatient, and, at times, irritated. Some people were the recipients of his temper. But really, in the words of Abbot Hugh, he was a lamb in bear's clothing. This reassuring lamb proved himself in two powerful ways,

according to the president, Dr. Bill Carroll. When Springfield College petitioned Benedictine University for administrative assistance, it was our great reassurer who emphatically asked, "Do we not have a moral obligation to assist another Catholic organization?" Today, Springfield College thrives under the auspices of Benedictine University. However, the most profound illustration of the gifts of our brother lies in his ministry. A few years ago, a student suffered an epileptic attack in her room on campus and died. Dr. Carroll asked his director of ministry to accompany him to inform her parents of their daughter's death. They found her father at home. When he received the news of his daughter's passing, it was Fr. Kevin who comforted him and consoled him. Because of a bitter divorce the responsibility of telling the student's mother fell to Dr. Carroll and Fr. Kevin. When they discovered that she was not at home, they went back to the car. When Dr. Carroll asked about how long they should remain, Fr. Kevin remarked, "...until she gets home."

In the diocese of Joliet Fr. Kevin was a pastor. He spent one year as administrator of Divine Savior Parish from 1975-1976. After the election of Abbot Valentine, he ministered for six years as pastor of St. Joan of Arc Parish, from 1978-1984. He served on the board of Villa St. Benedict and ministered to the sisters of Sacred Heart Monastery as chaplain.

Our words of grief are the same as St. Martha's words- "Lord, if you had been here, our brother would not have died." But St. Martha's prayer must also be our prayers- "I know that whatever we ask of God, God will grant it." While we all grieve at the loss of Fr. Kevin, it is this monastic community that feels his loss the most. We are older and smaller now. In the words of the late great Irish poet, John O'Donohue, We "are in this time of interim where everything seems withheld..." Questions abound for us and people would understand if we struggle with the pain of existential angst. But it is just such moments as these that we need to recall the words of St. Paul and, according to Fr. James, the unofficial motto of this great abbey: "If God is for us, who can be against us?" It is God who sees us through. It is God who directs us. It is God who guides us. And Fr. Kevin would not want it any other way.

So it's night. Those of us who grieve and are a little worried bam on the door. Who should answer the door but the Good Shepherd! He invites all of us not to sit on the porch but to be seated at the Great Eternal Banquet and together we take up the power of memory. There at this great feast we remember Fr.

Kevin's love of fine cuisine of fish and chicken. We remind him that we had to pick up after him and that his room and his office were always a mess littered with paper and dust. We needle him about his fear of bugs and his need for Fr. Christian to defend him in choir when the critters overwhelmed him. Through the stories of Br. Columban we will gather around and we will speak of Fr. Kevin's love of vacations with Br. Columban and Fr. Demetrius. We will go on and on about how upon traveling for days to the Grand Canyon, Fr. Kevin rallied the troops after fifteen minutes and said, "Let's go." Upon arriving at Yellowstone National Park, it was Fr. Kevin who revved up the car and yelled out, "Let's go," even before Fr. Demetrius could get a worm on his hook. ON "that day," when we gather in the heavenly kingdom, we will meet again. Yes, our reassurer belongs to the ages now, but if God is for us, who can be against us? Is it the lack of numbers? Is it the economy? Will it be those who take advantage of us? St. Paul would respond with a resounding "no!" Our theology and our ancient tradition comfort us with a divine whisper that we have an intercessor that has arrived at his final resting place. And if he was here now, he would urge us on with the words, "Let's go." This is reassurance enough. And, in the words of John Donohue,

*What is being transfigured here is your mind,
And it is difficult and slow to become new.
The more faithfully you can endure here,
The more refined your heart will become
For your arrival in the new dawn.*

Amen!

-Fr. Becket, O.S.B.

Discernment Tip:

- it is possible to play around in indecision so long that you lose the ability to chose
- it is normal to feel grief at the point of making a decision

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The Example of Prayer

Jesus' problem with the Pharisees was their being long on teaching and rather short on example. They teach, but they don't practice. So, do what they tell you and don't do what they say. Jesus offers both teaching and example. He tells us about prayer and that we should pray always and not lose hope.

He gave us the Lord's Prayer as a model to pray. But then, He offers Himself as a model of prayer. We see Him at many points in His ministry spending entire nights in prayer after a day of busy activity among the people teaching and healing and so on.

It was Jesus' own example of prayer that led his disciples to ask Him: "Lord, teach us to pray."

-Fr. Philip, O.S.B.