

20 Disciples and Witnesses

The gospels are to be read two ways. They are the story of Jesus' public life, his activity and teaching leading up to his death - Jesus of Nazareth the Rabbi, and no one knowing for sure what else he might be. But they should also be read, from the beginning, in the light of that death and the resurrection that followed it, Jesus manifest all through as the Messiah - as many of his followers knew him to be only after he had risen from the dead.

Like us, the second and third generation communities for whom the gospels were written would have heard them in the knowledge that Jesus is the Christ, but with much still to learn about what that might mean. The gospels were written not just to fill in their curiosity about the life of Jesus, nor even to verify their beliefs about him, but to teach them how to live as followers of the Messiah. The gospels were written to hand on the first disciples' experience of Jesus and the teaching he gave them, as a formative discipline for the life of each new generation of disciples.

Those who wrote them had spent at least a generation learning to understand his life and live his teaching in a world that continued after his death and resurrection. They gave not just an eyewitness account of Jesus' movements and words in Galilee and Judea, however much we might value such an account, but they witnessed also to the life of the risen Jesus as it had been experienced among his followers for some decades after, interacting with every other aspect of their life and history.

The gospels are the books of a believing people, of second and third generation disciples, who, like us, were challenged to discover what he meant for them in their times. They were learning how to live their lives as witness to the rule of God in times and places that were already different from Galilee and Jerusalem in the time of Jesus' journeys there. But even while they were still learning they knew they were already empowered by the Messiah's commission to be teachers of the gospel, and they drew up their teaching, for one another and for newcomers, from the words and actions of Jesus as the first generation had passed them on.

It is that teaching, written in what we call the four "gospels", that we still hear, and from which we learn. But the teaching and the writing, the hearing and the learning all take place within the life and authority of the risen Jesus. We are in his presence, or we do not hear and learn at all. We for whom the history of the world goes on, live that history entirely within the coming of God's kingdom, and there we learn both from the history passed on to us in the gospels and from the history that we ourselves are living.

*

*

*

When Luke gives his account of the risen Jesus, he has a very different story to tell from Matthew's. Instead of one appearance to the women and a single dramatic appearance to all his disciples, Luke tells us of several appearances in or near Jerusalem. They are, however, appearances in which Jesus talks and shares with

Jesus Messiah

various of his disciples in a relatively normal way. He discusses the scriptures with two of them as they walk to the village of Emmaus¹, and when he appears to the twelve, finding them still alarmed and confused, he reassures them by sharing their meal.² He shows them that his life is real; it is not a metaphor for his disembodied survival or his enduring memory.

But the life to which he has risen from death is not measured within the confines of space and time as we know it. If he comes and speaks to his disciples (as Matthew, Luke and John all tell us) it is not because his life just fits back into the slot he had left behind on Golgotha; it is rather that his life now defines all future time and space, lifting its barriers and opening it to the eternity and infinity of God. If, from time to time, he appears within time and space, speaking to those who had known him before, it is as witness to his new and continuing life and to the accomplishment of God's purpose in him.

Jesus' appearances are witness to an existence too real and too strong to be caught and kept within any of our perceptive categories. He may be seen and he may be heard, as he chooses, but no seeing or hearing gives anyone possession of him or power to define him. To see, to hear, to feel, to know are now and forever more, to become the possession of God and to be defined by the risen Messiah.

Luke tells us how, after a time, the seeing and the hearing came to an end. His gospel is followed up by a second book, which we call the "Acts of the Apostles", and in that, (tho it is also recounted in his gospel) Luke tells how Jesus ascended visibly into heaven. But not before he had, as in Matthew's gospel, given a commission to his disciples:

You will be empowered when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1: 8)

The words are very different from Matthew's but it is the same reality, and we are reminded that these accounts are not necessarily a verbal recording of things said as they were said, but the disciples' witness to the commission they had from Jesus, put by the different evangelists into words that, for each of them differently, express the one reality. The commission from Jesus is so vast and so powerful that no one formula will definitively express it, and only the whole of history from then till now, and for as long as history lasts, can show the whole of what it means.

In Luke's way of telling it, the commissioning does not end with a promise to "be with you always" but apparently with the opposite: Jesus leaving them and being taken up into heaven.

And as he sed this, while they were still looking on, he ascended, till a cloud took him from their sight; and while they were still staring up into the sky, two men dressed in white were suddenly standing beside them. (Acts 1: 9 – 10)

¹Luke 24: 13 – 35 ²Luke 24: 41 - 43

They had seen him once more and then he had gone up, disappearing into a cloud of glory. He had gone away and they had been told to stay. So they stood there, watching and wondering. For where else could they look except after him, wherever he had gone? There was no one else to follow, and if they couldn't follow him into the sky, what else could they do but look?

But a pair of angels came and told them off. "Hey you Galileans, what are you standing about here for, staring up into heaven?" (I wonder if the angels' tone had just a little touch of Judean scorn for the provincial Galileans?) "This Jesus you've just seen going up – he'll be coming back. You'll see him one day coming down from heaven." In fact, there was no call to stand gaping up there where he had gone: for after all, all they saw was empty sky. They wouldn't find his power or the gift of God up there. Instead, they were sent back to look at an empty room in Jerusalem, to fill it with other followers of Jesus and to wait.

If we skip thru the story too quickly, assuming that we already know the point Luke is making, we might easily come away with no more than a confirmation of our own misconceptions: There is this material world where we now live, and there is the spiritual world of heaven to which Jesus has gone; in due course, we are to follow him and so must live our present lives, in the body, in such a way as to prepare for that future beyond death, with him in heaven.

It's a neat little theology, but it doesn't come from Luke. Luke's account has in fact demolished such a simplistic dualism: matter and spirit, this world and the next, time and eternity, body and soul; for it is his witness that Jesus has abolished every possibility of reading either history or the word of God in that way. In the dualistic world, the body goes down into the grave and there "lies in peace". (In fact, it is quite effectively recycled.) And the soul wings its way to the spiritual world of heaven. But Luke knows that Jesus has shown us something very different, described in his account of Jesus' ascension.

For it is the physical reality of Jesus that disappears into heaven, and it is the spiritual reality of Jesus that, as we shall see, remains, utterly real and effective, in this material world. The presence of Jesus has been made completely paradoxical, to baffle any illusion that we can still sort out heaven and earth, spiritual and material, into separate spheres of reality, mapping the different positions of God and the physical universe. For it is the physical Jesus, the living body, that is no longer accessible physically, no longer measured and contained in the physical universe. It is precisely the physical Jesus who is now in the presence of God. And everything of him that we might call spiritual: his effective power, his love, his word, his personal and moral activity, his life, his commitment are here in the physical world and filled, here, with the utter reality of God.

Luke's account is meant to demolish any satisfactory distance, any comfortable boundaries between this world and another. There is only one reality, one universe in which Jesus the Messiah reigns, where he is Savior for Israel and for all the nations: one reality, as we shall see, filled with the life, energy and authority of God.

In Jesus, all that has ever been meant by God and the world of God, and all that has ever been experienced as the toiling world of human life, the material world and its

Jesus Messiah

human history, are brought together into indissoluble integrity such that everything of God is now irreversibly here in present human history, and everything of the human, physical world has already come into the uttermost presence of God, even physically. Jesus is “seated at the right hand of God”. The distance between the eternal and infinite of God and the physical world we inhabit has been crossed and closed. Not only spiritual and material, but divine and human, have been united.

And this is the kingdom of God, accomplished by Jesus the Messiah.

Luke uses the dualistic world-view, heaven on high and earth below, but only to overrule it, to show that all its distances have been bridged, that angels chat with mortals, that heaven’s glory and earth’s rich peace are one and the same, that there is salvation Now, in the coming of God. I don’t mean that we are to pretend. We still live within a painful history, circumscribed by it, but God and everything that God offers, is no longer circumscribed out of it. People still live and wrestle with the world’s indifference, resistance and cruelty; plans prosper and are frustrated; bodies are pleased and flourish, and they are tortured and die. But the gospels tell us that Christ is here in this our history, the Messiah ruling us in all God’s power without any of the world’s parameters being able to limit or prevent him.

The kingdom and its power are here, and here the glory of God is revealed.

It is of this that Jesus’ disciples are to give witness – not of a universe divided in two, with the other, the better part, still inaccessible to us; not of history still waiting for a conclusion and for the coming of God, but of the Messiah’s reign inaugurated. It is even as the angels sang on the hillsides of Bethlehem: God’s glory, even in the highest heavens, consists in a baby in the animal compound, warmed by animal bodies in a world that smells of fresh and healthy dung.

Both Matthew and Luke describe, at the end of their gospels, a happening that is eternal and transcendent, yet also historical and future historical, concrete of the world and history in which we now live. Neither the going nor the staying of Jesus are to be understood without the whole of history that follows it. For all the differences in their ways of telling it, both Matthew and Luke are writing, in a few sentences, the same history: the future history of the world, as they know it is to be. To the end of time, it will be the work of the followers of Jesus to witness to and act within the kingdom of God, demonstrating the presence of Jesus at the right hand of God, and his presence, in all authority, with us in the world. The distance between Matthew and Luke is in fact so great that all of history will fit into it, and yet it is filled, bridged and held together by the Messiah, who is both the Son of David ruling at the right hand of God, and God-with-us for all our days. It is this vast reality of Jesus the Messiah that will constitute the rest of history, and of which his disciples will always be witnesses.

Jesus sent his disciples out to bear witness to him. As time goes on, their circumstances will be very different from his, but still they will find themselves learning from him, to implement his program and to carry out his task in fulfilment of the will of God. Tho their circumstances are very different from those they read about in the gospels, they will know them for the circumstances of Jesus the Messiah as he lives and rules now. They will know that they are always meeting life with him, as

his followers, and in it discovering what the rule of the Messiah actually means in our world.

* * *

For many Christians the sphere of discipleship lies within our own hearts and souls. It is individual to ourselves, or it extends only to the immediate relationships we form with the people we live and work among. That's as far as it goes. Now it is quite true that discipleship is within our own hearts, in our direct relationship to Jesus the Messiah, and that it lies within the relationships we form with our immediate contacts, but it goes further. The life of disciples will not stop short at the boundaries of our individual self or at the edge of a small cluster of relationships which we identify as our personal sphere. It will extend into the whole life of the community, to challenge and change there, and there to bear witness to the way of Christ.

For we are who we are together. My individual self is realised in the relationships I build with others, and that togetherness is further realised in the communities made from our interdependence. Community, whether neighborhood or nation, is built out of our selves and our many interacting relationships; it is the wholeness of our being together. And discipleship does not stop short of this whole reality, but follows through to witness, to take action, to challenge and to change throughout, changing communities as surely as it transforms our hearts and our relationships. It is all the one work of Christ, in which we are engaged and to which we bear witness.

Our relationship with the Messiah is deeply individual, changing our lives from within, for each one of us is a follower of Jesus the Messiah. And it is personal by engaging and changing our relationships, teaching us in our being together to relate to one another as to disciples of Christ and children of the One God. And our relationship with the Messiah is one that infuses the whole of what we are, claiming and ruling our identities as community and nation and as one world together. As such, it changes our hearts, changes our relationships and changes our world, a revolution that overturns even our nations to witness to the true kingdom and government of God that the Messiah is bringing about.

When we think of being disciples, it's easiest to think of having a role like preachers, missionaries, evangelists. We tend to concentrate on those areas of our life – church, once-a-week fellowship or bible study – where we feel we are in touch with Jesus' world. But the call and the challenge to be followers of Jesus extends into every walk of life. To be a disciple is to recognise Jesus the Messiah, to believe in him and so to learn from him, in whatever deeds or career we find ourselves engaged. For the Messiah, who rules over all that is the world, will call and teach disciples in every part of it, until all of it matches the pattern of his manifesto.

The Messiah rules in the whole world, where international banking and plumbing, trade, industry and agriculture, politics, counselling, entertainment all have their place; and disciples of Jesus are called to find their place for being disciples in all of these. To be a disciple of Jesus the Messiah is to believe that everything and every structure of living comes under his rule to be reshaped and remoulded until it reflects the teaching he has given us. For it is already in his hands to become the kingdom of God.

Jesus Messiah

Some would say, I think, that being disciples means being honest and hard-working in our workplace, never blaspheming, never indulging in lewd talk and being kind and friendly to our colleagues – and that's the lot. To be sure, it's a fairly challenging program, and if we succeed in doing this we will do good and not disgrace the name of Jesus. But to be a disciple brings us into very much more than that. If we are disciples of Jesus and true witnesses to him, we will be striving to change the very structures that pay and promote us. Tho we find our careers within the professions and enterprises that are shaped for money, power and competition, we will be dangerously at odds with them, subversive and revolutionary, working hard and honestly indeed, but also critiquing and searching for ways to change the direction even of our very secular and self-serving institutions. How can they too help the poor, encourage the struggling, bring justice to the oppressed?

That will not be easy. Unless we believe in the one who teaches us, the very questions will seem to be out of place and futile. It will damage our career prospects to ask them out loud or even to let ourselves think them. But even the systems which are driven by money and power for money and power, are the field of our discipleship, where we will not be able to sit easy and prosper without asking the questions and witnessing to a world which, in spite of itself, is already being changed into the kingdom of God.

It's not that we go into our world with serene foreknowledge of God's plans for it, a blueprint showing the Messiah's intentions for any business, factory or office. We are disciples, which means we are learning. We may have heard the Messiah's manifesto, but we still have to learn how that applies to this bank, this agency, this hotel, this newspaper for which I work, this bus I drive. But we know that it does apply, and that it will apply as a radical challenge.

How is it so? If we are disciples, still learning our teacher's way of life, how can we be caught up in a work that will change the world? Are we learners or already experts? But if we are Jesus' disciples, we learn by doing, and what we do, with him, is nothing less than God's work of mending the world. What the Messiah teaches us is not shut within ourselves and practised in private there, but is lived out in our work and our communities, as doing the will of God in them. And the will of God is nothing less than that this world, this sorry world we know and live in, should become the kingdom of God and of his Messiah.

While we're still learning, we'll already be doing the will of God and so living and acting that the kingdom of God comes about, even here on our earth. But how on earth can that be? After all, we're not even good at being learners. How can we be involved in the great task? We are still virgin, and God is telling us about the child in our womb. How will God bring it about that all this is fulfilled?

And above all, how can we be disciples, learning so much and doing so much, when the teacher from whom we want to learn is not visibly and audibly present? How can we take his teaching for Aramaic-speaking peasants and townspeople in first century Galilee and translate it so that it works in the languages and customs of the 21st century world? How can we now be in contact with Jesus and how will the teacher teach us?

Jesus is risen and with us always. Jesus is risen and has been taken up to the right hand of God. How will his presence with us and his presence with God be realised for us? How will the energy and authority of God, the power of the kingdom that he proclaims as Messiah, be effective in our life and times?

Therein lies a mystery. Not a dark mystery deepening into fear and confusion, but a mystery of too much light, too much evidence, too many new possibilities and new directions opening up all at once, the mystery of an explosive new creation, where the power of God leaps into life and action, transforming the world. It is a mystery of so much energy and drive that it can only be harnessed by a story, and told as the true story of the Acts of God among Jesus' followers.

Jesus Messiah