

## ENGAGING THE GREAT CONVERSATION June 2010

The Synoptic Gospels are called that because they are more or less similar to each other. Biblical scholars discuss with us how much is more and how much is less, in their opinion, based on textual and other evidence. But most of us can agree, whether we are scholars or not, that Matthew, Mark, and Luke are more or less similar. And, when we begin to look at John's Gospel, we can pretty much agree that it is quite different from the Synoptics. The fourth Gospel was written toward the end of the first century; so we may assume, given circumstances, that people were asking yet newer questions about this Jesus Way, and that the author was addressing some of those.

Recall some of the circumstances between the approximate time of Paul's letters and John's Gospel: Claudius, poisoned by his wife Agrippina, was succeeded by her son, Nero. Nero had his homicidal mother Agrippina killed. Nero had his wife Octavia killed and married Poppaea Sabina. Nero ordered Seneca to commit suicide. Nero committed suicide, was succeeded by Galba, who was succeeded by Vitellius, who was succeeded by Titus who, responding to the Jewish revolt, destroyed the temple in Jerusalem and was succeeded by Domitian. Peter and Paul, along with many others, had been martyred.

Imagine living in such grim political circumstances! Imagine being a frightened, grief-stricken, perhaps vengeful, Christian when ruthless persecution is the official stance of the state toward you and your community. Is there anyone who can speak with compelling authority in such times?

Peter, Paul, so many others are dead. To whom does the Jesus community turn now? In John's Gospel it is Jesus himself who speaks, often in lengthy discourses: of hardship, hatred and love, promising an "Advocate, the Holy spirit whom the Father will send in my name, (who) will teach you everything, and will call to mind all that I have told you."

I wonder about the differences between the Synoptics and the fourth Gospel and the differences between personality styles in individuals and in communities, for example, reporters vs. personalizers, or extraverts and introverts. There are times when we and the world need someone who is "out there" reporting *about* events, leading like a king, proclaiming and healing, expanding and building. And there are times when we and the world need someone who *personally* knows the depths inside of us, "in here" where sorrow and fear and rage echo and surge and threaten. John, for the length of the church's history, has resonated most eloquently with the "in here" kinds of experience that impact us, individually and corporately.

Later on, we'll take a look at how another age and time, deeming the Synoptics historical, learned to imagine history merely on the surface, the outside of things, promoting an "out there" activist style of Christian life and ministry, sometimes distracting from and discounting altogether the "in hereness" of Jesus' impact on and in us. "Memory," Augustine later would tell us, "is tied to hope." Memory and hope make relationship real and true across time and space. The Jesus community of John's Gospel, having lost so much, needs an Advocate who "calls to mind," who makes good on the promise of memory, offers hope, restores and renews personal and corporate relationship so that both individuals and the community can flourish, as John says, in, while not of, the world.

Suffering grief, in fear or anger have you ever felt that you might lose even the memory of someone you love or once loved, or that you yourself might be forgotten? We tell stories not as ends in themselves but to preserve *memory*, to keep *hope* and *relationship* alive. The fourth Gospel reminds us we are not alone in this: the Advocate – *not as an outsider* reporting *but as the deep most Insider* personalizing - compels us to call to mind.... Can you imagine, then, how your own story, maybe especially calling to mind its hardest parts, contributes to the Jesus community's corporate story, continuing the Great Conversation?