

ENGAGING THE GREAT CONVERSATION May 2010

Engaging the synoptic gospels is our task this month. By now you may be concluding that sampling the history of Christian thought via a one-paged topic at a time is both presumptuous and grandiose. Whole libraries have been written about the Synoptics, and each of them, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, is longer than one page. How presumptuous! How grandiose to imagine dealing with them so briefly! But, remember, we're only getting ourselves into the conversation, not trying to finish it.

If you want to know what biblical scholars think about these three gospels you might pick up a good introduction to the New Testament, or read the introduction to each one in a version of the New Testament such as Eugene Peterson's *The Message*. Our work, however, isn't just to find out what the scholars think and have thought but to introduce what matters to us into the conversation. To do that would continue the process already going on in New Testament times. Consider, between the time of Paul, his letters and these gospels, interested parties began asking new questions about a Jesus some had known and others had not. Some who had known him were still alive and could offer their perspectives on questions being asked. Some, on the asking end of the conversation, were Jewish and may have wondered whether Jesus' lineage going back to David the king was pertinent and, if so, what that might mean. Matthew may be a response to that sort of concern. Others may have wondered more about what Jesus did, what power drove him, what happened with him. Mark's gospel seems to address those kinds of issues. Recall that not all Christians were Jews by this time; so others may have been wondering about the expanding church and its mission in the world. Luke/Acts begins to inform us on that score.

So, who was Jesus anyway? What connection does he have with David the king, with power and its administration? And what would *true leadership* look like? How would we recognize it? What did Jesus do, and how and why? What difference does it make that he did some things and not others, and that he did them the way he did as opposed to some other way? And what is to be the nature of this community that is developing in response to his leadership? What marks it as opposed to other kinds of community? Questions like those were being raised and responded to in the synoptic gospels.

We tend to read or to hear the gospels as "stories" or as "lessons." But what's a story? What's the difference between a mere story, a tale meant merely to pass time or to entertain, and the gospel stories? Is there a difference? What do these gospels *intend*? If we were to listen seriously to them, as good conversation partners, it might be important for us to listen to what each of them *intends*, rather than to assume we already know yada-yada-yada. Matthew, Mark, Luke may surprise us yet, if we can stop pretending we already know what they mean. In fact, re-introducing *meaning* as our question, rather than someone else's foregone conclusion, might deepen our part in the conversation.

Which reminds me of the other conventional hearing: lessons. Much later in our history we'll get into how it came to pass that *Mystery* was reduced to *morality*, and how morality was pared down to Victorian etiquette, and how, finally, it became possible to be considered a good Christian simply by virtue of exhibiting neighborly manners-- as though each gospel story was no more than a forerunner to Emily Post.

For now, though, I would suggest the following: imagine as you are reading or hearing the gospel read that Jesus is present with you as your conversation partner. He looks straight into your eyes, and via the story spiritedly addresses your innermost self directly with the question, "What about you? Decide!" What's your response? Are you inclined to move *away* from him, *toward* him, *against* him, to *resist* or to *join* him? To the degree you can honestly own your response, mannerly or not, you may be closer to realizing that these gospels are more than stories, more than lessons, and that they may touch you more deeply than you ever anticipated. Or not, depending on who you, by what authority, decide Jesus is.