

Introduction

THIS IS A BOOK about reading the gospels and bringing them into one's own experience of life. It takes the form of passages from the gospels, sermons I have given on those passages, and questions meant to open them up for the reader. My premise throughout is that the gospels cannot be reduced to rules for life, to stories illustrating moral lessons, or to facts demonstrating the truth of theological propositions. Quite the opposite: the gospels are—in my view deliberately—full of problems, uncertainties, tensions, and incompletenesses. These are essential to their meaning. The gospels call on us to engage with them, to read them, to ask questions about them, to live with them alone and together, and in all of this to confront as honestly as we can the difficulties they present. They invite deep and complex responses in us, and it is in those responses that they come to full life.

Thus a passage in one of the gospels may seem to say one thing to us as we first read it; we then discover a question lurking in our minds and bring it back to what we are reading. When we do that we often discover another question, leading to another line of thought. All this suggests the possibility of alternative and contrasting readings, and perhaps connections with other scriptural texts, which themselves ask to be read, and so on in principle indefinitely. At the same time we may well be asking how what we are reading connects to our own lives today and find ourselves mystified or disturbed, looking for resolutions and not finding them.

By this point we are engaged with what we are reading, alone or together, and the life of that engagement is, for the moment, the conversational life of the gospel itself. I think that to say that the gospel lives in conversation is to say that God lives there too. Not in rules and com-

mandments and theological propositions, but in the life that the gospel stimulates in us and calls us to.

This life is different for each person, for each of us has a different soul, a different mind, a different history, and a different location in the world. “How does the gospel speak to me?” is a proper and important question for each of us, and we should expect our answers to be different too. It speaks to each of us in the moment at which we find ourselves. It calls us to bring to our reading and hearing of its words the experience of our actual lives—just as it asks, in turn, to be brought to that experience, to illuminate and perhaps transform it.

It is important that the conversational life to which the gospel calls us is not only that of an individual but that of a community. To read the sacred texts together, over time, has always been the Christian practice, as it has been the Jewish practice too. This reading, and the conversation it generates among us, is in fact one of the ways the church is kept alive. I hope that this book can be read by groups as well as individuals, who will in that way be continuing the conversation that began nearly two thousand years ago. In particular, it is the point of the questions that begin and end each chapter to stimulate conversation within the reader, or among the readers, of this book.

A word about what I mean by *conversation*. I do not mean the kind of casual interchange in which we all engage a good bit of the time, when our brains and souls are turned off, or mutual back scratching, but the opposite of such things, a deep and sometimes fearsome interchange between mind and mind, soul and soul, friend and friend. Questions are an important part of it: questions we ask ourselves; questions we ask each other; and, when we are reading the gospels, questions the gospels put to us. At its best this kind of conversation can lead us out of our familiar terrain into a new space, where new things can be seen and said. We can find ourselves saying things we never knew or heard before. That has certainly been my experience in composing these sermons, and I hope it is your experience too, as you find yourself saying new things in a new way. This is one way the gospels come alive again in our time.

In this book some of the sermons close with a prayer, and some of the questions end by asking you what prayer you would make in response to what you have read. Prayers of both kinds are an important part of our response to the gospels, and an important stage in the conversation they create and guide.

I should also say this: while in one sense the gospels come to us—they reach out to us, they call us into being—in another sense we must go to the gospels, with a readiness to experience the change in ourselves that our engagement with them may bring about. In teaching poetry to undergraduates I found myself saying that a good poem will not simply come to you as you are, offering a feeling or an image you can take away with you, the way, say, an advertisement or political speech does. Rather, it requires you to come to it, to engage with it on its terms, not your own. In this work is its meaning. This is true of the gospels as well, indeed of any text that has as one of its purposes the transformation of its reader.

Deep in the process I am describing is this question: what is the proper relation between the Scripture we are reading and the experience of our own lives, including when we most feel that the Spirit is alive in us and in the world? How can we possibly connect these ancient texts, written in an ancient language, to our lives today? We live in a completely different society, we are formed by a different culture, we engage in different pastimes, we are governed by a different kind of law and polity, we have a radically different experience of the natural world, and we live with a set of technological capacities that could not have been dreamed of in the time of Jesus.

Yet in a deep sense our lives are the same. The gospel is about what is central to human experience. It speaks to our souls.

The sermons are reproduced, with very light editing, in the chronological order in which they were given. They mainly concern the gospel passage for the week, which I reproduce at the beginning of the chapter. Where the sermon discusses one or more of the other readings, I include them as well. Some themes recur, in particular the nature of “belief” and the mysterious nature of the Jesus we read about in Mark’s Gospel. Sometimes I include a reference of a highly local kind, for example to a baptism that is about to take place in our church or a stewardship campaign that has just begun. I have left these in as reminders of the particularity of the life to which these sermons are addressed.

I use the general term *gospel* to refer to the general message of Good News that the particular gospel texts in their different ways seek to ex-

press. That the gospels are different from each other, creating lines of questioning and tension among them, is in my view one of their great virtues. This fact makes plain that it is our task to engage with the puzzles and difficulties the gospels present, which we cannot expect them to resolve for us. In this they define our responsibility as living and believing and doubting souls.

I encourage you to read the chapters slowly, perhaps only one at a sitting. That will give you time to let the gospel passages live in your mind as invitations to the conversation they exist to invoke.

Let me also add an obvious point, which is that the gospels are the primary texts here. The sermons and questions are offered only as ways of thinking about the gospels and how they might be brought into our lives.