

Recently in Victoria, before the opera, Ron and I killed time at Russell Books. I always look through the religion section and occasionally come up with a treasure. I found such a treasure – a copy of *Reclaiming the Bible for a Non-Religious World* by John Shelby Spong published in 2011. Some of you may remember, Spong, as the radically progressive and inclusive Episcopal Bishop of Newark, New Jersey from 1979 to 2000. I am finding many useful insights in his book. The one insight that I want to present to you now is about the organization of the Gospel of Mark. I have never encountered this particular insight in any of the reading I have done or the preaching I have heard.

Let me start with a mystery. Jesus is widely understood to have had about a three year earthly ministry. That duration is reflected in the Gospel of John in that it discusses three distinct Passover festivals in which Jesus participated, hence three years. Yet the Synoptic Gospels present Jesus' earthly ministry entirely in the context of a single year. Spong provides a very interesting and highly credible answer to the mystery.

It is important to remember that Mark's Gospel is the first gospel. Matthew and Luke were strongly influenced by it. Spong points out that at the time of Mark's Gospel the followers of The Way, as those who followed Jesus were known, were still going to the synagogue. Although Mark wrote his Gospel before the destruction of the Temple, he wrote in Rome so the synagogue was his only place of worship. The followers of The Way still hoped for the acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah within Judaism. The rupture of the two religious traditions did not really begin until the destruction of the Temple in 70 and was not complete until about 135. Mark is writing in about 65.

A reminder that you have heard many times from me: the Gospels are not history, they are theological statements. Spong points out that Mark's stories of Jesus earthy ministry are completely mapped to the liturgical year in synagogue worship. Mark's gospel has 16 chapters. There is no nativity story, and there are no childhood stories. It begins with the Baptism of Jesus by John in only 2 verses, then 2 verses for Jesus temptation in the wilderness, 2 verses to begin the Galilean ministry, then 4 verses on calling the first disciples, and then the ministry truly begins through the rest of the 1<sup>st</sup> Chapter of Mark and for the next 9 chapters. The final 6 chapters are entirely involved with the last week of Jesus' earthly life.

The trial, condemnation, crucifixion and resurrection are correlated to the Passover picking up from Paul's letter to the Corinthians written some 15 years earlier that says of the passion *Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you really are unleavened. For our paschal lamb, Christ has been sacrificed.* 1<sup>st</sup> Cor. 5: 7 Now if you Google or, if you prefer do something really quaint, look up in a dictionary the adjective paschal, you will see its first meaning is Passover and its second meaning is Easter.

So working backwards from coupling the passion with the Passover, the Jewish festival of light known as Hanukkah commemorates the return of light to the Temple after its desecration. Mark presents the equivalent in the Transfiguration as the light of God falls not on the Temple but on

Jesus and on Moses and Elijah who appear on the mountain with him representing the law and the prophets. We come next to the festival of Sukkoth which was an 8-day celebration of the harvest to which Mark relates in our reading this evening the parable of the sower and the stories of seeds. Next we come to the Festival of Atonement, Yom Kippur a day of cleansing and reconciliation. Mark presents all the healing stories of Jesus. Finally in our backwards journey we come to Rosh Hashanah, the New Year. Mark presents the baptism of Jesus by John, the Spirit descending upon him, and the voice from heaven, *You are my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased*. Mark 1: 11. In short, the Gospel of Mark is a theological statement placing the life and ministry of Jesus in the liturgical context of synagogue worship at a time when it was yet unclear that there would not be reconciliation between the followers of The Way and mainstream Judaism. Both Matthew and Luke followed Mark's pattern, but with considerably more detail because writing as they were 15 to 20 years later, reconciliation between Jews and Followers of the Way was looking less likely. By John's time, with his Gospel as late as 125, reconciliation looked both very unlikely and not entirely important as so many gentile churches had grown up including in Ephesus where John was writing. The complete break occurred incrementally from the destruction of the Temple in 70 to 135. The final blow to any hope of reconciliation was when Simon Bar Kokhba led the rebellion against Rome and was hailed by some rabbis as the Messiah. None of the Followers of the Way could tolerate that when they already believed and experienced Jesus to be the Messiah.

I hope you find all I have just said useful in understanding some of anomalies, contradictions, and silences on certain subjects in scripture.

So to this evening's reading, the Markan connection of Jesus to the Festival of the Harvest. Well I have spent most of the time available to me on giving context. So I shall try to be brief. These three seed stories are amongst the best known tales from the Bible, and as with all best known passages they are weakened in meaning by the disease of over-familiarity. It seems to me a few questions emerge for us in our time:

What is fertile ground for the message of God in Jesus? Heaven knows there is no shortage of well trodden paths that produce little or nothing, rocky ground that produces much that cannot last to full fruiting, and invasive plants that choke out everything in their path. Would we know what was good, and when it was ready for the harvest? Can we distinguish between seeds? Can we find the mustard seed that will grow so the birds of the air can make nests in its shade? These are questions that the church and we as church people need to ask and pray for answers.

A set of questions that I haven't ever heard anyone ask coming out the parables of the sower, the growing seed, and the mustard seed is deeply personal: What was the seed that was sown in me? How well is it growing? Have I been a faithful cultivator? Will I know when the harvest is ready? Will I know when to plough under and reseed? What and how will I sow differently given what I have learned with the previous crop? Amen