

Mark's Good News

Our Bible has a problem. It tells the story of Jesus . . . four times. In four different ways. We have four different gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John - and they don't always agree, even in the details. When did Jesus throw the money-changers out of the temple? John says it was early in his ministry. The others say it was five days before he died. How many blind men did Jesus heal on his way to Jerusalem? Mark says it was one. Matthew says two. Did Jesus say, "Blessed are the poor in spirit?" Yes, in Matthew. But in Luke, he said, "Blessed are the poor," which is *not* the same thing.

These are little differences, but there are so many of them that reading the gospels can be a genuine problem for left-brained people - you know, the ones who like certainty and accuracy and the gathering and assessment of verifiable facts. Left-brainers are the engineers, mathematicians, statisticians, and accountants of our world, and we need them. But they are not people who can overlook random variations in basic facts. "How many demoniacs did Jesus heal at Gerasa? Mark says one, and Matthew says two. They *can't* both be right! Why doesn't somebody put all the gospels together into just one coherent narrative with no contradictions? Would that be so hard?"

Actually, someone did. In the second century after Christ, a left-brained Church Father named Tatian put the four books together, removed contradictions, and smoothed over difficulties. The resulting single gospel, called the *Diatessaron* ("Through Four"), became the standard gospel for Christians in Syria for the next three hundred years. But only in Syria. Everywhere else, the church chose to keep all four gospels – with all their little inconsistencies – side by side in scripture. And after the fifth century, even Syrian Christians went back to the confusion of four mostly (but not always) parallel gospels.

Here's why. It isn't just the facts that are different: each writer has a very different theology, expressed in very different ways. Matthew is a very Jewish gospel, intent on showing how Jesus is the true fulfillment of the Hebrew Scriptures. Thus it quotes a *lot* of the Old Testament, and it spends an awful lot of time on Jesus' conflicts with the Jewish priests and scholars, those who didn't accept Jesus as the Messiah. Luke, however, is written for Gentiles and so is largely uninterested in conflicts with the Temple authorities. Instead, Luke stresses that the good news of Jesus Christ is extended to the poor, the weak, the rejected, the outcast, and the neglected.

(Remember, in Luke, it's "Blessed are the poor.") And the reason we need all the gospels – despite their factual inconsistencies – is because we need all their theological perspectives. We need to know that Jesus fulfilled the Hebrew Bible, and we need to know that his good news is for the oppressed.

This summer, we are going to be examining the life of Christ: Mark's version. In my sermons (beginning June 21), I will be telling Jesus' story as Mark tells it, highlighting the specific themes of Mark. Along with this sermon series, the adult Bible Study class will be studying the Gospel of Mark in a more detailed manner, and we will be encouraging our confirmands (and anyone else who would like) to read through the Gospel with a study guide. This summer, let us live in the Good News of Jesus Christ. According to Mark.