

Jesus meets the people

An introduction

For many people the gospels are a source book for theology. What did Jesus say about this issue or what did he say about that issue? So what should we teach about this or that? Or how should we act in this situation or that situation? Or what should the church teach about this or that?

While there may be such lessons in the gospels, this little book takes a different approach. It sees Jesus as a person with a mission, meeting people, talking to them, and reacting to them as individuals or groups each according to his situation and need. This means that what Jesus said to one person may not be applicable to another person.

If my approach is correct it is a warning to the theologian who is looking for theology in what Jesus said and did. He must first look deeper at the situation and the person. It is also a warning against simply taking what Jesus said in one situation or to one person and immediately applying it to a different situation or a different person without first trying to find a deeper understanding of Jesus and his ways. Such an approach is little better than the proverbial story of the man who wanted to know what he should do, so he opened the bible at random and read: "Judas went and hanged himself". He didn't like that verse so he tried another random verse. It came up: "Go and do likewise". Fortunately the man did not copy Judas.

Let us look at this in a little more detail with some examples. Jesus met many people in his life. Sometimes he spoke in general terms to the crowds who came to him and sometimes he had a special message for individuals. John said of Jesus that "He knew about everyone, he didn't need anyone to tell him about a man, because he himself knew men's thoughts" [John 2:25].

When a paralysed man was brought to Jesus, he first said that God had forgiven the man for his sins. Then he healed him. Jesus knew that underlying the paralysis there was a problem with sin. When Jesus met a blind man, the disciples thought that the man must have sinned (or his parents). But this time Jesus said NO. In this case sin was not involved. When Jesus healed lepers he did not say they were ill because of their sin, though nearly everyone else thought it was because of their sin! This is all a muddle for the theologian looking for an answer to the question: "Did Jesus teach that illness is the result of sin?" He will probably decide that John, who told the story of the blind man, had one opinion, and Mark and Luke had a different opinion. In fact he will probably decide they represent opposing factions in the early church!!

However for an evangelist or pastor inspired by the Holy Spirit there is no problem. Such an evangelist or pastor will be used to the experience of being led by God to the right word for each individual. Just as Jesus the pastor and evangelist knew what was in a man, so God's chosen evangelists and pastors will be guided by God in each individual case. They will listen to Him as they talk to people.

When Jesus called his first disciples, the fishermen Peter, Andrew, James and John, there was no theology. Nothing about sin, nothing about forgiveness. Nothing about being good or being kind. He just said in effect: "Come along with me, I've got a job for you. I want you to go fishing for men."

When Jesus met the learned rabbi, Nicodemus, there was theology galore! "You must be born again. You must start a new life in the Kingdom of God, starting from the beginning as a baby. But don't think people will understand you. They won't because you will be like the wind. No one knows where it comes from or where it goes to."

I became a Christian many years ago as a student. One of the things that convinced me that there was a God was that a Christian who spoke to me said something that had a special meaning for me which he could not possibly have known. Only God could have put those words into his mouth. (I wish I could remember what it was, but I have long since forgotten it.)

Jesus still has a special message for each one of us. What is it for me? What is it for you? It won't be the same for all of us.

This book looks as what Jesus said to some of the people he met. Perhaps by looking at what Jesus said to them we might get some idea about what he is saying to us today, how he reacts to us, and how we should react to him and others.

I hope you enjoy reading the book and learn as much by reading it as I have learnt from writing it. If you have any comments, if you disagree with me on something, please write to me. I would love to hear your comments. May God bless you all.

Philip Gordon.

Introductory notes:

The Mishnah:

In a number of places in this book I refer to the Mishnah. This was a collection of Jewish religious teachings made after Christ. The history of the book is very obscure. It is not possible to decide how much was written down at any time. What is clear is that many of the sayings are very ancient and derive from the time of Christ. The fact that they illustrate the New Testament in so many areas is a good argument for their authenticity. I have therefore referred to the Mishnah freely while appreciating that there may be some doubts that some of its contents were current at the time of Christ. The edition I refer to is the translation by Herbert Danby DD published by the Oxford University Press in 1933.

Josephus:

Josephus was a Jewish writer who witnessed at first hand the Roman invasion of Israel about 70 A.D. He wrote several books that provide a mass of background information for the New Testament period. Josephus wrote in Greek and the translation I have referred to is that by William Whiston.

The quotations from the Bible:

I have made my own translations.