



Mark 4:10-12 "When (Jesus) was alone (with his disciples), those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. And (Jesus) said to them, 'To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything comes in parables, in order that 'they may indeed look but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.'"

The great success of the early Christian Church was its ability to absorb and accommodate vastly differing peoples and cultures. From the very beginning Christianity spread quickly from a Jewish background into a Greek and Roman world, and then stretched far beyond the borders of the Roman Empire, bringing

in parts of the culture and thinking of each successive region. It is not for nothing that Christianity is sometimes called "baptized paganism," for the Church transformed many foreign practices and ideas and holidays and holy places into Christian ones. The early Church was lenient and flexible in its approach to others. This was both its greatest strength and its greatest danger. For even within the New Testament there is evidence of growing conflicts between differing theological parties within the Church; just as there still is today, sadly. As historians have come to realize, however, during the first three centuries of the Christian Era, the practices and beliefs found among the people who called themselves Christians were so varied that the differences today between Roman Catholics, Primitive Baptists, and Seventh Day Adventists, pale by comparison. This sermon is the first of a four-part series on some of the theological discussions and debates going on in those early centuries. And interestingly, elements of so-called heretical thinking often still remain in the Church today.

So, one of earliest and best-known heresies of the Christian Church was Gnosticism, which derives its name from the Greek word for knowledge, 'gnosis', and was a religious movement that developed around the idea of a special knowledge that can lead to salvation. And that special knowledge was frequently esoteric in detail, and often secretly passed down from

generation to generation. Contemporary scholarship now largely agrees that Gnosticism has Jewish Christian origins, beginning as early as the late first century of the Common Era, in Jewish and early Christian groups in Galilee and Samaria, though some scholars argue Gnosticism may well have existed even before in pagan circles. For centuries, most of what we knew about Christian Gnosticism was limited to the anti-heretical writings of their opponents, people like Irenaeus of Lyons and Hippolytus of Rome, who will later be deemed as orthodox early Church Fathers, though at the time both sides saw themselves as orthodox. And so, the adjective 'Gnostic' is regularly applied to works that hint at secrecy and esoteric knowledge in the Church, a little like the passage I read from Mark's Gospel about why Jesus taught in parables.

There was a renewed interest in Gnosticism after the 1945 discovery in Egypt of the so-called Nag Hammadi library, thirteen leather-bound papyrus codices buried in a sealed jar containing a remarkable collection of 52 rare early Christian and Gnostic texts, including the only known copy of the Gospel of Thomas, which opens with a gnostic verse: "These are the hidden words that the living Jesus spoke. And Didymos Judas Thomas wrote them down." The book is then composed of 114 sayings attributed to Jesus. There is no narration of Jesus' life, and almost two-thirds of these sayings actually resemble

those found in the canonical gospels, and indeed some of those in the Gospel of Thomas are viewed by scholars as earlier versions and thus more authentic than the versions we have in our Gospels.

Theologically speaking, Gnostic theology postulates a dualism between God and the world, often with a plethora of divine beings that mediate between the two. Within Christianity, Jesus is seen as the primary divine being who intercedes in our relationship with God the Father. Gnostic thinking first appeared in the principal centers of Christianity simply as schools of thought, commonly associated with several different teachers, not always agreeing with each other, but who were generally intellectual and articulate. The best-known Gnostic teacher was Valentinus, a priest who taught first in Alexandria, then in Rome, where we are told he had hopes of being elected bishop of Rome "on account of his intellectual force and eloquence." Valentinus produced a variety of writings, including a work called "The Gospel of Truth," very well known in the early Church but like so many other works deemed later to be heretical, it was suppressed and lost to us, as most Gnostic writings were. Yet like the Gospel of Thomas, Valentinus' work was uncovered in the Nag Hammadi library.

The Gospel of Truth then is a declaration of the unknown name of Jesus's divine father, the possession of which enables

the knower to penetrate the veil of ignorance that has separated all created beings from God. Jesus, of course, revealed that name to his followers. The work is mystical with much symbolic language, reminiscent of tone and themes found in the canonical Gospel of John. Surprisingly it is not a particularly unorthodox book, though it is a bit strange reading, but less strange than say the Revelation of St. John the Divine. Interestingly, Valentinus' disciples reported that he received his teachings from one Theodas, a pupil of the Apostle Paul who is otherwise unmentioned in Christian sources.

Generally speaking, the Gnostics believed that once one had discovered the gnosis, the knowledge of salvation, then one could escape the entrapment of our spirits in this material world. The truth would set one free. For Gnostics, God rescues those who know Him from enslavement to the world, the flesh, and the devil.

The numerous later Gnostic Gospels which came to be written purport to reveal those secret explanations and instructions of Jesus to his Apostles. The actual teachings ranged from those which embodied much genuine philosophical speculation to those which were wild amalgams of mythology and magical pagan mystery rites drawn from all quarters, with only the slightest admixture of Christian elements.

To the Gnostic Christians, Jesus was always assigned the central place as the emissary from God who brought to humanity this special knowledge, this gnosis or this logos, a unique revelation, which was handed down to his Apostles and from them to secret disciples, thereby affording us a means of salvation. In response to this apparent secrecy, the early Church began emphasizing historic Apostolic succession as the principal means to combat the secretness of Gnostic authority and to verify who the original Apostles actually sanctioned as the leaders for the Church. Anyone in the early Church could then openly trace the authority of their Bishops back to Jesus, but not so with the Gnostics. Thus, by the end of the third century, the Gnostics had been thwarted and passed through the Church, becoming secret schismatic sects of little influence, because by then all orthodox Christians considered themselves to be agnostics, that is opposed to the teachings of those secret gnostic sects and schools.

Yet even so, Christians today remain fascinated by the ideas that there are "lost" books of the Bible, or hidden prophecies, or secret codes, that can explain the way to salvation. For it seems very obvious to me that at the heart of many Christians' understandings is the assumption that some specific knowledge, or some defined set of beliefs, is necessary for salvation. That is why, for instance, Baptists and others

will not baptize children, for children cannot yet understand the necessary matters of belief, and that understanding is essential to a real possession of faith. Not until they reach the magical 'age of discernment' can children possibly know the truths necessary for salvation. Similarly, many parts of modern Christendom for centuries refused to allow baptized children to receive Communion until they are confirmed, and thus had received instruction, lest they receive Communion without fully understanding what they are doing, as if any of us fully understands it, or as if that understanding was a necessary precondition for God's redemptive activity.

For many Evangelical Protestants, there is a similar Gnostic-like emphasis on knowledge. You have to "know" Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior. If you "believe" in Him, you will be saved. Sacraments are not important in Protestantism, because post-Enlightenment religion is more a matter of the mind, then of the heart. God, for many Christians, seems to save us in response to our believing, rather than the traditional view that we come to believe in response to God's saving activity in our lives. And Catholics are no different. The Romans, for instance, can certainly tell you exactly what articles of faith you must believe in order to be saved, and they can assure you that you will be damned if you do not believe in such doctrines of the Church as the Immaculate

Conception or the Assumption of Mary, for believing such doctrines is held by them as necessary for salvation.

There is often no room with such Christian thinking for simple faith or love, often no need of good works, only right believing is necessary. Such thinking creates a Church certainly not for children, or for that matter, for the simple-minded or the senile. Rather it is a religion for the clever and the articulate, which is why such people are always so ready to argue religion with you, like the Gnostics, desirous to change your mind, but not necessarily your heart. Much contemporary Christian activity seems to me to be all too Gnostic at times, too dependent on knowledge, upon some specific understanding or belief.

Indeed, Anglicans are often criticized by both Roman Catholics and Evangelicals alike because we cannot always specify exactly what it is we believe, as though that was the essential element of Christian faith. We may rely upon the Creeds perhaps as guides for right thinking, but we should all understand that it is not right thinking that saves us. God saves us, even though we sometimes don't rightly understand God at all, and even though God always remains something of a mystery beyond our comprehension. Grace is found in the life of the Church, not in formulas of faith or our ability to understand. The problem with Gnosticism is that it centers not



on God, but on the self, and on self-understanding. It has sometimes been called the theology of self-awareness, as though the raising of our consciousness is what will save us. But for orthodox Christians, Jesus is more than an emissary from God who brings the secrets of self-awareness to us. For Jesus came to redeem a fallen world and a fallen human nature, not by knowledge, but by love and self-sacrifice. In the end, Christians seek not to escape the world or the human predicament, but like Jesus, to simply transform it. AMEN