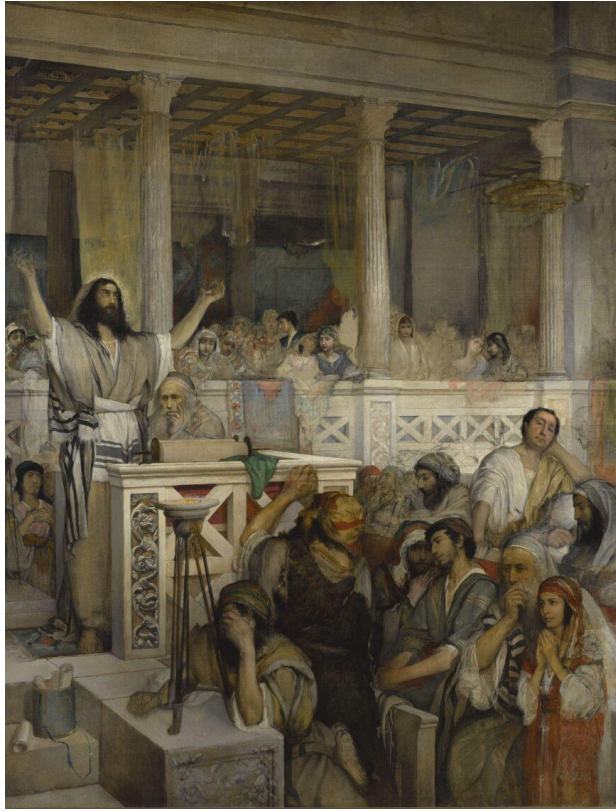


A NEW TEACHING



Mark 1:21 "Jesus and his disciples went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, (Jesus) entered the synagogue and taught. (The congregation was) astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes."

A friend of mine at seminary once noted that when Christians are asked to describe who Jesus is, their answers tend to fall into one of three categories. First, the theological, where we identify who Jesus is by declaring, for example, that he is the Messiah, or the Son of God, or the incarnate Word, or some other such title, very God of very God, begotten, not made. Secondly, we might identify who Jesus is by the supernatural events we

associate with his life, where we note his Virgin birth, for instance, or the numerous miracle stories, like walking on water or raising Lazarus from the dead, or we simply focus on the Resurrection appearances as crucial and fundamental to our understanding of who Jesus is. Or thirdly, we might simply identify Jesus as a religious teacher, and focus on his sayings, on the parables, his teachings, and on his manner of life, his welcoming of sinners and outcasts, of Samaritans and Gentiles, and his crossing of the cultural barriers of his day. So, which of these came first to mind for you in answering that question, who is Jesus?

Mark begins his gospel with this story of how Jesus' teachings astounded the crowd at the synagogue in Capernaum, how he taught with authority, and not like the scribes, but alas, Mark doesn't tell us here what Jesus actually taught there at the synagogue in Capernaum. He focuses instead upon the healing of a man with an unclean spirit! Sadly, miracle stories in the Gospels often get in the way of Jesus' teaching, as do theological proclamations. But it is Jesus' teachings with which I am personally most interested, and in which the earliest followers of Jesus also seem to me to be most interested.

Now Mark's Gospel tends to be seen as the oldest of the four in our New Testament. And remember that Mark's Gospel interestingly has no birth narrative and no resurrection

appearances. That absence was so shocking to some of my friends in college, that they just assumed that those parts of the Gospel were simply missing, that they got lost somehow, something like the outer sheets of the book must have come off somehow, with the beginning and end of the real story forever lost, they thought. For how can you tell the story of Jesus without the Resurrection? Or the Virgin Birth, they exclaimed? Note, however, that codices, books as we call them today, didn't start to appear commonly until the fourth century, so Mark's Gospel would originally have been written as a scroll, and not a book whose outer pages could be easily lost, and none of the early Church Fathers ever suggests that Mark contained more than we have. Thus, those tales of the virgin birth and a miraculous resurrection only seem to come later to the story. And so distressed were later scribes and copyists of Mark's Gospel by the absence of any resurrection appearances, that no less than four different endings were later added to the manuscripts of Mark's Gospel, so as to include some mention of the Resurrection.

Moreover, it appears that both Matthew and Luke in writing their Gospels had a copy of Mark's Gospel before them as they composed their own, for there is a clear literary dependence between these three synoptic gospels. And in addition to Mark, Matthew and Luke seemed to have shared another source, called Q by biblical scholars, from the German word for source, quelle. And

yet, those shared passages that seem to derive from Q are exclusively sayings and parables of Jesus. Again, I had friends in university who simply could not imagine an early source of the story of Jesus that was simply his sayings and parables. That would be preposterous, they exclaimed! Where are the miracles? Where are the theological declarations? Where is the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection? A book of just his teachings, really?

Then in 1945 in the desert sands near Nag Hammadi in Egypt, a collection of early Christian texts was uncovered, including the so-called Gospel of Thomas, which consists only of 114 sayings of Jesus, no miracles, no theological declarations, but something very akin to the long-suspected Q document. Indeed, almost two-thirds of the contents of the Gospel of Thomas resemble sayings in our canonical Gospels. These two early Christian documents then, Q & The Gospel of Thomas, and they are not the same, both consisted only of Jesus' teachings, of sayings and parables! Remember, Jesus' teachings apparently astounded the crowds of his day, as he taught with authority, they said, and did not teach as the scribes or Pharisees, who relied upon proofs texts from Scripture.

So, what does it mean now that most of us Christians are more interested in the supernatural stories of Jesus and our theological declarations of who he is, than we are interested in his teachings. Indeed, the Fourth Gospel (6:60) tells a story where a crowd surrounded Jesus upon his return from cleansing the

temple in Jerusalem, only to later turn away from him because his teachings were "difficult." Indeed, I think we often overlook the harshness of much of Jesus' teaching. To be a disciple of Jesus was demanding; it was life-changing. For Jesus required absolute sincerity and singleness of purpose for members of the kingdom of heaven, as the parables of the light, the lamp, the eye, and even the salt are used to illustrate (Lk. 11.34-5, 14.34-5). Jesus required radical acceptance of this new covenant in his followers. "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." "You cannot serve two masters." "Take up your cross and follow me." High among the duties is the love of one's neighbor, especially the foreigner and the outcast. Ethically Jesus appealed to the highest principles of love, forgiveness, and the mercy of God.

Moreover, Jesus took his stand upon a direct, intuitive understanding of God's will, not upon the scribal practice of authoritative interpretations of tradition (Mk. 7.5-13; Mt. 5.17-48). It was Jesus' freedom from the scribal tradition, and his unhesitating rejection of scribal authority, which astonished the crowds and roused the antagonism of the religious authorities of his day, that eventually lead to his demise. His teaching was a threat to their influence over the people, and to their whole system of religious interpretation and regulation.

Matthew provided a long summary of Jesus' teaching, which we collectively refer to as the Sermon on the Mount, and which

concludes with the often-repeated response that "(the listeners) were astonished at (Jesus') teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes" (Mt. 7.28-9). There in the Sermon on the Mount is the crux of his message: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. . . For unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. . . You have heard that it was said to the men of old, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.' But I say unto you that everyone who is (just) angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment . . . You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye. . . But I say unto you, do not resist one who is evil. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also . . . Give to him who begs from you, and do not refuse him who would borrow from you. You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say unto you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you . . . Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal . . . Do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. . . Judge not, lest you be judged . . . (And) not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but (only) he who does the will

of my Father who is in heaven. . .” and so on and so forth (Mt. 5-7).

With teaching like that, perhaps it is not surprising that the crowds were astonished, or that many rejected Jesus. For Jesus' sayings are indeed "hard" and demanding. So, it is perhaps not surprising that some when they heard Jesus' words and understood his teaching, "drew back and no longer went about with him" as John put it in his story.

Interestingly, Jesus didn't make religion about himself, about who he was, or about his followers, about what they wanted. Old ways were simply passing away. Those who wished to be first, must put themselves last, and be servants of all! Their lives would be transformed, fulfilled, and sacred. This was the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven, a new covenant, a new commandment. It didn't originate in something the people wanted, but in something God wanted. For God wants us to love one another, God wants us to be reconciled with one another, to care for one and another, especially the poor and the outcast, to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned. And this new age wasn't in the control of Jesus followers, nor was it happening for their purposes, or even promising them dominion, the kind of things they wanted! No, it was promising peaceful coexistence now, with the Samaritans, with the Roman oppressors, with the self-righteous Pharisees of their day, and with those of ours. It was promising

love and justice, the kind of things God wanted, the kind of things that lasted, the kind of things that mattered. What Jesus was teaching, what Jesus was calling his followers to, was 'difficult,' and challenging, and transforming --- changing lives and changing communities. Do we really want to be a part of that? Are we up to that challenge? For Jesus is still out there calling to us. How are we going to respond? Amen.