

How to read the Gospels

When you listen to a preacher interpreting a scripture passage it's like listening to a pundit from MSNBC or Fox news. They often start with a point of view and use the scripture to support their point. As one of our Redemptorist Missionaries knowingly quipped, "I don't let the Gospels get in the way of what I want to say." It takes a great deal of study and a life time of prayerful reflection to learn to come to the scriptures with the openness Jesus intended. The only way to truly hear his meaning is to gradually be taught to see and live from his perspective. This is why he left us the Holy Spirit: "I have to go so that the Spirit may come...." (Jn 167)

The Gospel's intention is to involve us in the life, story, meaning and perspective of Jesus. IT is far more than gaining knowledge about Jesus. The Gospels will gradually awaken us to his experience, understanding and wisdom. This is his revelation – not facts and ideas but a way of relating to the Divine dimension of all Creation that profoundly informs our relationship to one another. The gospels draw us into a process of awakening to Jesus' awareness of the spiritual reality of our being.

Scriptures are based on experience, not concepts and ideas. They come from the experience of gradually awakening to the Father love and being taught by the Spirit to love one another as Jesus does. This is a deeply intimate connection that ultimately brings us to the treasure and freedom we long for, in which there is nothing we must prove, nothing we must protect, where "I am who I am" in the unconditional love of God. The gift and revelation of the gospel is incredible, personal, communal and concrete, all at the same time.

Jesus is the Divine/Human Son of the Father. We must keep this tension, the union of heaven and earth, central in our listening to the Word and his human stories. When we over emphasize the divinity of Christ we lose the reality of his humanity. And when we overemphasize the humanity of Jesus we lose the mystical dimension of his consciousness. As a theology professor summed it up, "In the divinity of Christ we know everything there is to know about our humanity. And in the humanity of Jesus we come to know everything we can know about our divinity." Or as St. Athanasius put it "The Son of God became human so that humans might become God."

The historical Jesus has much insight to give us about how Jesus developed, learned, and grew in wisdom, in stature and in favor with God and men (Luke 2:52)). The mystical and divine dimension of Jesus keeps us alert to the divine reality that is the center of our humanity as well as the spiritual depth of our being. When we lose the mystical dimension of Jesus we end up with an ego centric and psychological approach that robs us of our divine and spiritual depths. Jesus' attitude and consciousness is human, he experiences and reacts the same way we do. He grows and learns and matures just as we do, by dealing with his life situations. In John's gospel he is profoundly affected by the women in his life. Read the story of Cana (John 2) and you see a Jesus who is still learning to put his beliefs into action. When his mother tells him, "Son, they have no more wine," he responds, "What does that have to do with me. My time has not yet come." Like a wise mother she turns to the wine stewards and tells them "Do what he tells you." She's knows it's time for him to act, even if he doesn't.

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When he meets the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4) he is still gripped by the historical Jewish disdain for Samaritans. By the time their encounter is over, she has argued with him, and he has come to realize that his Father has room in his house for all his children. Much the same thing happens with the Canaanite woman who tells him that “even the dogs get the scraps from the table. (Mt. 15:27).” And her quip awakens within him a compassion for people in need, no matter what their national background. The Gospels will do the same thing to our lives if we let them.

When we read the scriptures there are no superfluous words. Every detail has a reason for being there. But what the four Gospels have in common is that they are revealing creation from the point of view of Jesus’ consciousness, an experience of intimacy with the Father, as it is experienced and struggled with in the lives of the various gospel communities.

Our religious upbringing has taught us to read scriptures as morality lectures. They portray Jesus as scolding us for not doing well enough, or from a more positive point of view teaches us how to please God more fully. They seem to demand change on our part as the price of God’s love. This has the unfortunate implication that we are the center of our lives. It stresses our egoic mind and will as the primary source of our moral worth, which focuses our lives on saving ourselves. This short circuits Jesus’ basic message – risk all for love, give yourself over to God’s unconditional love as the source of your love for one another.

Let me quote a modern theologian (Ilia Delio – *The Humility of God*) who puts this very clearly:

How can we look at the Biblical text in a manner that will convert us or change us? I am going to define the Bible in a new way for some of you. *The Bible is an honest conversation with humanity about where power really is (i.e. the foundation of reality)*. All spiritual texts, including the Bible, are books whose primary focus lies outside of themselves, in the Holy Mystery. The Bible is to illuminate your human experience through struggling with it. It is not a substitute for human experience. It is an invitation into the struggle itself—you are supposed to be bothered by some of the texts. Human beings come to consciousness by struggle, and most especially struggle with God and sacred texts. We largely remain unconscious if we avoid all conflicts, dilemmas, paradoxes, inconsistencies, or contradictions.

The scriptures were not intended to be a historical or factual description of what happened. They are about the *meaning* of what the followers of Jesus experienced. And for them meaning is always about the presence of God working in the concrete realities of our life. The Bible is filled with conflicts, and paradoxes as well as historical inaccuracies. In one book we read contradictions of what we have read in another. Yet it is in struggling with these conflicts that we grow up – not by avoiding them and glossing them over with simplistic explanations. Instead we are meant to have our point of view cracked open by the struggles. Think of Jesus, the divine Son, dying on a cross and you will know firsthand the mental conflicts created by his life. Think of the hope the disciples placed in this “messiah” who they saw heal people, and feed crowds, and who they hoped would lead them to prosperity and power and prestige. Then read the account of his temptations in the desert. He had to face what they faced after his death. And only after his death did they begin to learn the meaning of what he faced. It was only when they lost hope in all that they had dreamed about that they found, as did Jesus, the Divine Intimacy that

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actually sustained them. The more we allow these scriptures to cultivate our relationship with the Father through the Son, and continuously evolving through the Spirit, do we find ourselves more generous, accepting and willing to let God be the Source of our lives. This means we have allowed the story of Jesus begin to reveal the meaning of our lives.

Understanding the Gospels

When Jesus turned and saw them following he said to them. "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi... where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and see!" (John 1:38-39a)

"Come and see... Come with me. Come walk with me and learn as we go. It's not about learning about me. It's about being together in a relationship that will allow you to catch my awareness of who we are because of who our Father is.

When you come with me you'll have to learn for yourself. I'm not going to just give you information. That's not enough. "I will give you the love that my Father has given me..." (John 17:26 14"16-17). You have to bring your whole personality: your point of view; your questions; your fears and resistances; your beliefs and values; your intuition; your awareness, both mental and sensual. You learn from the inside out. You'll have to question for yourself; ponder, feel lost, be everything you are and learn that our Father is with us at every moment along the way. This is how our Father teaches us.

Let me tell you a story about how it is:'

"Imagine a sower going out to sow. Now it happened that, as he sowed, some of the seed fell on the edge of the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some seed fell on rocky ground where it found little soil and sprang up straightaway, because there was no depth of earth; and when the sun came up it was scorched and, not having any roots, it withered away. Some seed fell into thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it produced no crop. And some seeds fell into rich soil and, growing tall and strong, produced crop; and yielded thirty, sixty, even a hundredfold. And he said, 'Listen, anyone who has ears to hear!:' (Mark 4:1-7).

This is most often read from a moral perspective as a description of different people and their reaction to Jesus' revelatory teaching. It's basically read as setting up a set of criteria as to how we must respond; as if we just need to know what is right and then do it.

But as you walk with Jesus you may realize that he doesn't make these simplistic judgments. What if all the varied responses to the word / seed were contained in one person? At different times in my life, in different circumstances I've responded in all these ways.

There are times I resist, times I just miss the point, and times when I'm inspired, not just to an insight but to action. And there are even times when the word takes root and changes not only my way of perceiving reality but roots me in the deeper divine compassion that is the Source of my living. It seems to me that I need to be aware and accept all these realities to get to the point in my life where grace can do its work. And I'm sure there is more in store for me. All of this is

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part of a necessary process, a spiritual unfolding of my relationship to Father, Son and Spirit. There's a shift in focus here, a shift from my being the center of my life to God being present in all the moments of my life. When I'm the center I end up being self-centered. It's all about me. When God is the center I grow in gratitude and trust and the story takes root in my spirit.

I'm guessing that Jesus' first followers related to this from their own experience. They witnessed the uncertainty of the crowds; they knew other followers who began with enthusiasm and then lost confidence; they faced the hostility of their religious leaders, as well as their own inability to get Jesus' point. Following Jesus was not a sure thing, an obvious solution nor a clear path leading to a happy ending. Following Jesus was fraught with taking chances and running into the darkness of their own reluctance.

When I read the Gospels I look for the point of view and perspective that informs the story. And then I look for a clue as to how that perspective comes into my life. In this story Jesus simply says, "Listen, you who have ears to hear." This kind of listening, the willingness to let the seed grow in the soil of our spirit begins with cracking open the shell: "A seed must fall to the ground and die... (John 12:24).

Hearing, Seeing, Walking are metaphors that Jesus uses to describe what happens when the word to take root in our lives. Notice how we're mixing metaphors. Jesus is not concerned about a logical explanation of the spiritual path. Instead he throws metaphors, stories, parables and paradoxical situations our way so that we must deal with them. To use yet another metaphor, it's like eating pistachios. We have to crack open the shell to enjoy the sweet nut.

Seeing is blindness healed into awareness. Hearing is deafness transformed into non-judgmental and unconditionally loving presence. Walking happens when our crippled legs are strong enough to carry the weight of our whole self. All of these metaphors share a gift of healing and the process of letting go of our self (shell) to enjoy the gift of our true and divinely resourceful self – our spiritual aliveness.

What we need to bring to this process is an alert, relaxed and receptive attitude. This will allow our shell to crack open. Take a few deep breaths and breath into the story – and then pay attention to whatever comes into your awareness.

The shell is created by questions like these: Is this what really happened? How is this going to save me? What's the right thing to do? What dogma is Jesus talking about? How can I do the right thing and be the good person? What do I need to believe so that my religion is the true religion?

These are questions that make us the center of our universe. They cement our position in righteousness instead of faith and trust. They constrict our point of view, make it rigid and black and white, whereas Jesus is trying to open our heart to the complexity and vastness of life in God's unconditional love.

The sweet nut is made up of the willingness to be silent as alert to possibilities. It allows us to be comfortable in our ignorance and recognize that there is more here than we might be willing to

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accept. We need to accept our point of view for its limitations and let the tightness of our mental grip slowly be relaxed so that we can receive with open hands. And in this difficult moment we need to accept our fear, anger, shame and reluctance to let these go. In discovering this hardness in our self we will be left with prayer as our only possibility. And in this moment of frustration we may give up and find within this the grace of having room in our heart for Jesus' world - our homecoming in the Kingdom of God.

This is gradual process that finds rich soil in attention and persistence on our part. It's not very practical and we are nothing but practical people. I've found two ways to crack open the shell that have helped me along the way. At the least they give me something practical to do while I'm waiting for the grace of inspiration to take root within me.

The first way of cracking the shell involves making associations. Pay attention to the words and phrases, images and statements that stand out for you. And then write down as many associations as you can for them. As we listen to the stories of Jesus we will constantly find new surprises. Jesus' stories interact with all of his other stories, with our developing life story, and with the stories of others who share their story with us. All of these shed new light on the stories of Jesus.

I often pay attention to other things that I'm reading and then ask, how does this fit into the story that Jesus' is telling? Sometimes a lyric from a piece of music will wake up a fresh perspective within me. Even totally unrelated conversations put the story in a different context and help crack open its meaning.

INNER VIEWS

I've spent the last couple of weeks talking about learning how to read the Gospels. While I am writing and reflecting upon this I am very much aware that the thing that has helped me the most is having to preach on the Gospels. From the beginning of my priesthood I've felt that preaching is the most important thing I do. I've felt that I owe my very best to you. And I've always been acutely aware that my very best falls short of the Gospels.

It didn't take me long to wake up to the fact that I could not and should not preach anything less than what I sincerely believe and my willing to learn how to live. Preaching with integrity means that I must challenge myself to the truth embedded within the Gospels. It is never enough to simply preach what I've been taught or something I've read – no matter how clever and learned the writer was. To preach means I must immerse myself in the Gospels and open myself to a point of view and wisdom that expands the littleness of my personality. The Gospels expand every bit of who we are – not just our mind, not just our emotions, not just our moral sense and creative involvement. The Gospels build on all of who we are and transform that into a new creation.

Hidden as a backdrop to what I'm saying, and learning to preach, is the awareness that there is a consciousness, a divine presence, that is far more than I can imagine or put into words. As I write this I am aware that I feel about as young as I did when I began preaching. Maybe "innocent" is a better description. When I read the scriptures I feel innocent and naive, like I must listen intently to something I can't quite understand. I feel that the Gospels radiate a divine presence that is

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trying to expand my consciousness, open my point of view, and transform my willingness to live in a more courageous and generous way. I am being taught to be present in the same way that the Divine is present to me.

Let me give you an example for the Gospels awakening themselves within me. Earlier last week the daily Gospel was from Matthew (10:34-1:11). After reading it three or four times and then reading a commentary and then letting go by listening to music, I finally caught this: Jesus tells us “if you follow a prophet you’ll get a prophet’s reward. If you follow a righteous man you’ll get a righteous man’s reward. But if you give a glass of water to someone who is like you, just one of the common folk, you’ll be living in the Kingdom of heaven and earth.

Our religious tradition holds up prophets as exemplars of openness to God’s revelation. Our religious tradition also holds up righteous people, holy people as goals for our own living. But Jesus says there is far more in store for you – just give a glass of water to one of your sisters or brothers, to someone who needs what you can give, and you will be living in the Kingdom of God – because you are part of creating it. That’s the way I would summarize it. But you can see how much more elegant and meaningful Jesus’ words are. If you hold this image in your awareness you’ll feel it healing and transforming you.

This simple passage radiates with light and inspiration. It presents Jesus’ whole message in a few simple phrases. I feel like I’ve been privileged to catch a glimpse through Jesus’ eyes. In that brief moment, with little effort on my part, but a relaxed openness to grace I was inspired to feel alive in a new way. You can tell when this happens because it usually brings a feeling of empowerment and gratitude mixed together.

I believe that my role is to follow Jesus in his work of awakening us to his perspective and experience of living in our Father’s presence. I know that I can’t do this for you, nor is it my responsibility to teach you. At least not in the way we usually talk about teaching – as a passing on of information. Jesus didn’t settle for that kind of teaching, although much preaching settles for it. Jesus used stories and parables or make us do our own work and awaken to God our Father’s presence alive within us. I need to continue to reflect on this. Next week we’ll see where it leads.

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Reading the Gospels with Imagination

Spirituality and Religion are about connecting with a Divine Reality bigger than ourselves. They use stories, images, rituals and beliefs to take us to that place deep inside where the Divine is the Source of our lives and is creating our lives as an expression of Divine Love. Our scriptures use stories, images, rituals and beliefs to actively engage our imagination and sensitize us to the Divine activity in our life.

Imagination makes connections between what seems to be disparate realities’ and expresses them in more holistic and inclusive ways. Imagination draws us into a process that loosens the rigidity of our stories so that we are able to receive love as an inclusion of reality in our awareness. To

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do this it needs to shift between the levels of our consciousness. Images bridge the narrow point of view of our accustomed story to the spacious inner awareness of Jesus' experience of the interdependence of living with God as our Source. I believe that this is how the Gospels lead us to their revelation. They use imagination to agitate our awareness by getting us connected to the images, stories and parables as an expression of a deeply sacred and loving energy looking to express itself as us.

To understand the Gospels we need to pay attention to the connections being generated in our imagination. Our imagination creates these connections in response to the stories, parables and images of the Gospel. This means that working with the Gospels is about positioning our self in the space between our story and Jesus' story. In this space we recognize that our story is limited and needs to experience divine inspiration in order to expand it. We can do this by paying attention to and building on the images, feelings, insights, connections and associations coming into consciousness through our imagination. We become involved in an ongoing and unending process of Divine creation through our lives.

This divine unfolding of our personality has been going on all our lives. There was a time when all we knew how to do was to crawl on our hands and knees. And then something shifted within us and we felt an urge to stand up and walk. We were supported by the urging and example of older people around us, but there was also that urge from deep within. Later it urged us to speak and learn to express ourselves and then to make friends by learning to relate to other people. Again there were plenty of examples all around us but these made sense and inspire us to expression as they embody that deep inner urging.

These urges needed the help of people around us. They could be nurtured by these people and also crippled by them. In any case that deeper Divine Source was expressing its life giving energy through us and guiding us to awaken to its love through these inner urges. Our faith and beliefs are meant to help us become aware of the spiritual development of these urges as they encourage our lives to develop more fully.

When we approach Jesus in the Gospels we are not meant to analyze what is being said and done but to immerse ourselves in its reality. The truth revealed in the Gospels is not a concept we can grasp or information we should collect. The truth revealed in the Gospels is an ability to relate to reality in its wholeness. This demands an inner letting go of our small world. On a personal level the "truth" is an awareness of our essential relationship to the Divine Love that is creating the Kingdom of heaven on earth through our lives. From his own experience Jesus knows that there is no truth separate from our Divine Source. "On that day you will understand that I am in my Father and you in me and I in you." John 14:20 He also tells us "I have made known to you everything that I have learnt from my Father." John 15:35

The Gospels use stories, parables and images to do this because stories are basic to our human thinking process. We think and then try to understand our world through stories. And we use the stories we've repeated over and over to make sense of new events in our life. Stories are the primary language of our experience. And experience is the substance of faith.

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Our stories give some stability to our lives. But they are a temporary interpretation which is meant to grow, develop and expand as we respond to our deep inner urging. Our stories create a commentary on the events of our life and provide interpretation of our actions. And most important, they allow us to say what the experience means to us. But our story is also a spin doctor. It doesn't report our experience, it interprets that experience so that it fits our way of making sense of our life. When we believe we are being rational and following common sense we are actually being spun by our own thinking. We are believing our own press releases.

Jesus' stories interpret our story line to open our stories to the divine world. If we rely totally on our story to interpret life we will be reduced to rehashing the way of thinking and the awareness that brought us to this point in the first place.

To think about our thoughts and feelings prevents us from seeing ourselves accurately as we are right now as an extension of our Divine Source. Self-awareness cannot come from mental analysis. When we go deep within ourselves we discover another dimension – the stillness of Divine Presence. Awareness of our divine Self emerges from this inner stillness. This inner stillness is not made up of thoughts, it is the awareness and unconditional love that is beyond thoughts. Because it is more than our thoughts it is not conditioned by past experiences. It is born from the Source of Truth that is the Divine Source of our living.

The Gospels are trying to tune us into our Divine Source. We can do our part to tune in by using our imagination. Images are open ended by their nature while ideas are restricted to single meaning. We build on images through making associations, paying attention to the connections that arise and relaxing in the creative stillness of Divine Presence.

When we think, even though we imagine that we are thinking new thoughts, most of the time our thoughts are nothing more than a rearrangement of the memories stored in our brains. We select memories and then join them in an order that we deem logical. Even though the mind strings memories together in an array of patterns, its range of reference is nevertheless limited to "what has always been true," actually to what it has always taken to be true within the limitations of its point of view. The mind cannot come up with anything truly original unless the thinking arises from inner awareness. In fact, the thinking mind often cannot even clearly perceive what is happening in the present because it sees through windows tainted by the past. This is why all innovation and true progress is born from the stillness of inner Presence. We may believe it is the thinking mind that has come up with new ideas, but the mind is just the recipient of and channel through which these new insights are expressed. Writers talk about this as their "inner muse" because they realize that their writing can lead them to thoughts that they never expected. This is part of the joy and discovery of writing, as well as the adventure of letting the Gospels reveal our lives as expressions of our Divine Source.

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