

Conversations with Scripture

This is an ongoing newsletter dedicated to the interpretation of Scripture and the Sunday readings from the Roman lectionary.

Breaking Open the Word of God

- Each week there will be a reflection on the Sunday readings along with some interesting biblical facts
- **20th Sunday in Ordinary Time August 18, 2024**

Bible and the Visual Arts

- Each week there will be a visual presentation of a Bible passage along with commentary

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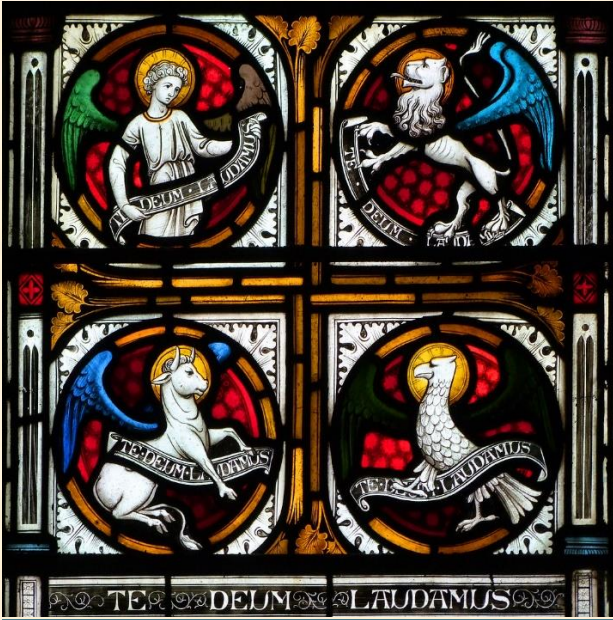
NICCOLÒ ANTONIO COLANTONIO (1445)

St. Jerome in his study



St. Jerome (340-420) is considered one of the greatest bible scholars in the history of the Church and is the patron saint of Bible scholars. He translated (or corrected pre-existing mistranslations) the Bible into Latin – the Vulgate that is the official bible of the Church. In this depiction of the saint in his study, there are two key elements of iconography that are associated with him: 1) the cardinal's hat, although he lived centuries before the College of Cardinals was established; and 2) the lion – according to legend, he removed a thorn from the paw of a lion, winning a faithful friend for life.

The Ox, Angel, Lion, and Eagle

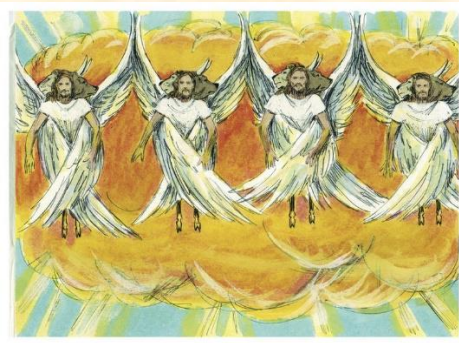


Each of the four gospels is associated with a symbolic figure based on two passages from Scripture.

The first is Ezekiel 1:4-10 – Ezekiel’s vision by the river Chebar

The second is from Revelation 4:7-8 – John’s vision of the celestial worship.

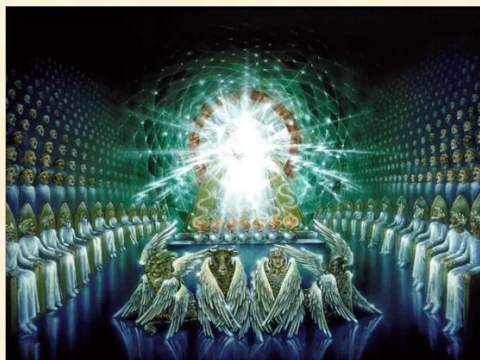
The two descriptions are similar but not identical. Ezekiel’s creatures each had four faces, while those of Revelation had only one. The evolving iconography of the early church finally settled on a lion for Mark representing the power and majesty of Christ; an ox for Luke, signifying the sacrifice of Christ, as the ox was viewed as the optimal offering; a winged man or angel representing Matthew, since he focused on the humanity of Christ; and finally, the eagle for John – the Word was incarnate from above, and the eagle has a transcendent view into the future. These four figures adorn illuminated manuscripts, paintings, and mosaics up to our own day.



Ezekiel:

⁴ As I looked, a stormy wind came out of the north: a great cloud with brightness around it and fire flashing forth continually, and in the middle of the fire, something like gleaming amber. ⁵ In the middle of it was something like four living creatures. This was their appearance: they were of human form. ⁶ Each had four faces, and each of them had four wings. ⁷ Their legs were straight, and the soles of their feet were like the sole of a calf’s foot; and they sparkled like burnished bronze. ⁸ Under their wings on their four sides they had human hands. And the four had their

faces and their wings thus: ⁹ their wings touched one another; each of them moved straight ahead, without turning as they moved. ¹⁰ As for the appearance of their faces: the four had the face of a human being, the face of a lion on the right side, the face of an ox on the left side, and the face of an eagle; ¹¹ such were their faces. Their wings were spread out above; each creature had two wings, each of which touched the wing of another, while two covered their bodies.



Revelation:

Around the throne, and on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: ⁷ the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with a face like a human face, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle. ⁸ And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and inside. Day and night without ceasing they sing, “Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come.”

The Four Evangelists



20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 18, 2024

(Year B) Proverbs 9:1-6; Psalm 34; Ephesians 5:15-20; John 6:51-58

The gifts of God in the Scriptures are often associated with ample food and drink. A longed-for future time in which the people of God will be happy, at peace, and in God's presence is usually described as a lavish banquet. We can call to mind Isaiah 25 – fine foods and wine are promised to the people when they gather on God's holy mountain. In the New Testament, the messianic age and life in the presence of God is seen in terms of a banquet (Lk 13:29; 14:15; Matt 8:11; Rev 19:9) to which all the peoples of the earth are invited. Table fellowship with the poor and marginalized was a vital part of the ministry of Jesus. The heavenly banquet was the model for the Last Supper and the Eucharist celebrated by the first Christians in the Book of Acts and 1 Corinthians 11. It signified abundance, peace, equality, mutual support, and conviviality – something we could certainly use today. In Proverbs, Lady Wisdom – the female personification of the wisdom of God – described an exquisite banquet that she has prepared for those willing to accept her invitation. She addresses that invitation to the simple, meaning those who are humble and do not think of themselves as too clever to learn anything. The arrogant and know-it-alls are definitely not on the guest list. The wisdom that she offers in her banquet is personal knowledge of God and a deep understanding of God's ways. Psalm 34 invites us to taste and see that the Lord is good – not the first time that a divine encounter is described in sensual and culinary terms. But there is a catch – eating Lady Wisdom's bread and drinking her wine requires an interior change. She demands that people lay aside immaturity! Many might object that they are not immature, but Wisdom would disagree. Those who insist on living according to human values, attitudes, and behavior – even those claiming to be religious – are indeed immature in God's eyes. Wisdom urges us to stop trying to be clever and to give up the illusion that we are wise. Live and walk in the way of insight, she urges – and this insight can only come from a divine source, and only when we are willing to change and to learn.

In the mystical literature of many religious traditions, being filled with the Spirit of God is often likened to intoxication. The author of Ephesians warned his followers to avoid the usual type of intoxication or drunkenness with which people are all too familiar. In its place, he proposed the sort of inebriation that is a gift of an encounter with the Spirit. This was expressed by singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs – what the author calls the music of the heart. This is an effective antidote for feelings of anger, depression, resentment, fear, and lack of gratitude. It is a way of generating our own happiness and carrying it with us.

In John's gospel, Jesus is the source and the giver of life, for the life-giving Spirit of God resides in him. The Word became flesh so that we might receive that sustenance from above even while we are still on earth. In describing his role as the giver of divine life, once more a food metaphor is pressed into service. Bread was always regarded as the staple of life, so Jesus applied this label to himself. He sustains and nourishes. Blood is not regarded as a drink in the Old Testament, but as the sacred bearer of life. By offering his blood as drink for those who believe in him, his role as the giver of eternal life is underscored. Just as the food and drink that we ingest creates and forms us, so Jesus will transform us – we will become who and what he is. But just as in the case of Lady Wisdom, we cannot approach the Lord with 'attitude' – only humility and willingness to learn and be transformed will suffice. Jesus does not want to remain an object of worship outside of us, but a vital part of our identity and being.

Four Different Presentations of Jesus

Why do we have four gospels – and why do we read a different one each liturgical year? Are they not all the same? Actually, there were more than four gospels, but most of them did not make it into the canon of the New Testament. In most cases, there were very good reasons for not including them, but we will cover that topic in a future newsletter. Additionally, the four gospels are not exactly the same. There are some striking differences between them, most notably in the Gospel of John. Each of the four gospels has a particular ‘take’ on Jesus – each tells the story in a different way and has a unique theological theme running throughout the gospel. They are like four paintings of the same person – some show great detail, complete with facial lines and birthmarks, while others are more abstract and impressionistic. It is important to respect the theological integrity of each of these four gospels. Harmonizing them or mixing them together does violence to the unique message contained in each one. We will begin by examining the Gospel of Mark. The other gospels will be covered in subsequent newsletters.

Mark is sort of the “Cinderella” of gospels because it was thought to be written last and a mere abbreviated version of Matthew and Luke. It’s the shortest of the gospels and is very sparse on details and the teachings of Jesus. There is a lack of elegance and style and the Greek in which it is written is rough and sometimes ungrammatical – the sort of Greek that might have been spoken on the street or in the marketplace. Throughout the centuries, most commentaries and preaching concentrated on the other gospels.

We now know that Mark was written before the other gospels – probably between 66-72 AD (although some would say earlier) – and it is our earliest account of Jesus. Matthew and Luke copied Mark but added their own traditions and theological interpretations of Jesus. Mark is the bedrock of the other gospels. Unlike Luke and Matthew, Mark does not have an infancy narrative (account of the birth of Jesus). The story begins with John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus.

It is not surprising that Mark was always symbolized by a lion. This gospel is known for its emotional intensity, as well as its constant motion and action. There is a breathless sort of urgency in the gospel as the narrative races from one scene to the other. The words “next” and “immediately” usually link one incident to the next. The kingdom of God is imminent – it is breaking in on them. Mark describes a cosmic struggle between Jesus and the forces opposed to God. Every encounter with demons or sickness is a skirmish in this war. The humanity of Jesus is much more at the forefront as he sighs and groans, is tired, and is often disappointed with the reactions of people. He is grieved by the misunderstanding and incomprehension of all, even disciples and family. He can be irritable and cranky, especially with the apostles! The life of Jesus is modelled on the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53. He suffers a painful and lonely death, abandoned by those closest to him, and he cries out “My God, why have you abandoned me?” from the cross.

The ending of the gospel is of special interest. Some of the oldest and best hand-written manuscripts of Mark end at verse 8: *But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you."* *8 So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*

This was noted even in antiquity – some of the Church Fathers comment on it. Some speculate that there was a longer ending but that it got separated somehow. It is entirely possible that Mark deliberately ended it on such an abrupt note, stressing the fear of the followers and the abandonment and aloneness of Jesus. People do not like ambiguous or unresolved endings, so in later centuries, various communities created endings to bring Mark in line with the other gospels.

These are found in your bibles at the bottom of the page with the notation ‘other ancient authorities add...’ Needless to say, none of the version listed below were in the original gospel.

These are the various versions:

1. And all that had been commanded them they told briefly to those around Peter. And afterward Jesus himself sent out through them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.
2. 9 Now after he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons. 10 She went out and told those who had been with him, while they were mourning and weeping. 11 But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it. 12 After this he appeared in another form to two of them, as they were walking into the country. 13 And they went back and told the rest, but they did not believe them. 14 Later he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were sitting at the table; and he upbraided them for their lack of faith and stubbornness, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen.*** 15 And he said to them, "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. 16 The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned. 17 And these signs will accompany those who believe: by using my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; 18 they will pick up snakes in their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover." 19 So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. 20 And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it.
3. *** adds: And they excused themselves, saying ‘This age of lawlessness and unbelief is under Satan, who does not allow the truth and power of God to prevail over the unclean things of the spirits. Therefore, reveal your righteousness now’ – thus they spoke to Christ. And Christ replied to them, ‘The term of years of Satan’s power has been fulfilled, but other terrible things draw near. And for those who have sinned I was handed over to death, that they may return to the truth and sin no more, that they may inherit the spiritual and imperishable glory of righteousness that is in heaven.

The biblical tradition was a work in progress – many communities saw nothing wrong with altering the text or adding to it to meet the needs of their own times. The differing versions are all variations on a common theme. The tradition evolved over time.

Codex Sinaiticus (4th century) showing the abrupt ending of Mark

