**How do we know about Jesus? Revd Dr Calvin Samuel**

How do we know about Jesus? Fundamentally we know about Jesus through the Bible, especially the gospels. We also get some information from the epistles. But the gospels, if you know anything about them, are wonderful insights into Jesus, but they are primarily theological documents rather than historical documents. And if you know anything about them you’ll notice that the gospels don’t overlap exactly. There are apparent contradictions in them, there are certainly points of divergence in them. One of the best examples is in John’s gospel – the cleansing of the temple happens right at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, John chapter 2. In the Synoptic gospels – and they are called Synoptics because they share a very similar outlook – the cleansing of the temple happens right at the end of Jesus’ life, in the last week of Jesus’ life just leading up to the crucifixion. So how do we make sense of things like that?

One way is to try to find some convergence, to say, perhaps the cleansing of the temple occurred twice and John tells us about the first one and the Synoptics tell us about the second. I have to say, I think that’s unpersuasive. It’s much more likely there was one cleansing, and John for a number of reasons chooses to tell that story at the beginning in Jesus’ life and the others choose to tell it at the end. What that tells us is that the gospels are not windows that you can simply look through and then you’ll see what would have happened if you were there – no, that’s not what they are; they’re much more sophisticated than that. These are highly theological documents where they’ve taken the history and they’ve reported that history in particular ways to highlight the theological truths that they think are important. Let me give you another example. In Matthew’s gospel, we hear the beatitude of Jesus, ‘blessed are the poor in spirit.’ In Luke’s gospel, you get the same beatitude but it’s ‘blessed are the poor.’ Now, it’s entirely possible that Jesus will have said that beatitude more than one time, so it’s entirely possible that Matthew records the occasions when Jesus talks about ‘poor in spirit’ and Luke highlights a different one. However, I have to say I think it’s much more likely that Luke emphasises ‘blessed are the poor’ because he also wants to make a theological point – that the God that we serve in Jesus is one who is fundamentally committed to the poor, interested in them and, most importantly, welcomes them into the kingdom.

But the reality is, those areas of divergence or areas of apparent contradictions are all relatively minor. These four gospels present to us portraits of Jesus – and a portrait, of course, is not a photograph. It has the skill of the artist, and it is an interpretation of what the artist sees of reality. And depending on when you paint a portrait – whether you paint it early in a person’s life or later in their life, or indeed the time of day or the setting, you may get a slightly different accentuation. It’s the same person, but the artist is involved in the production of that portrait. That’s what we have in the gospels. Four highly skilled artists. Four highly skilled theological artists who paint for their readers a portrait of the Jesus that they have come to know. And they’ve come to know this, some of them, by being eye-witnesses, and a number of them, of course, are not. They are a little bit removed from the events, and they have come to know this Jesus.

These convergent gospels tell us a number of things. They tell us about a Jesus principally who is raised from the dead – that is where the stories all end. They tell us about a Jesus who is one of us – he walks this earth, he lives in our world, inhabits our space, is born as we are born and dies as we die. It tells us about a Jesus who experiences a range of human experiences. He loves, he is betrayed, he gets tired, he gets angry, he weeps. You even get interesting family dynamics. We hear of Jesus at twelve years old in Luke’s gospel who, shall we say is a bit of a disappointment to his parents when he remains back in Jerusalem. That’s not the only time he’s a disappointment to his parents. There’s a powerful story of Jesus at the beginning of his ministry where his family come to restrain him because they clearly think he’s lost his mind, because he thinks he is the Messiah. And so there are some complex family dynamics there where Jesus has to say, his family are those who hear his word and listen to his command. That’s where his family is to be found.

So what we get in this picture of the gospels then is of a Jesus who is very much one of us. What that means is the gospels become really important documents for us. They’re not simply there to tell us something of the history. They are there to teach us something of the nature of God.

One of the ways in which Jesus teaches is through the parables. Parables are a fascinating way of teaching, because they are primarily narrative – and stories are wonderful things – but they are also there to disturb or to include wisdom, or as a way of addressing an issue that’s really quite difficult to address. Let me give you a number of examples. So the parable of the good Samaritan is a parable with a surprising outcome. Those who you expect to behave in particular ways, like the priest or the Levite, don’t. And the one who you might expect to behave in an expected way, i.e. not to help, is the one who turns out to be the hero of the piece. That’s not the only parable that Jesus uses like that. There’s another parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee where exactly the same kind of dynamic is to be found. The person that you might expect to be upright, the Pharisee, is actually a hypocrite. And the tax collector, whom everyone hates, is in fact the one who is justified, who approached God appropriately. In that parable, of course, what you get is an open-ended story which allows us to draw all sorts of things out of them, and that’s a really beautiful thing about parables.

Some parables are, of course, not there to be illustrations. Some parables are there so that what Jesus is saying becomes more complex to understand. So the parable of the sower. The point of that parable is so that the hearers do not understand. Now that sounds counter-intuitive doesn’t it? Why would anyone choose, as a teacher, to use an example that people aren’t going to understand? And that has been something that we wrestle with. One of the suggestions for this is that it requires that you actually pursue the meaning. In other words, those who are truly interested in what Jesus has to say – those who will demonstrate that they are disciples, will press on to find the meaning. The other understanding of that parable is that this is also a means of judgement – a way of separating those who are insiders from outsiders. [This represents] one of the reasons that reading the parables, and indeed the gospels, of Jesus is so important, because these are some of the ways that we learn about Christ.

The last thing to say on this front is that these gospels – because we have multiple gospels – we are afforded a particular opportunity to read these gospels side by side. Those who were framers of our Scriptures were not unaware that the gospels did not match word for word in every place – that there were points of divergence, or even points of apparent contradiction. And indeed, hundreds of years ago the church rejected the opportunity that was presented to them by a chap called Marcion. He suggested that we should simply have one gospel – harmonise it all, have a single gospel, and that would be the definitive story of the life of Jesus, and the church rejected that as heresy. It wanted to have these four gospels side by side, so that they could be read side by side. And what that does for us is a number of things.

One, it enables us where there are these points of convergence to ask, why might Mark describe this story using this language? Whereas Matthew uses a different kind of language. What’s going on there? It draws our attention to certain elements.

Two, where we find differences of chronology, in other words a story occurs in one place in one gospel, and in a different place in another – we then get to ask questions like, why might this story occur here? Is there a particular point? Is this driven by an understanding of God, in other words, a theological point?

But third, it’s also interesting to note what is included and what is not included. So there are some stories which occur in each one of the four gospels. I want to suggest that every one of those stories is likely to be highly important. If none of the gospel writers felt they could possibly tell their story about Jesus without including this critical story, it probably is something that’s really important. Whereas something that only turns up in a single gospel – again we may want to ask, what does that tell us? And it might tell us something about the gospel writers themselves. So, for example Luke’s gospel is the only one that tells us information about the details of Mary’s pregnancy, and not just Mary, the pregnancy of Elizabeth the mother of John the Baptist. So things like, the baby in Elizabeth’s womb leapt when she was greeted by Mary, is only recorded in Luke’s gospel. I suspect that tells us something about Luke, but I want to suggest it actually tells us something about the nature of God in Christ – that this is a God who is interested in even those tiny details of women who were in that time and culture perhaps less important in the grand scheme of things than men were perceived to be.

And so these gospels that we read tell us something about Jesus, tell us about ways in which we can understand it. They are a gift to us. But they are also rooted in a particular culture and time and space. So one of the things that we do with the gospels is try to remember that they are – they come from a particular part of the world, so they are rooted in Palestine, they come from a particular culture, and they come from a particular time. And so if we are going to understand some of the dynamics, some of the stories, some of the events that happen, we spend a bit of time trying to root them in the historical context, recognising that whilst they are timeless documents and we’ll be reading them in a hundred years’ time or a thousand years’ time, if the Lord tarries, they are also documents that are rooted in a particular time.

So how do we know about Jesus? We know about Jesus primarily through the Bible, especially through the gospels and the epistles, and that’s why we spend time getting to know them – familiarising ourselves with them, and asking questions like ‘why is this story here?’ or indeed ‘why is it not here in this gospel?’ ‘why is it in this order?’ ‘why are these words used?’ because each of the gospel writers are trying to do something very specific as they paint their skilful portrait of Jesus.