

Cork Scripture Group (March 2023)

Gospel Portraits of Jesus

(Phil Mortell)

Three writers are asked to write an article about *Mary Robinson*. The **first writer (a Community Development Worker**, writing for a Community Development magazine) might stress Mary Robinson's determination, since taking up the Presidency, to travel the length and breadth of the country meeting people, groups and communities – encouraging, supporting individuals' voluntary involvement in their local and national issues. The **second writer (a Barrister**, writing in a Law Society Journal) would stress her interest in the law and her determination to update Irish law on numerous matters with a keen interest in matters relating to women in Irish society. The **third writer (a returned Aid Worker**, writing in a Trocaire newsletter) might emphasise her concern for marginalised individuals at home and abroad, her visit to Rwanda during the famine there and might even see this develop into her role as United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

All three articles would have a lot in common (date of birth, education, qualifications, career highlights, family, interests, etc.) – but there could also be significant differences between the three articles. **Because, the three different authors are writing from three different points of view, for church members in three different settings, with three different messages - but all recognisably dealing with the life and times of the one person. The writer, the setting, and the message – all influence how an article, book or indeed gospel is written and/or presented.** Similarly, each of the four gospels tells the story of the life and ministry of Jesus in its own unique way.

This presentation will look at 3 Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke). They are also called the Synoptic Gospels because they have many similarities. Despite this, they also emphasise different aspects of Jesus' life and teaching, as each writer has a different personal view, and each is writing for people in a different setting, and experiencing different difficulties.

Books:

*Marie Noonan Sabin, *The Gospel according to Mark*, Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2006.

Morna Hooker, *The Gospel according to St. Mark*, London: Black Publishers, 1991.

*Barbara Reid, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2005.

Donal Senior, *Matthew*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998. Donald Senior, *Jesus: A Gospel Portrait*, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1992.

*Michael Patella, *The Gospel According to Luke*, Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2005.

Robert Tannehill, *Luke*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996.

Luke Timothy Johnson, *Living Jesus: Learning the Heart of Jesus*, New York: Harper-Collins, 1998.

Mark's Portrait of Jesus:

Mark's gospel was written around 70 A.D. There is no certainty about where it was written or for whom it was written. **But, we are sure that the Christians in that city were being persecuted openly for their new-found faith.** Therefore, it was understandable that Mark would recognise **that setting.**

Mark's gospel, then, focuses on Christ as suffering for his faith – opposition, rejection, persecution, crucifixion. But, God raised Christ from the dead to an eternal, embodied life, thus overcoming his suffering (Morna Hooker, *The Gospel according to Mark*, 22). And Mark's message is that his church members will also overcome their suffering and be raised by God to eternal life. So Mark's message is one of encouragement and hope in times of suffering or adversity. Suffering is the background or setting against which it is written. But, of course, there is much more to Mark's gospel than suffering.

Mark uses several titles to describe his picture of Jesus and his mission – e.g. **Son of Man, Servant of God, Messiah/Christ/Anointed One.**

Son of Man: the human face of Jesus

Mark gave different meanings to the term 'son of man.' Often he uses it to present us with a very human Jesus. For example: Mark's **Jesus shows compassion** (Mk 6:34 – the miracle of the 5,000 - "his heart was moved with pity for them"), **indignation** (Mk 10:14 – he rebuked the disciples for keeping the children from him), **amazement** (Mk 6:6 – "he was amazed at their lack of faith"), **and love** (Mk 10:21 – the rich man reluctant to give up all – Jesus looked at him and loved him). He is portrayed as **tired** (Mk 6:31 – "come away and rest for a while") and **hungry** (Mk 11:12 – at the fig tree). Significantly, **Jesus doesn't know everything** (Mk 13:32 – "but of that day... no one knows... nor the Son"), **and his power is sometimes limited** (Mk 6:5 by others' lack of faith). Furthermore, he is **misunderstood** by the religious authorities of his time and even by his closest disciples (Mk 8:11-21). He is **rejected** by his hometown neighbours (Mk 6:1-6). **Three times he warns his followers that he must suffer – and that they must suffer too** (Mk 8:31-33; 9:30-32; 10:33-34). Overall, **He is a very human person – a key concept in Mark.** And, so are his all-too-human disciples!

Mark also uses this title as a reference to the 'son of man' in the Old Testament Book of Daniel (written around 160 BC and popular in Christ's time). In Daniel 7: 13f., we read of the coming of a heavenly yet human figure, i.e. the 'Son of Man.' This 'son of man' would come 'from the heavens,' that is, from God; he would be a man of integrity and courage, he would be the leader of the People of God, he would do battle with the enemies of God, he would suffer, even die for others. He would be victorious over all his enemies and he would 'rule over Israel and the nations.' This phrase ('son of man') is evident especially when Mark speaks of Jesus' mission or ministry (Mk 2: 10, 28), his suffering and death (Mk

8: 31; 9: 9, 12, 31; 10: 33, 45; 14: 21, 41) and of his exaltation and glorification (Mk 8: 38; 13: 26; 14: 62).¹ His resurrection shows him as victoriously glorified by the Father.

But, his victory and the fulfilment of his vision would only be recognised after his death and resurrection (Dan 12: 2 is the first place in the Bible where the resurrection of the just is affirmed).²

Suffering Servant of God:

Mark's use of references to the Book of Isaiah is also significant. In Mark's view, Jesus fulfils the OT image of the servant of God found principally in the later chapters of the Book of Isaiah (Isaiah chapters 40 – 65). Jesus brought the good news/the gospel to the poor (Mk 1: 14f; cf. Isa 52: 7). At his baptism the Spirit comes on him as upon the servant (Mk 1: 10; Isa 61: 1). He is **treated with contempt** (Mk 9: 12; cf. Isa 53: 3). In Mk 10: 45 **a cluster of allusions to the suffering servant** of Isa 52: 13 – 53: 12 occur: he 'serves' (Isaiah 52: 13); he **'gives his life'** (Isaiah 53: 10, 12); his life is an **'offering'** (Isaiah 53: 10); and it is for **'the many, i.e. for all'** (Isaiah 53: 11f.). Mark 10:45 ("For even the Son of Man did not come to be served: he came to serve and to give his life to redeem the many"). **Jesus was a suffering servant of God but many of the people of his time expected a warrior-king (like David): that might explain some of the reluctance to accept him/his gospel.**

Jesus, the Messiah/Christ, the Anointed One, the Son of God:

In Mark 1:1 we are told directly that this is **"the beginning of the gospel of Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God."** There, Mark has already 'nailed his colours to the mast.' These are two important titles (for Mark) and they are repeated directly and indirectly throughout Mark's gospel. 'Christ' in Greek and 'Messiah' in Hebrew are translated as **"God's Anointed One,"** God's official spokesperson. **"Beloved Son of God"** is the title God gave Jesus at his baptism (Mk 1:9-11): it was repeated by God at the Transfiguration (Mk 9:7).

In Mark's own view, the "coming of the Anointed One" was foretold in Isaiah 35:4-6 ("Here is your God.... coming to save you"). He believes firmly that Jesus is the "anointed one of God" as foretold in Isaiah 61:1f ("The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me for the Lord has anointed me"). Mark knows that "the Spirit of the Lord God" came on Jesus at his baptism and that he was declared by God to be **"My Beloved Son"** (Mk 1:11).

Furthermore, Isaiah said that the Christ/Messiah would be sent from God "to bring the good news to the afflicted, to soothe the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to captives, release to those in prison, to proclaim a year of God's favour..." (Isaiah 61:1-3). **Isaiah had explained how the Anointed One would be recognised when he came - (Isaiah 35:5f: "Then the eyes of the blind will be opened, the ears of the deaf unsealed, then the lame will leap like a deer and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy..."):** Jesus' miracles prove this.

¹ Wenham and Walton, *Exploring the New Testament*, Volume 1, 202.

² Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction*, 511.

In chapter 14 – when Jesus is brought before the Sanhedrin - He is questioned by the high priest (Mk 14: 53 – 65); his life is literally at stake. We are told that the chief priests and the scribes kept trying to find testimony/evidence against Jesus in order to put him to death, “but they found none.” The witnesses they did find had contradictory stories – and were dismissed out of court. The chief priest then asks Jesus: “Are you the Messiah/Christ, the son of the Blessed One/God?” Jesus accepts this description (Mk 14: 61f) saying simply “I am.” The high priest says: “You have heard the blasphemy” (i.e. Jesus has claimed to be God) – and “they all condemned him as deserving to die” (Mk 14:64).

In Mark’s view, Jesus is the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies about the Son of Man, the Servant of God, and the Messiah/Christ/Anointed One.

Matthew’s Gospel

Matthew’s Gospel was written around 80-85 A.D. **A sizeable majority of his church members are (‘former’) Jews who are being accused (by ‘loyal Jews’) of being disloyal to, of even changing their Jewish/Mosaic beliefs. But, Matthew wants his church members to know that they are the ‘true Jews,’ the Jews of ‘the fulfilment,’ the religious descendents of the Old Testament Jews. Therefore, he recognises this setting and stresses the continuity of God’s Plan from the Old Testament into the New Testament and beyond: Jesus as God’s faithful Prophet, sent by God, to fulfil or complete the Law. For Matthew, it is important that Jesus’ followers live righteously.**

Jesus is Continuing/Fulfilling the Old Testament into the New Testament

To prove that assertion (the NT as a fulfilment of the OT), Matthew stresses Jesus’ links with the Old Testament heroes (e.g. Abraham, Isaac, David), i.e. that he is their descendent. He is “Messiah, son of David, son of Abraham” (Mt 1:1-22; Mt 9:27; 12:3; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30-31). Matthew identifies Jesus as “your king” and he has Jesus fulfil the prophecies of Zech 9:9 by riding on a donkey and colt (Mt 21:2, 7). On his entry into Jerusalem he is acclaimed by the people as the “son of David” (Mt 21:9, 15).

Often, Matthew states that “all this happened in order to fulfil what the Lord declared through the prophet ...” He includes over 100 references to the OT and its fulfilment in Jesus.

In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus came not to overthrow Judaism, but to renew, complete, or fulfil it (“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfil it” - Mt 5:17-18). For example, “It was said to you of old...., but I say to you love your enemies...”].

Matthew’s Jesus is an Authoritative Teacher

In his role of fulfilling or completing the Law and the Prophets, Matthew’s Gospel tells us that Jesus “went around all Galilee, **teaching in their synagogues**, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and curing every disease and illness among the people” (Mt 4:40). “His fame spread to all of Israel, and they brought to him all who were sick with various diseases and

racked with pain, those who were possessed, and paralytics, and he cured them. And great crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan followed him” (Mt 4:23-25).

In Matthew’s gospel Jesus’ adversaries call him ‘Teacher/Rabbi’ and his genuine followers call him ‘Lord’ (for Matthew ‘Lord’ means ‘risen Lord’). Scribes (Mt 8:19, 12:38), Pharisees (Mt 12:38; 22:16, 36), Sadducees (Mt 22:24) all call Jesus ‘Teacher.’ The disciples, the afflicted and those coming to faith all call him ‘Lord’ (Mt 8:2, 6, 8, 25; 9:28; 14:28; 15:22, 25, 27; 16:22; 17:4, 15; 18:21; 20:30). **Interestingly, Judas calls Jesus ‘Teacher/Rabbi’ – Matthew’s way of ostracising Judas (Mt 26:25).**

The Kingdom of Heaven

Jesus’ teaching about the Kingdom of Heaven or the Reign of God is a dominant theme in Matthew’s Gospel. Matthew never uses Kingdom of God as it uses the name of YHWH and righteous Jews would not use that. So he substitutes Kingdom of Heaven. The evangelist interprets the phrase as meaning a community (kingdom) in which God is King, or ruler, a community in which God’s will is observed by all. **[Mt 6:9-13, The Our Father]**

Many of Matthew’s parables state that the **kingdom of God grows slowly** (as does the disciple’s’ understanding!). The kingdom is “like a mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds, .. but eventually blossoms into a large tree (Mt 13:31-32). Or, it’s like a fist of leaven/yeast folded/kneaded into the dough (Mt 13:31-32)... or like a handful of tiny seeds that a man scatters on the ground (Mt 13:1-23). While he sleeps the seed begins the struggle towards its fulfilment [harvest]. In Matthew’s telling of the Parable of the Sower, there is a more individualising interpretation - the seed (singular in Mark) is now plural (in Matthew), the growth of the seed is differentiated, i.e. different people accept it in different degrees (“some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty,” Mt 13:18-23). **And, for “anyone who hears” the word of the kingdom (Mk 4:1-20), the point of differentiation is ‘understanding,’ - the one who hears “but does not understand” (Mt 13:19), and the one who “hears and understands” (Mt 13:23).**

Jesus and Righteous Living

In the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:1-7:28), Jesus lays out in great detail that his followers should live lives of righteousness, justice, reconciliation and unconditional love: Jesus demanded of his followers far more than the Mosaic Law. The OT (Mosaic) Law (the Ten Commandments) required that Jews not kill but Jesus requires that they should not even be angry with one’s brothers and sisters (Mt 5:21-26); that they do not commit adultery, but Jesus required that they don’t “commit adultery with her in his heart” (Mt 5:27-30); **the follower of Jesus is called to love even his enemies (Mt 5:43-48). He also stresses the importance of prayer, fasting and almsgiving.** And, in Matthew’s parable about the Final Judgement the choice is starkly presented “I was hungry, thirsty, naked, sick..... and you fed, clothed, visited ...me” (Mt 25:31-46). **The true follower of Jesus “does the will of the Father in heaven” (Mt 7:21).** Matthew sets a very high standard when he says: Jesus’

follower is to live, to reflect God's life: "Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48).

Matthew's church members are themselves 'former' Jews living among Jews: they are being accused (by 'loyal Jews') of being disloyal to, and of even changing their Jewish/Mosaic beliefs. But, Matthew wants his church members to know that they are the 'true Jews,' the Jews of 'the fulfilment,' the true religious descendants of the Old Testament Jews. Therefore, he stresses continuity of God's Plan from the Old Testament into the New Testament and beyond: Jesus as God's faithful Prophet, sent by God, to fulfil or complete the Law – the Law of Love (following Jesus' example).

Luke's Gospel:

Luke wrote his Gospel around **85-90 A.D.** (though some commentators suggest that it was written as late as 120 or 130 A.D.). The setting of Luke's Gospel: it is thought that his church-members were "of diverse social composition," i.e. they were people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds, social status, and wealth. **It was important for Luke to emphasise that Christ's gospel was FOR ALL.** Also, his church members were facing challenges from members of the local Jewish synagogue(s) whose religious leaders failed to see that Jesus was the Christ/Messiah/the Anointed One of God. Luke wants to reassure his church members that Jesus is indeed the Christ/Messiah/the Anointed One of God.

He does this by showing 1) that **Jesus was anointed/empowered by the Spirit of God,** 2) **that he was a prophet in the long line of God's Old Testament prophets:** 3) **that he was sent to bring God's Salvation to all nations and peoples;** 4) **that he was a man of unconditional compassion and love for all creation (especially, the poor and marginalised – Jews and Gentiles),** 5) **and that he was a man of prayer.**

The Holy Spirit

Luke tells us that Mary would conceive **through the Holy Spirit** (Lk 1:35). At Jesus' baptism we are told that **"the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove and a voice came from heaven, 'You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased'"** (Lk 3:21-22). This descent/coming of the Spirit of God on him likens Jesus to the prophets of the OT (on whom the Spirit of God 'rested'). **The Spirit was also present/active in the Presentation in the Temple scene (Lk 2:22-40).** Immediately after his baptism, Jesus (**"full of the Spirit,"** Lk 4:1) is led into the wilderness. **Jesus began his public preaching "in the power of the Spirit" (Lk 4:14)....**

Jesus the Prophet

Luke's account of Jesus' birth (Lk 2) is modelled on the birth of the prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 1 – 2). Both Hannah (Samuel's mother) and Mary (Jesus' mother) miraculously conceive, to the joy and amazement of their families/relatives, and both respond in song, praising the God of Israel, "who exalts the lowly and humbles the exalted" (1 Samuel 2:1-10

and Luke 1:46-55).... [Compare the song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:1-10 and that of Mary in Luke 1:46-55.]

In the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus reads from Isaiah 58:6 and 61:1-2 (“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me”) and he claims that this prophecy is being fulfilled in him (Lk 4:21). On that same occasion, Jesus (Lk 4:21-30) he claims to be a prophet ‘sent by God’ like Elijah and Elisha (two recognised prophets of God in the OT).³ Jesus tells the Nazareth synagogue gathering about the Jewish prophet Elijah’s raising of the widow’s only son at Zerephath in Lebanon (1 Kings 17:17-24). He also tells them of the prophet Elisha, who cured Naaman the Syrian of leprosy (Lk 4:27). The congregation (Lk 4:16-30) are enraged because these cures were performed in Lebanon and Syria (that is, outside Jewish territory – **a sign of Christ’s mission to all nations**). **Later, when Jesus raises the widow’s son at Nain** the crowd react by calling Jesus “a great prophet has arisen among us” (Lk 7:16). To be called a prophet was definitely a mixed blessing. **The OT prophets had the task of proclaiming God’s Word to his people. They were not the most popular people in Israel because they frequently criticised the people, priests and kings for failing to keep God’s Word (e.g. Amos). But, in Lk 13:32-34 Jesus places himself squarely in this tradition (“Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it”).**

The Compassionate, Loving Jesus

All through Luke’s Gospel, **Jesus is concerned, caring and compassionate towards the poor, the oppressed, women, public sinners, outcasts (tax-collectors), lepers, Samaritans, and the Gentiles.** Many of his parables (e.g. the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son) and his healings (e.g. the woman with a haemorrhage, the healing of the Roman centurion’s servant) focus on and include the marginalised. Jesus was compassionate towards the Women of Jerusalem (as he climbed Calvary, Lk 23:28), the Good Thief (Lk 23:29f) – he even asked his Father to forgive his executioners (Lk 23:32). In a society built on distinctions of class, this was counter-cultural.

A classic example is the raising of the Widow’s son at Nain (Lk 7:13). One translation says “his [Jesus’] heart broke,” another says “he was moved to his very core,” and another says “his insides churned” such was his compassion: his compassion was unconditional, (Lk 6: 36-38 “be compassionate/merciful, as your Father is compassionate/merciful”).

Jesus at Prayer:

Prayer is important for Jesus and his disciples. Virtually every adult in Luke’s Infancy narrative prays. At his baptism the Spirit descends on Jesus “at prayer” (Lk 3:21), Jesus selects the disciples after prayer (Lk 6:12). The Transfiguration happens “while Jesus is praying” (Lk 9:29). Luke’s account of Jesus at prayer is more extensive than the other gospels. Many of Jesus’ teachings/parables are about prayer. He expected his disciples to pray (Lk 11:5-10 - “ask and you shall receive”) – and to “pray always” (Lk 18:1f.). Jesus

³ The Book of Isaiah is quoted six times in Luke’s Gospel and is alluded to dozens of times – as are many of the other OT prophets (e.g. Jeremiah 1:4-10 is quoted in Luke 4:21-30).

tells Peter that he has prayed for him – that his faith will hold true and that he will be an inspiration to others (Lk 22:32-34). In Gethsemane Jesus prays for the strength to do God’s will (Lk 22:39-45). On the cross, he prays for his executioners (Lk 23:44-46). **Jesus is a ‘man of prayer.’**

A Composite Gospel Portrait: Who do you SAY I am?

1) In all the gospel accounts, Jesus was a sociable, caring, loving person, who lived according to the Two Great Commandments of God (Mt 22:34-40: love of God and love of neighbour). He loved all people, was at ease with all people: especially the marginalised (e.g. Mt 19:14, children; Lk 8:48, women; Mk 1:41-42, lepers; Lk 10:27-37, Samaritans; Lk 19:1-10, tax-collectors; Lk 7:36-50 prostitutes). Importantly, **his love was unconditional.**

2) He was a prophet sent by God, God’s spokesman, “anointed by God:” one in a long line of prophets going back to Isaiah – and beyond. He was acknowledged to be a “mighty prophet” by the people among whom he preached and healed (Lk 7:16-17). **In the views of the gospel writers he was the last and the greatest of the prophets.**

3) He was an “**authoritative Teacher**” (e.g. Mk 1:27; 2:12) and the final/‘Fulfilment’ Interpreter of God’s Law as given to Moses (e.g. Mt 5:17, 23f, 27f., “You have heard it said to our ancestors..... But, I say to you”). He knew God’s Law, respected it and lived by the Law. However, he also **fulfilled or completed** the Law. At times, he criticised the ‘mindset’ that put the letter of the Law before the spirit of the Law, the ‘mindset’ that put the additional man-made regulations before the underlying God-made commandment to love all unconditionally (e.g. Lk 10: 25-37: The Good Samaritan).

4) His mission on earth was to establish the Kingdom of Heaven/God – a basic statement in all gospels – a kingdom built on conversion, reconciliation, justice and – above all else – **unconditional compassion or love for all.** This led Jesus to challenge the attitudes and practices that discriminated against the poor, sick, disabled, strangers, etc. **His miracles (healing the blind, lame, leper, etc.) showed his love (Lk 7:11f, the Widow’s Son at Nain), and his God-given power to address and eradicate all forms of evil (personal, communal, societal) and to build a faith-filled, spiritual, and real world.**

5) **He was a human being so dedicated to the will of his God that God’s own creative power – God’s own Love - flowed out through Christ’s every pore.**

6) **His consciousness of his prophetic role helped him understand the inevitability of his rejection and, eventually, his death on Calvary.** For example: the Parable of the Vineyard Tenants (Mk 12:1-12; Mt 21:33-46; Lk 20:9-19). On a number of occasions he predicted his own death ‘in Jerusalem.’ In the Garden of Gethsemane account (Mk 14:32-42; Mt 26:36-46; Lk 22:39-46), we get a glimpse of Jesus - frightened, and abandoned by his friends/disciples - overcome by the thought of his impending death. And yet, he had enough faith/trust in his Father to say “**not my will but yours be done**” (Mt 26:39).

7) However, death was not the end. On Easter Sunday God raised him to eternal life, to a life beyond the grave/death, to a spiritual, embodied life more real than this 'earthly' life. The trust of Jesus in his God was vindicated. The followers of Jesus knew that he was risen (Mk 16:14-18; Mt 28:9, 16-20; Lk 24:36-49): over 600 disciples saw him, spoke with him, touched him, or ate with him after his resurrection (1 Cor 15:1-8)..

8) He invited his followers to participate in this life-beyond-death, as evidenced in his dying discussion with the Good Thief (Lk 23:39-43).

9) Lastly, **time and again in the Gospels, directly and indirectly, Jesus asks his followers the question - "Who do you SAY I am?"** (e.g. Mk 9:22-38; Mt 16:13-28). Not, who do you THINK I am? But, who do you SAY... **Our following of Jesus, our faith, is something that must show.** Tertullian, an early Church Father, wrote that non-believers knew Jesus' followers by their public and obvious love ('See! How they love one another!').

If you acknowledge that Jesus is the Christ, the Anointed One of God sent by God to bring his message/plan of salvation to all, then, you cannot but accept that message. **Being a follower of Jesus Christ means following his example.**

In the words of St. Augustine: **'Love, and say it with your life.'**

Karl Rahner S. J. (1904-1984), has said that the fully human person is letting the divine love of God – **the love that is God** – fill his/her very being. **He/she is letting God's love increasingly 'divinise' him/her until he/she is fully divinised - in the next life** (Rahner, *His Essential Writings*, p. 43).

That's our calling, our journey, that's our destination or destiny – to be more fully human, and more fully divine. We have the best exemplar possible – Jesus Christ.