

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Fishing Trip

One of the most endearing things about the Gospels is the clear presence of humanity in the work of passing on the divine message. The Word is really made flesh in the four Gospels. Mark's breathless storytelling style, for example, each sentence starting "And... and..." makes him sound like a talkative youngster, who can't talk fast enough to keep up with his excitement. Have a look, and see! Luke's thoughtful generosity to his characters and his refined vocabulary give us a civilised and cosmopolitan voice, perfectly evoking the divine courtesy of God towards us.

People Also Sleep

When I've done twelve hours of work, and slumped in front of the television for a bit of so-called "recreation" - how far can you misuse a word? - I eventually blow the whistle and go to bed. Now I enter a world of altered consciousness. My pulse-rate falls to a tiny fraction of its waking speed, my breathing slows, I lose consciousness, and then I start to dream. What do you think of that? Indifferent? Not likely. It's so vital that I will spend a third of my lifetime doing it. Every night my mind will go submarine and out of control - that is, out of the control of those wakeful policemen, my practical managing, my moral, even my common-sense logical mind. Time and space will no longer restrict me; I will be visited by the dead and the unborn as well as the living; even essential properties like gravity will no longer apply; I can fly in my dreams, and I can also find myself unable to put one foot in front of the other. But whatever is happening in there is vital to my sanity: people robbed of the power to dream (by being awoken when they start to) rapidly become unbalanced, and even violent.

The Dream Gospel

What I'm leading up to is that the incidents related by the Gospels have sometimes a dreamlike quality: the barriers of space and time can dissolve, and the stories can float freely in the consequent soup, much as our minds leave behind the limitations of consciousness and float freely in dreams. It isn't that we leave "the real world" behind: rather we are perceiving it in a different mode. I'm sure everything I dream about is of great importance, and that the things I contemplate in dreams deeply need to be watched, thought, and experienced. In my

waking hours I edit them out: they aren't practical, they aren't acceptable; sometimes they aren't decent. But my dreaming mind has no such inhibitions. I wonder how many people have walked out onto a brilliantly lighted stage, faced the darkened auditorium, and realised they have forgotten their lines, the plot of the play, and even the character they're meant to be playing? Not many, in waking mode: but in dreams, plenty. I wonder how many clergymen have found themselves walking down packed Cathedral naves, slowly realising they have entirely forgotten to wear any clothes? (That's one that wakes you up rather suddenly.)

Fishermen's Dreams

The story of the miraculous draught of fishes is tacked on the end of John's Gospel, as a weird footnote (quite clearly the end of the previous chapter was originally designed to end the whole Gospel). Suddenly we are pitched into this workaday fishing-trip. Without the least preparation we find ourselves confronted with an appearance of the Risen Lord. Is it supposed to be the first such (they don't recognise him at first)? It's in Galilee, while the ending in ch. 20 is certainly in Jerusalem (time and space notwithstanding). This story wasn't written by the same author as the rest of the Gospel, and it appears in Luke's Gospel too: but right at the beginning, just before the apostolic calling of Peter. (Where did it *actually* happen? You guess.) Here, on the seashore, Jesus rehabilitates Peter after his three denials. In Luke, astonished Peter says *Lord, leave me: I am a sinful man*, and Jesus says, *Now it is people you will catch*; In John he says to Peter, right at the end of the Gospel, *Follow me*. The time, the place, the circumstances have changed. But the story, like a dream, is the same. I find this way of thinking about these stories a great help in reconciling them. In logic it is practically impossible to fit them all into order. So why try? Stories have a life of their own, and these are not about happenings determined by history. They're supernatural, divine stories, and I think we must receive them in a special space in our consciousness, where we too are preparing for the Risen One to enter: a place where we meet all our memories and hopes, all our past, and all the future. Maybe it will be more like the place where we dream than anything else.

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