

# ***The Presence of the Old Testament in the Gospel Tradition***

This fourth lecture begins with the recapitulation of our previous theme, the layers in which the tradition of the Gospels is laid down, in which we broadly identified three stages:

- the life, sayings, and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth
- the preaching of the first Church
- the bringing of these traditions into scriptural form

Today we will try to understand the influence of the Old Testament at *each* of these stages.

## **i      The notion of “fulfilment of the Scriptures” in the mind of Jesus himself**

I chose here to examine the arrival of Jesus in the Temple, after his triumphant entry into Jerusalem. The entry itself takes its form from the Old Testament, and if it be read in the context of Zechariah 9 and Malachi 3 it makes quite specific claims about the one who enters.

That these claims are clear to all is easy to read in the manifestations made by the people, and the response of the Jewish leaders, fearful for their favourable *entente* with the occupying Romans. The question they ask Jesus, *What authority can you show for what you have done?* refers not to the turning over of a few tables - which, in a thronged Temple court measuring 300 x 450 metres, is all that Jesus could without military force have achieved - but to the ulterior meaning of his deeds. Already having arrived like a Royal Saviour, he now does the deeds which in Malachi belong to God himself. What is he claiming?

This incident, rather than the Baptism, forms a frontispiece in the Gospel of John to all those things Jesus transacts within the liturgical symbolism of the Temple and of Jerusalem.

In the Synoptics, it moves to the end of the ministry, and forms the climactic trigger which is the final straw for the authorities, and so precipitates the Passion itself. Here too it is no impulsive or reactionary happening, but (as Mark is careful to establish) a response to the Temple which Jesus carefully considers (at least overnight in Bethany, but surely for a long time beforehand). In the Gospels there is enough to justify the thought that by this deed Jesus has finally arraigned the ruling priests in their stronghold. These are the themes of Jeremiah and of Zechariah. They are also, however, themes which Malachi sees as involving the advent of God himself onto the human stage. If the Evangelists have not made this link specific, there is every reason to suppose that *Jesus himself did*.

## **ii      The Church before the written Gospels**

The key to the Church's mind before the Gospels are written down lies in its relationship with the Jewish context, and the one who most clearly evokes it is actually Luke. In the Lukian encounters with the risen Christ, a process begins to be depicted which must have become the typical activity of the first Church: the re-reading of the Jewish Bible to discover the meaning of Jesus in the word of God. *Did not our hearts burn within us as he spoke to us on the road, and opened the Scriptures to us?* The *Acts of the Apostles* continues this theme, as first Peter, then Stephen, then Philip, then Paul find themselves using the Bible they had always known as the chief catechetical instrument of their new ministry.

### **iii      The Casting of the Gospel into Scripture**

The process of making the Gospels into literature obeys the kerygma as preached and modified in Stage Two above, and the kerygma here means the message the evangelists thought was central. Their theology, therefore, rather than any slavish attention to historical facts about Jesus, becomes the norm they obey. Where they have nothing or very little to go on by way of historical fact, they simply turn to the theology which has sprung from the early Church's re-reading of the Old Testament which Luke so clearly describes. We've already seen the result of this in the brief glance we have cast in the direction of the birth-narratives - the Matthean citations of the OT are particularly clear. We've seen the same rule followed out in the presentation of the Baptism; when the Jesus of "Q" answers his tempter in the wilderness, his mind is presented as finding its perfect expression in the words of Deuteronomy 6 & 8.

In today's talk I point out that even the places where we might expect unanimity and shared vocabulary, the four Gospels differ in favour of their particular theological basis: we have four texts of the "words of institution" at the Last Supper, despite Paul in the oldest form of them (1Cor 11:23ff) evincing his own obedience to a tradition *already cast in words* which he feels bound to follow. We have different last words for the dying Jesus, we have variance in the Lord's prayer; even the writing atop the Cross itself comes in differing forms.

The understanding of the presence of the Jewish Scriptures in the Gospel, therefore, is a complex and living attention to an obedience that is far from formalistic or slavish. We have to develop the same sort of sensitivity which Paul has: there is little in the pages of the Old Testament that could be called negligible in our effort to understand the Lord.