WRITING THE FIFTH GOSPEL

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One of the more mysterious aspects of the interior life has to do with the changing role of scriptures in our prayer as we mature. This, at least, has been my experience both as a pray-er and as a spiritual director. In the early years of a good prayer life the Scriptures, especially the gospels, are our privileged and primary way to come to know and love the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Then, as we come to be "at home" with Jesus and the Father—as our prayer moves from the head to the heart, from getting-to-know to loving—the Scriptures remain important but their role changes.

To provide a background for our discussion of this changing role of Scripture in our prayer, let me suggest an image which I have found helpful: our need to "write the fifth gospel" ourselves. We might wonder why we have four gospels in the New Testament rather than one. If there were only one, we would be confident that we had the "gospel truth" about Jesus' life. We would assume, that is, that its factual accuracy even in the minutest details was guaranteed by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Even now fundamentalists look to the Scriptures for this kind of truth. But the existence of four gospels rather than one, with their numerous differences in chronology, in quoting the words of Jesus, and even in such details as the different genealogies of Jesus in Matthew and Luke, makes such a fundamentalist interpretation unlikely and implausible.
Why then do we have four gospels? To understand this, I believe we must look deeper into their real purpose. They are not intended to give us a mere journal of the exact words and deeds of Jesus. Their purpose, rather is to reveal to us how Jesus was experienced by those who knew him in the flesh, and by the Christian communities established by these eyewitnesses in the years following his ascension. The gospels are factual but the facts are reflected in the personal experience and inspired writings of different authors. As we shall see later, this personal dimension is even more evident in St. Paul than in the gospels. Thus from the very beginning of the Church’s life the real question to be answered is, “How was Jesus experienced by those who knew him? What was he like for them?” We can say that there are four gospels, and not only one, because we must write a fifth gospels ourselves. That is, we must also answer the question which the gospel writers sought to answer: who is Jesus?

It is against this background that we can understand more clearly why the role of the Scriptures changes as we mature. As we begin to write the fifth gospel ourselves—as we begin to answer the question of who Jesus really is for me—a few verses (or perhaps one favorite verse) suffice to fan the flames of love for the Lord for days on end. Later still, if we persevere into the “dry well” of contemplation, the role of Scriptures in our prayer will change in a way that is mysterious and initially disturbing.

It is important, then, to realize that there are different stages in a good prayer life, and important to understand the role which the Scriptures should play at each stage. To help us appreciate and cooperate with this changing role of Scripture in a maturing prayer life, I propose to explore each stage in turn.

THE BEGINNING: WHO IS THIS MAN?

As beginners, then, why do we go to the Scriptures in prayer? It is to discover who this person is whom we are drawn to love. Who is Jesus Christ? Who is the God and Father whom we “see” in seeing Jesus? Thus we search the Scriptures to know a person—and not
primarily to find guidelines for living or wise moral teaching valuable as these may be.

I recall reading once that Mahatma Gandhi, one of the great religious figures of the twentieth century, found the gospels—especially the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew—a prime source of moral guidance in his own life and mission. And yet Gandhi was not a Christian. Beautiful and valuable as his interest in Jesus was, it did not require faith.

Our quest, by contrast is one of faith and for that reason much more personal: not to discover truths but to discover Living Truth, not doctrines but a Person. Our Christian faith is, ultimately and radically faith in Someone rather than in a body of truths. “I believe in God . . . and in his only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ.” The doctrines are indeed important, but only insofar as they attempt, in a limited way to express and communicate a religious experience.

Although we often forget it, St. Paul is insistent on this point: his proclamation of the good news is not grounded on the testimony of Cephas or the other witnesses, but on his own personal experience of the God who called him and revealed himself personally to him.

“Let me tell you, my brethren, that the gospel I preach is not of human origin. I did not receive it from any man nor did anyone teach it to me. It was Jesus Christ himself who revealed it to me. You have been told how I used live when I was devoted to the Jewish religion, how I persecuted without mercy the Church of God . . . But God in his grace chose me even before I was born, and called me to serve him. And when he decided to reveal his Son to me, so that I might preach the good news about him to the gentiles, I did not go to anyone for advice, nor did I go to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before me” (Gal. 1:11-13, 15-17).

The importance which Paul gives to personal experience of Jesus (see also II Cor. 4:5-6 and I Cor. 2:10-15) as the basis of his faith and of his preaching is also found in the first epistle of John (1:1-3) and in the second epistle of Peter (1:16-18). It is the same for us, with
the important difference that we have not been eyewitnesses of the earthly life and preaching of Jesus as the first disciples were. Nor will most of us have the extraordinary direct revelation of the risen Lord which grounded Paul's apostleship. We will, at least in the beginning, have to depend on the testimony of eyewitnesses—on the evangelists' accounts of the life and preaching of Jesus. But the goal is the same for us as it was for Paul and the Twelve, as can be seen more clearly when we consider the next stage of the prayer journey.

**THE FIRST CHANGE: A NEW PERSPECTIVE.**

At the first time of transition and maturing, when prayer moves from the head to the heart and from knowing to loving, the Scriptures often serve to fan the flames of our love. A story I have told before may make this change clearer. In the years since my father's death I have had occasion to visit my home in Rochester, New York, several times. Whenever I am with my mother, I and my brother and sister delight in getting her to talk about my father: about the years when they were courting; about the hard times during the Depression of the 1930s; about their travels together—everything about him that she can share with us.

In a way this is strange, because very little that she says is new to us. Virtually all the stories are familiar by now; we do not get any new knowledge about him—or about her. Why, then, do we love to hear the stories again? Not because we seek knowledge about him, but because we love to hear her speak of one whom we all love. Her reminiscences awaken our own memories and fan the flames of our love for him. And something very similar happens when we read or recall the familiar scriptural details about the Lord we have now, in the second stage, come to love as the first disciples did.

At this time, too, we will come to discover the depth and the riches of St. Paul. For beginners Paul is mysterious, difficult to comprehend. The reason, I believe, is that he presupposes that we know the basic "objective" facts of Jesus' life and focuses instead on the more personal question of the meaning of Jesus in his own life. Be-
ginners do not yet have that basic knowledge of the person of Jesus which Paul presupposes from his earlier preaching to the churches. For this they need to go to the gospels, the records of the words and deeds of Jesus which "have been written in order that you" (that is we the "blessed ones who have not seen and yet have believed" of Jn. 20:29), "that you may believe, and that through your faith in him you may have life" (Jn. 20:31; see also Lk. 1:1-4 and II Tim. 3:14-16).

But once the life and deeds Jesus have become real to us from our contemplation of the gospels, then Paul's love for this same Jesus can make sense to us and capture our hearts too. We might say, in a certain sense, that the gospels answer the question, "Who is Jesus Christ?" while Paul responds to the subsequent, more personal question, "Who is this Jesus for me?" As we grow in the experiential knowledge of God, Paul's conviction and passion resonate in our own hearts and wills. And the gospels, with their eyewitness accounts of a Jesus whom the first disciples knew and loved in the flesh, play a different role in our prayer life. No longer do we depend primarily on them for our knowledge of Jesus, since he has now become personally real to us.

The story of the Samaritan woman in John 4 makes my point beautifully. After her mysterious and unsettling encounter with Jesus by the well, "the woman left her water jar, went back to the town, and said to the people there, 'Come and see the man who told me everything I have ever done. Could he be the Messiah?' So they left the town and went to Jesus. . . . Many of the Samaritans in the town believed in Jesus because the woman had said, 'He told me everything I have ever done.' So when the Samaritans came to him, they begged him to stay with them and Jesus stayed there two days. Many more believed because of his message, and they told the woman, 'We believe now not because of what you said, but because we ourselves have heard him, and we know that he really is the savior of the world'" (Jn. 4:28-30, 39-42). The woman was the herald—the John the Baptist, the "Scripture" testimony—by means of which the Samaritan townspeople came to know Jesus. But in the end their faith was grounded not in her word or in God's word to them through her but
in their personal experience of Jesus. They had to write their own fifth gospel, if not in words on paper then surely in their hearts and lives—the record of this very personal experience of what he meant to them.

THE SECOND CHANGE:
WHAT CANNOT BE SAID OR READ

It might seem that this should be the end of our story, the goal of our inner journey. Once God is personally real to me and my life is centered on him in love, what more is there to say or seek? And yet there is a third stage to every pray-er’s journey: the “dry well” or the dark night, or the cloud of unknowing. We have grown from knowing to loving, and now we must grow further from loving to truly loving. The terminology is mine (see When the Well Runs Dry, chapters four to six), but the process is the same as that described in St. John of the Cross’s Dark Night of the Soul, in Boase’s Prayer of Faith and the anonymous Cloud of Unknowing, as well as in the last three mansions of St. Teresa’s Interior Castle. It seems to be an essential and integral part of any mature life of prayer: we become centered on God as the love of our life, and once we are so centered he seems to disappear!

Why is this so? And what is the role of Scripture now? Perhaps I can answer the first question briefly by explaining that phrase “from loving to truly loving.” While it is true that the Lord has become our love, there is still much of self in this passion. We love him because he fulfills us, because he satisfies all our desires and gives us joy. But is this true love? True love desires the good of the beloved; it finds its happiness not in itself but in giving joy to the one loved. And when God is the beloved, true love needs to love as it is loved—infinitely, without measure, beyond our human capacity to love. Only God himself can accomplish this stretching of our hearts to hold the infinite, to use St. Augustine’s beautiful image. Only he can burn out of us all the self-seeking which prevents us from truly loving.

The process is painful, sometimes desperately so, and it means losing all our familiar moorings in this world of sense and flesh. St.
John of the Cross says to the Lord, “Do not send me any more messengers, for they cannot tell me what I need to hear” (*The Spiritual Canticle*, Stanza 6). The soul’s need now is for God himself, and all the lovely messengers who proclaimed his presence in the past—nature, friends, beautiful music—no longer can satisfy her.

And what of Scripture? Is it also a “messenger,” no longer able to satisfy the soul’s need? Yes. This at least seems to be the experience of the masters of prayer throughout the ages, and of the mature pray-ers whom I have been privileged to direct. All words, even the revealed words of Scripture, fall short of expressing the full reality of God and of love. Perhaps St. John is hinting at this in the conclusion of the gospel: “Now, there are many other things that Jesus did. If they were all written down one by one, I suppose the whole world could not hold the books that would be written” (Jn. 21:25; compare 20:30).

Those who enter into this “dry well” stage of their journey to perfect love of God will often find the words of Scriptures dry and lifeless, as will be the other “messengers” which were so helpful in the past. And yet, just as it is important to continue to give time to formal prayer, to give the Divine Physician time to work his healing surgery in us, so too it is important that we continue to be fed by the words of Scripture in our reading and in the eucharistic liturgy and in the prayer of the Church. Like our formal prayer, they will shape and transform our lives even though we have no tangible or felt awareness that this is happening.

**CONCLUSION:**

**THE GOOD NEWS OF THE FIFTH GOSPEL**

Moreover, even in this mature stage of prayer, I believe Scripture plays a positive, tangible role in our lives. It may be that our prayer itself is dry and blank, that we are, as it were, anesthetized while the Divine Surgeon performs his healing and transforming work in us. But at the same time, our prayer now overflows into our lives.
Most of us are called to be “contemplatives in action,” to find God in all things and to share him with all the persons we meet. And this sharing among human beings can only be done in an embodied way, in “words.” The words of Scripture, above all, are the test of the genuineness of our finding and are the medium of our sharing.

Face to face with God in prayer we may be wordless but in our life together in the community of friends which is the Church, and in our proclamation of what we have seen to the whole world, we will still need “messengers.” In this way, in fact, the cycle of growth begun in the apostolic age is ever repeated: we began to know because of the proclamation of others; and when our knowing has matured into true loving, we in turn become the heralds for a new generation of knowers. The Church lives, and Christ is ever more widely known and loved, because of the fifth gospel which we and the Lord proclaim in our lives.