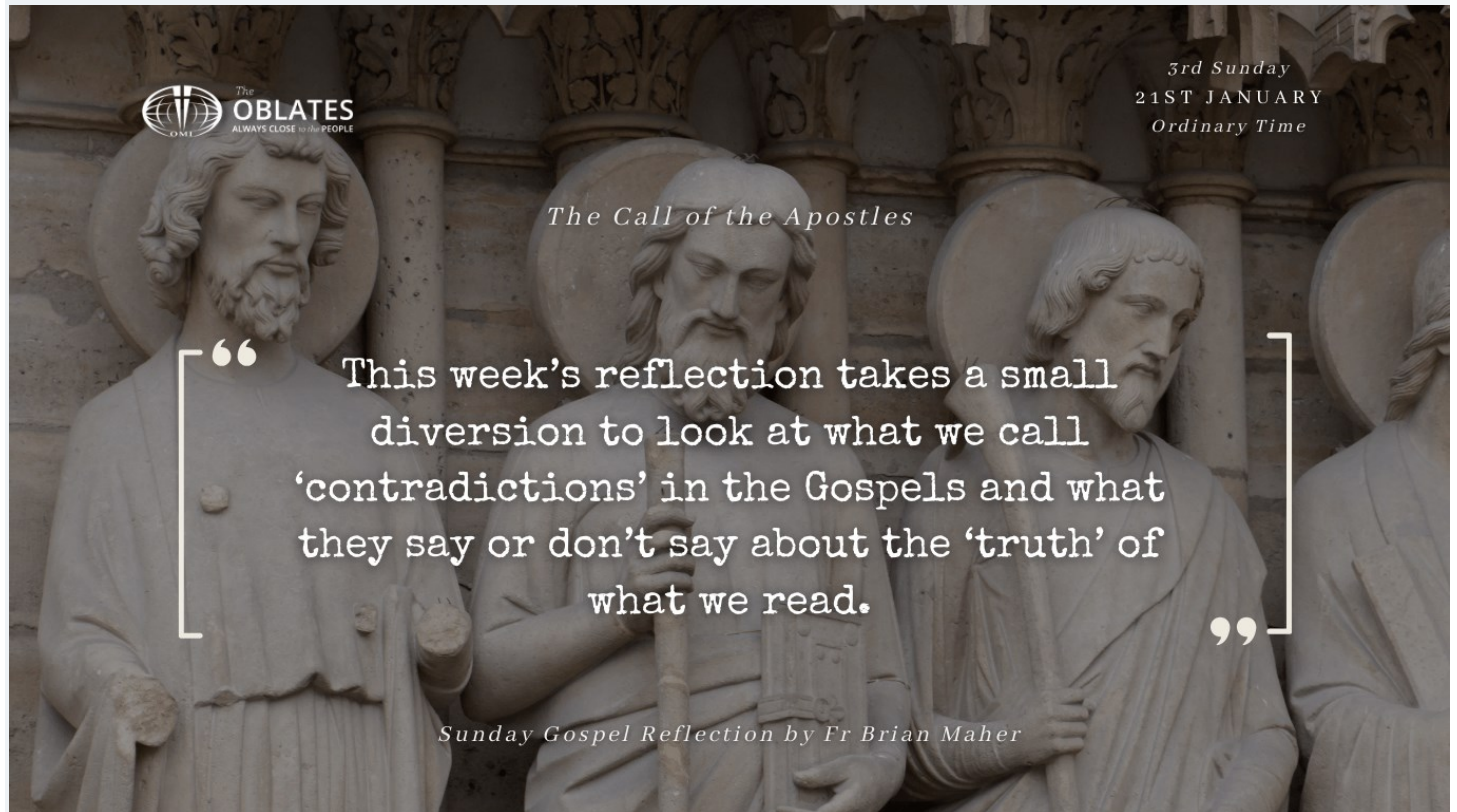


Gospel Reflection Sunday January 21st 2024 – Second Sunday of Ordinary Time

By Fr Brian Maher OMI



Gospel Reflection for Sunday January 21st 2024 | 3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

I learned as a teacher that it can be very disillusioning to begin a lesson with the words, "...remember what we said yesterday..." – disillusioning because the statement was usually met with a sea of blank faces indicating that what I thought was clear as crystal was actually dark as night! These are memories which still haunt my dreams and so, for the sake of sanity, I will not begin this reflection with the words, "...remember last week's Gospel..." What I can do, however, is exactly what I used to do all those years ago and give a one sentence reminder: "Last week. Remember? John's account of the calling of the first Apostles, Andrew and his brother Peter: "what are you looking for...?", "Come and see...", "I will call you Peter, meaning Rock...etc.."

The reason I want to make the connection between last week and this week is because this Sunday our Gospel is Mark's account of the very same incident, which you will immediately notice is the same yet totally different!

Last week the call happened at the River Jordan when John the Baptist was still active. This week it happens in Galilee, by the lakeside, after John has been arrested. Last week Andrew and an unnamed companion follow Jesus and after spending some time with him, decide to join him. Last week there were questions about the very meaning of life, 'What are you looking for? Come and see. etc.' This week Jesus is walking by the lake, says to them 'follow me' and immediately they do. Last week there was the account of Jesus giving Peter his new name. This week, nothing about that. Last week, only two people are named, Andrew and Peter. This week it is a family affair with two sets of brothers, Andrew and Peter, James and John named. It would probably be difficult to come up with two accounts of the same event that are more different!

Putting on my teacher hat again, I well remember some of my students, with all the wonderful arrogance of youth, telling me that these types of contradiction 'prove' that the Gospels are not historical, and therefore untrue. Some of my more daring students went further and attested that Jesus never even existed!

Having said all this, they sat back smugly waiting for fury and shock to overwhelm me, followed closely by faith deserting me.

Of course I jest, and I did in fact have the height of respect for all of my students, but the point is still worth making. There are people, some intelligent, eminent scholars; others, religious fundamentalists, who trot out this stuff with great authority but, sadly, with very little common sense or understanding of why the Gospels were written in the first place. There are also people, genuine, faith-filled people, who simply know within themselves the truth of God's love expressed in the person of Jesus, but because they are told they must 'prove' every word written in the Gospels, they feel undermined and maybe even a little foolish that the beautiful truth, which they see so clearly, is ridiculed and laughed at.

Indulge me, therefore, if I make just a few simple points which will enable us to hold fast to the truth contained in the Gospels, without entering into conflict with those who hold different views.

First point: The Gospels were never intended to give us a biography of the life of Jesus. If that was the intention, then surely the writers would have given us a physical description of the man they were writing about! Yet they don't! There is also the uncomfortable fact that over 99% of the Gospels are written only about the last three years of Jesus' life.

The conclusion has to be, then, that the Gospels were never intended to be read as a chronological, objective account of his life. The question therefore becomes, if not a biography of Jesus, then what are they?

It seems to me that the answer to this question is glaringly obvious. Indeed, the authors shout it at us from the very start: Mark's Gospel opens with, *"The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God..."* Mark is absolutely clear about his intention. He is writing "good news...". He has no intention of trying to 'prove' that; he states it as true. More than that, what he writes is good news about Jesus the Messiah, Son of God. Once more he is not saying to his readers, 'this is my theory, which I will try to prove to you by the end of what I write.' He states it as something already believed by his readers.

The opening of John's Gospel is similar; *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God..."* John is writing about Jesus, who existed from the beginning of time as the Word of God, and who is himself God. There is going to be no attempt to 'prove' that. It is stated as true from the beginning.

The Gospels are faith documents. They were written for people who already believed in the Resurrection of Jesus from the Dead and who now wanted to be his witnesses in the world as they awaited his coming again in glory.

Second point: The Gospels were written over a period of maybe forty years, and they were written to specific Christian communities with specific needs and concerns. They know the people to whom they were writing and the 'Good News' they share was intended to support and validate the life they were living.

The writers, therefore, chose from the many stories and memories of Jesus the ones which best addressed the particular needs of their community. They also emphasised particular events or added details omitted by others, in order to answer particular questions.

A simple example of this is the Gospel of Matthew. Reading his Gospel we will be immediately struck by how frequently he quotes from the Old Testament and how he emphasises names, places and events from the Old Testament. Why does he do this? Because his Gospel is written particularly for Jewish followers of Jesus. His readers are familiar with the many covenants and promises God made to his Chosen People, so Matthew can more explicitly link Jesus with the coming of the Messiah.

Many of the things we see as contradictions in the Gospels, are no more than the writer putting a different emphasis on a story told by Jesus, or action done by Jesus, in order to make it more relevant to its readers.

Third point: the so-called contradictions we find in the Gospels are used by some to suggest that they are untrue or invented. I take the opposite view! For me these 'contradictions' point to the veracity of the stories and memories recounted.

When a crime is committed, those involved need an alibi or a cover-story to 'prove' their innocence. What they do is get together and agree a story which shows that they were somewhere else, or with someone else, when the crime was committed. They will ensure that their stories agree in all the details because they will be caught out if their stories are not the same.

Very frequently those investigating the crime will become suspicious and begin to doubt the story if it is 'too perfect', or 'too much the same'. Real life is not like that. All of us remember things in different ways, we notice different details, we draw different conclusions. This does not mean that the things we are describing didn't happen, it just means that we remember them differently.

If we are telling the truth and if we have nothing to fear, then we are not worried about other people noticing different things or seeing things differently to us. The Gospels are written for believers and by believers. They have nothing to fear. They are confident that what they say is true. They speak with the authority of the Holy Spirit.

I am reminded of that wonderfully funny song by Maurice Chevalier where a couple are remembering their first date. They speak to each other, *"We met at nine." ... "We met at eight." ... "I was on time." ... "No, you were late." ... "Ah yes, I remember it well."*

As the song goes on, the couple discover that their memories of that evening differ in every possible way. And yet, *"They remember it well!"* The differences do not mean it didn't happen. What they both 'remember so well' is the love they had for each other.

To finish where I started. If we wanted to, we could say that because the Gospels of the last two weeks differ so much they cannot both be true.

Wrong! The differences simply mean that several different versions of this important event were circulating among different groups of believers. John's version emphasises the point that becoming a follower of Jesus means coming to know the person of Jesus. We must "come and see."

Mark's version, on the other hand, emphasises the urgency of following Jesus. There is no time to waste. The Kingdom of God is very close. When Jesus calls, we drop everything and follow him.

Just as Jesus called Andrew and Peter, so he is calling us in our world to 'follow him'. He invites us, just as he invited Andrew, to spend time with him; to "come and see..." (last week's Gospel)

If we accept the invitation to become a follower of Jesus, there is no room for half measures or part-time followers. The 'Good News' we have been given by Jesus is important and it is urgent. The Kingdom of God has come among us. (this week's Gospel).

Many thanks,

Brian.

If you have any comments, questions or thoughts on this scripture reflection, please feel welcome to email me at b.maher@oblates.ie

I will make you into fishers of men

After John had been arrested, Jesus went into Galilee. There he proclaimed the Good News from God. 'The time has come' he said 'and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the Good News.'

As he was walking along by the Sea of Galilee he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net in the lake – for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you into fishers of men.' And at once they left their nets and followed him.

Going on a little further, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John; they too were in their boat, mending their nets. He called them at once and, leaving their father Zebedee in the boat with the men he employed, they went after him.

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