A New Old Faith October 6th 2018 Norman Wilkins

A statement of the obvious: it’s not easy to take something written over 1900 years ago that assumes that it is addressing an adulterous and sinful generation that believes in Jesus coming back again with a lot of angels, and believes in Satan. Jesus describes himself as the Son of Man, and we don’t refer to anyone like this. Some people in church may do so, but concerning the population living all around us those ideas won’t strike them as in the least relevant and to present non-church people, and lots of church people with those ideas straight would at best cause a cynical grin and I would be judged a religious nut.

So it has needed a bit of scratching of my head and a fair amount of thought.

The first and actually essential step is to try to get inside the heads and the world that this was written for.

It was a first century Jewish world, and in this world these ideas would make sense

First of all there is the use of the name “Son of Man, or Son of Adam”. That was a term used in the Hebrew Scriptures. It was used to describe first an insignificant humanity, like in Job 25 where it says “A son of Adam who is a worm”. Secondly it was used to describe humans as being created a little lower than God in Psalm 8.

 Finally, it is used in Daniel in a way that resonates with this use in Mark when it says “I saw one like a son of Adam coming with heaven’s clouds” as a heavenly person who was given eternal dominion.

The reference to Jesus dying and rising again on the third day shows that Mark has probably taken on board what Paul had already written to the Corinthians when he wrote “Among the very first thing I handed to you was what I myself also received as tradition, Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures and was buried and rose on the third day according to the scriptures. He then appeared to Cephas and later to the twelve.”

It has been said of course that there is no direct reference to Jesus dying and rising on the third day in the Hebrew Scriptures but the third day is a time symbolic of when something is completed and I have put those in an appendix on the end of the written copy of this reflection. Paul would have been fully aware of the significance of the third day as would other first century Jews.

The idea of a sacrifice dying for the sins of the people is very central to Jewish beliefs of the time with the Pascal Lamb sacrificed at the time of the Passover. This goes back to the Exodus when the First-Born Sons of the Jews in Egypt were spared because of the blood of sacrificed lambs being smeared on the door lintels. This was the time when the Israelites were rescued from captivity, so it wouldn’t be hard to see Jesus’ sacrifice as rescuing the people from captivity to sin.

There are also some scholars who claim to have evidence that the idea of a saviour being killed and then rising on the third day was in Hebrew beliefs just before Jesus was born; but to claim this is in my very humble opinion not backed up by significant hard evidence.

Satan was not generally believed in as an evil angelic being but was in some of the apocryphal writings like the book of Enoch. Satan was mentioned in Job and Zechariah but not really as he or it has been depicted in popular literature. Anyway, he was in the imagination of lots of people.

All that is background to make the point that what is written here in Mark would make sense to those who heard it.

We might hear this passage with respect, but honestly, I doubt if any of you would consider talking about it over the tea and coffee at the end of the service. That’s not a dare for some brave one of you to try it.

However, it would have been of the uttermost relevance to those who heard it. In those days religion was the most significant part of life, it was all of life. It determined all people’s actions, God or the gods were all about you and you were completely at their mercy every moment of your life. It determined all politics, economics, all beliefs and actions conformed to whatever your faith was.

And that attitude where religion was central to life continued until fairly recently.

When we were on holiday we were in Budapest living close to Calvin Square. There was a statue of Calvin there. Calvin was one of the founding fathers of what became the Presbyterian way to be Church. He wrote his Institutes that were monumental tomes of theology that even as a theological student I wasn’t expected to read. He and men like Luther and Zwingli were the cream of humanity’s intellect at the time. I stood under his statue in awe of the great mind that man had and said to him. “Thank you setting up the business that has given me a steady job, but you know sir, if you had been alive today you would have invented a Google or Facebook, been an astronaut, or won a Nobel Prize.” But back then the greatest minds devoted themselves to true religion.

Jesus, and the prophets, Calvin and Luther all gave their lives for what was the most important part of people’s lives and was taken for granted to be the most important part of life.

We might think that the Christian faith is the most important part of life, but for most people it is almost irrelevant. It is no longer the religion of our society. However, repeating something that was said in a funeral we attended recently “The Church has lost the plot, but the plot is still real”

So I suggest than if Jesus or any of those great men and women of the faith were alive today they wouldn’t bother with the Christian Church, for we are no longer the central and most relevant belief system or set of values that people live by.

So I am suggesting that if we had a Jesus living around here it is unlikely he would feel the need to come in here.

So what is the determining belief system, what really controls what people do and stand for. When everyday people decide what is right or wrong, what do they measure everything against? What is the religion of today here in New Zealand.

I suggest it is those old first and second Commandments: To love your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and love your neighbour as yourself. The second commandment is actually the Golden Rule: Do unto others what you would want them to do to you”. I have got back to the essence of what all religions tell us to do.

Whatever any well-adjusted and moral person does, they measure it against those maxims.

The first commandment which says we are to love God, can be brought into this more secular world by rewording it “love whatever is best to you, what are your highest values and most loving, compassionate and wise actions.” For the well-adjusted, fulfilled person, that is really their god. Give ourselves mind, soul, and body to what is most noble and good in life. It is what children are taught in kindergarten.

They are also taught the Golden Rule that amounts to being kind and considerate to others.

So if a modern Jesus were here, what sort of things would he be campaigning for? The real Jesus seemed to get worked up about the restrictive and hypocritical Sabbath laws and the narrow-minded self-righteous men who enforced them. He got worked up about the exploitation of ordinary people in the corrupt exploitative system that prevailed in the Jerusalem Temple. All that really affected people’s lives, it was relevant, it counted. So a modern Jesus would devote his life to what was important.

I am suggesting it would be anything where those maxims “Be the very best person you can be and do unto others as you would have them do unto you” were denied and not practiced.

I think that he would be concerned for the very issues that concern socially involved people today. We know what they are of course: the environment, the gap between the rich and the poor, the lack of purpose that many people seem to have, the euthanasia debate. I wouldn’t dare to try to say what Jesus’ views would be, but I am pretty sure that a modern Jesus would be involved.

However I will add another aspect of our society that I believe needs some reformation. I suggest that it is the equivalent of the oppressive Sabbath laws in the first century and the way the poor were exploited in the Temple.

It is bureaucracy at its worst. It is what poor and often inarticulate people can experience at WINZ. It can be when delays are unnecessarily long when someone is awaiting approval for some planning consent. When they are sent away because they arrived a couple of minutes late, but if they are on time are kept waiting until the worker is ready for them. Whenever rules are applied without any consideration of the real circumstances of the people being affected by them.

A couple of years ago I saw the movie “I Daniel Blake”. It had the theme of bad experiences with Social Welfare in Northern England. It highlighted institutional evil. A few weeks ago I saw the movie Celia about Celia Lashley, who for me encapsulated what I believe Jesus stood for.

The Church that is being the real Church gives people confidence to be the best they can be and affirms them so they feel better about themselves while at the same time acting and speaking out against whatever was doing the opposite to them

I think all churches are actually pretty dedicated to advancing the cause of the Golden Rule “doing unto others what you would like them to do to you”. We seek that others should have as just and fulfilled life as possible because we know that is right.

So you might feel rather bored with passages like the one we just had, and even feel a bit guilty about it, but if we bring the essence of it up to date I suggest that what is happening here, especially when this church is out and doing during the rest of the week is completely in line with the aim of the church back in the first century which was to reform and make just - the essence of what controlled people’s lives.

***From Hosea:***

Hosea 6:1–2 states,**“Come, let us return to the Lord. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence.”** This is a word given to Israel as a whole, but the sequence is there: full restoration on the third day!(1)

***From Genesis:***

According to Genesis 22:4, it was on the third day that Abraham arrived at Mount Moriah and prepared to sacrifice his son Isaac—that important event known in later Rabbinic tradition as the Akedah, “the binding (of Isaac)”—an event seen as a Messianic foreshadowing by the rabbis (see above, 4.1). In similar fashion, the Letter to the Hebrews notes, **“Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death”** (Heb. 11:19)—and this took place on the third day.

***From 2 Kings:***

This was the time set for the miraculous healing of King Hezekiah, who as a son of David serves as somewhat of a Messianic prototype (cf. also b. Sanhedrin 94a, 98a):**“Go back and tell Hezekiah, the leader of my people, ‘This is what the Lord, the God of your father David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will heal you. On the third day from now you will go up to the temple of the Lord’ ”** (2 Kings 20:5; cf. also v. 8).

***From Jonah:***

Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days (a deathlike experience, to be sure!—cf. Jonah 2:1–9) before being spit out on dry land, and hence saved from his watery tomb (Jonah 1:17; 2:10). Jesus himself makes reference to this event in the context of his death and resurrection (see, e.g., Matt. 12:40).

Elsewhere in the Tanakh, it is striking to see how often the third day has special significance:

* God told the children of Israel assembled at Mount Sinai to be ready for the third day “because on that day the Lord will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people” (Exod. 19:10).
* After calling the people to fast for three days for divine intervention to save her Jewish people from annihilation, on the third day, Esther stood before the king and appealed for mercy (Esther 5:1).
* The building of the Second Temple was completed on the third day of the month of Adar (Ezra 6:15).
* On the third day after Joseph interpreted the dreams of two of his fellow prisoners—both of whose dreams included a symbolic “three”—one of the men was hung and the other man restored to his former position (Gen. 40:1–23).
* Sacrifices left until the third day could no longer be eaten but were to be wholly consumed by the altar’s flames (Lev. 7:17–18; 19:6–7).
* It was on the third day—and in the third battle—that the Israelites defeated their Benjamite brothers in battle (see Judges 20, esp. 20:30).
* After three days the Israelites crossed the Jordan—by the miraculous intervention of God (Josh. 1:11; 3:2).(2)

Based on this biblical data, the German biblical scholar Roland Gradwohl argued that “ ‘three days’ is a stereotyped phrase used by the Old Testament in describing a situation when something will be fulfilled or completed within a useful and reasonable time.… The ‘third day’ is used to describe the moment when an event attains its climax.”(3)

Another German scholar, K. Lehmann, wrote an entire volume on the subject of resurrection on the third day, pointing to passages such as Exodus 19:11, 16; Genesis 22:4; 2 Kings 20:5; Esther 5:1; Hosea 6:2 (all cited above) as evidence that the third day was associated with special divine activity, something that caught the attention of the ancient rabbis as well.(4)