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Stories for the Journey

Interview: The Gospels are texts about individual and community transformation, not a 'newspaper record' of the life and times of Jesus of Nazareth. Michael Fitzsimons talks with author Alexander Shaia about how the Great Story is more about the Jesus in us than the Jesus of history.

Alexander Shaia comes to town in late autumn, keen to shed a fresh light on the Great Story of the Gospels that we are so familiar with, in a sense too familiar with. He grew up in Birmingham, Alabama, the third son of Lebanese immigrants and still retains a Semitic outlook.

Maronite background

"I grew up in a Lebanese village, living in the old ways, right in the middle of an industrial city in the American south. The gift of this was to grow up seeing the Christianity of my ancestors, the same as it has been for more than 900 years, brought from a mountain village in Lebanon, recreated in Birmingham. My father's family is the family of Maronite priests in this village, and nine of our last 11 generations have included priests called Alexander.

"I went to Maronite seminary after college for a short while, but I left in search of one that would fit me better. I immediately began to work for Roman Catholic Churches instead and did so for the next 20 years as head of adult education, leading and teaching the rite of Christian initiation of adults."

Interest in transformation

In the early 90s Alexander entered a doctoral programme in clinical psychology and these days is an educator, psychologist, spiritual director, liturgist, writer and speaker. His great interest is transformation — personal and community — and his core message is that transformation rather than historical record is what the Gospels are all about.

Tonight he is addressing a small crowd at St Andrews on the Terrace with great enthusiasm. Lately he has worked with spiritual directors in New Zealand and Australia and is working on another book, a follow-up to the very successful Hidden Power of the Gospels: Four Questions, Four Paths, One Journey. He wears a lovely greenstone pendant, an appreciative gift from the spiritual directors he has been working with.

Dynamic presence of God

In recent times there has been a great emphasis on the historical Jesus, but the heart of the Gospel is about the dynamic presence of God right now, says Alexander. The Gospels are about connecting the Risen Jesus to the young and fragile Christian communities in Rome, Antioch and Ephesus.

The Gospel is not a sacred newspaper recording what Jesus said and did but rather the truth in every moment in time, verifiable, says Alexander. "It's about the dynamism of now, and that's what set first century Christianity on fire. The historical Jesus needs to be placed in a new configuration, he needs to be brought home to the dynamic struggle of the baptized.

"When the Church brought the four Gospels together, it was giving us a spiritual map for how to live the life Jesus promised. The stories become not just about Jesus but about Jesus in us."

Gospels from lived experience

Seen in this way, the Gospels are the lived experience of particular Christian communities written in response to moments of crisis and dilemma. They come from the wrestling of these new baptised communities. The spiritual truths that underpin them are fundamental to the spiritual journey that we all must take.

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Mark

“Writing in the 60s, Mark gives the revelation of Jesus Christ to a community in extremis, after the Christians of Rome had been persecuted under Nero. They were baptised, but none of these early Christians would have believed their faith would have led to all their deaths. Seeing the text in this way, Mark’s gospel becomes a prayer, a teaching, a meditation on how we walk with Jesus Christ through the valley of death. This lens organises the text in a new way — it shows the life story of Jesus in the context of trial and suffering. It opens up as a teaching but also as a spiritual practice, it’s like an Ignatian exercise on the life of Jesus brought forward to this terrible moment in Rome.”

Matthew

“We think the Gospel of Matthew is coming from the community in Antioch in the years after the destruction of the Jewish temple and the massacre of the Jewish priesthood, in 70 AD. The emperor wants to destroy the Jewish faith. The Jewish people are bereft in a way few faiths have ever been in history. The only access they believed they had to God was in this temple. At this stage there was no Christian priesthood, we are still tied to Jewish ritual, priesthood and the temple. Now they are gone, and the rituals stop. The Jewish-Christian community in Antioch is wrestling, and the text of Matthew leads them in their moment of change. Underneath Matthew, is this beautiful grace delivering the message that they have a new temple, and a new priesthood, in Christianity.”

Luke

The third lens is Luke, in the mid-80s and it is a Gospel about how we mature in service, says Alexander.

“The text of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles is: here we are a people of a new revelation, we have a wider way for the human family to be seen, we have increased dignity for women, slaves and the poor. This way of living made us an enemy of the Emperor. This text led us through 225 years of mind-boggling persecution, of being executed for being Christian. The Roman Emperor fell 225 years later because we had changed the values of the empire. Luke is one of the first great texts about non-violent resistance. It is the text of how Jesus, Peter and Paul faced oppression, how we as Christians will face oppression.

John

“The fourth text is John, at the end of the first century. He is writing it for a community which is Greek instead of Jewish, so he uses the Greek language. It is an interior text, a meditation about how to make love your foundation, how to keep your heart open. They are meditations on the grace of God, active now.”

According to Alexander, it is no accident that 300 years after they were written these four texts, these four paths on the spiritual journey, were named by the Church as the Gospels.

“Why are there four chapters? The Church leaders believed that there were four parts of the sequence to the spiritual journey, a number they got from Judaism. So the Gospel needed four accounts. The first part is how you face change, for which they rightly chose Matthew. Facing change leads to a time of great trial and difficulty, the text of Mark. The change and the ordeal lead to a moment of epiphany, John. The joy of the new vision finds its fulfilment in Luke, which is service.”

Gospel message for now

Seen in this light, the Gospels are not so much a verification of history but a message about how to live now. And that involves not just a faith decision, a moment of conversion, but the more difficult challenge of living as a member of a new pan-tribal family.

Says Alexander: “The idea of a pan-tribal religion hadn’t been on the planet before Jesus and it was very revolutionary — and still is. We all come from one source, called to be one family gathered around one table, having the same affectionate bond to everyone who sits at the table, and not just those that are part of your bloodline. All that beautiful diversity is to be wrestled with and that is what the Gospels are about.”

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