

Father Matt Jacobson
3 September 2023
St. Mary the Virgin, NYC

Year A, Proper 17, Sunday Solemn Mass
Jeremiah 15:15–21; Psalm 26:1–8; Romans 12:1–8; Matthew 16:21–28

We just heard from Matthew in our Gospel lesson for today. And Matthew, when the four Gospels are symbolized as four creatures, as is often done, is usually depicted as a human. But, not always. St. Augustine had him as a lion.

More typically, and what was ultimately settled on, Mark is a lion, Luke an ox, and John an eagle, though this varied across the early Church as it was all still being sorted out.

It follows the imagery of the four creatures in Ezekiel as well as the Book of Revelation.¹ And, the approach dates back at least to St. Irenaeus in the second century, who had an even different arrangement for who was best represented by the eagle and who was the lion and so on.

The creatures aren't the only four-fold symbolism that's been applied to the Gospels over the years. Others from the early Church drew upon the physical cosmos from astronomy and meteorology, as well as fields such as music, mathematics, and geography.² For example, Eusebius talked about the four elements—earth, water, air, and fire—and through this tied the four Gospels into the formation of the universe.³

In part, this way of looking at the Gospels relates to the New Testament coming together—which books were in, which books were out—not only as support for these four, but also to explain why there must be exactly four. “How indeed could the number of the Gospels be either more or less?” said Irenaeus.⁴

What's particularly interesting is that some of the writers in the early Church, say the four-fold Gospels are the reason the cosmos is structured the way it is. The four regions of the world—which is how geography was understood in antiquity—Augustine says is a sign that points us to the Gospels.⁵

¹ Revelation 4:7; Ezekiel 1:10, 10:20.

² Jeremiah Coogan, “Reading (in) a Quadriform Cosmos: Gospel Books in the early Christian Bibliographic Imagination,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 31, no. 1 (Spring 2023): 87.

³ Eusebius, *Oration in Praise of Constantine*, 6.5, 11-17.

⁴ Irenaeus, *Against Heretics*, 3.11.8.

⁵ Augustine, *Cons.*, 1.2.3.

If we follow this through, the cosmos, creation, points us to the Gospels. And, the Gospels then point us to Jesus: the Gospels as a reflection of Christ, who then reflects God back out to the created world.

The vastness of the cosmos pointing us to the four books which describe Jesus. The four books that give a glimpse at something vast and more incomprehensible than the cosmos: God.

Seen this way, it perhaps makes some sense why the Gospels get put in a special book and are processed out with smoke and extra ceremonial—going out into the middle of the congregation to draw us all forward.

But, while the Gospels tells us a lot about God through the stories of Jesus, it's still only a glimpse at what's ultimately largely beyond our comprehension and of course certainly couldn't be contained in a book. And that, in a sense, brings us to some of the specifics we heard from Matthew today.

St. Peter, versed in Hebrew scripture and the tradition of the time, knew what it meant to be the messiah. Or so he thought.

Last week, in a portion which precedes what we heard today, Peter correctly identifies Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Yet, today, we find out that Peter didn't know as much as it seemed.

He rebukes Jesus after hearing that he must suffer and be killed in Jerusalem. At that point, Peter probably didn't even hear the rest—the part about being raised on the third day—and just began to protest and to say to Jesus: no!

So he gets put in his place. Instead of telling Jesus “no,” he needs to follow where Christ is leading him. Peter didn't appreciate the vastness of what's entailed in Jesus being the Christ, that there might be more that he didn't know or couldn't understand. And, this got in the way.

I find Peter's example a bit of a relief—knowing I can't fully appreciate God's vastness or the vastness of what Jesus is calling us into. It gives us permission to stumble too as we search for what it means to deny ourselves and take up our own cross. Wander a bit. Take wrong turns.

But, St. Paul looks to point us in the right direction. He speaks of us as a living sacrifice in today's passage from Romans.

He goes on to talk about how we're many members of the one body of Christ. And, as individuals, each of us is called in a different way to support that one body. To work together using our different gifts. To pay attention and then follow where the Spirit is guiding us. Paul is opening us up to the possibilities of how we might be called to take up our cross as he talks about not being conformed to this world, but rather being transformed—allowing ourselves to be changed by God.

The idea of taking up our cross and following can be intimidating. At least it is for me. The image of the cross invokes death, but Paul's concept of being a living sacrifice points us to a death of the part of ourselves that would rather conform to the world than figure out our role as a member of the one body.

I find it helpful to remember that Jesus also describes all of this in a different way in Matthew. We heard it on a Sunday in early July. "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."⁶

The burden of taking up our cross and following Jesus is light . . . when we live into the member of the body God is calling us to be.

Is Matthew supposed to be the human or was Augustine right that he's the lion? Who's an eagle and who's called to be the ox? We need to test it out.

If it's hard and we aren't finding rest for our souls, we probably need to keep on discerning our place within the body. When we find it and follow, what Jesus is saying about his yoke will make a lot of sense.

The implications of all this are profound and deeper than the cosmos is vast, but we don't need to take all that on. We just have to listen to where God is calling us and follow. As we heard Paul say about the gifts that have been given to us: "let us use them."

✠ In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

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⁶ Matthew 11:29-30.