

Signs of the Time: Luke 12: 54-56

Rembrandt's painting of St Matthew portrays the Evangelist composing his gospel: before him lies a manuscript, poised in his hand is a pen, but he himself is miles away, lost in thought, absorbed in what he is about to write, he is even oblivious to the angel, who bends over his right shoulder whispering in his ear. Oblivious, that is, to the source of his inspiration.

I don't know whether or not Rembrandt believed this was how the Gospels came into being, but certainly many of his contemporaries, and indeed many today, would believe it was so. An angel or God dictated the words, the Evangelists were merely the scribes, the secretaries, who took the words down.

In which case Matthew is an unfortunate example.

For something like two centuries the Gospels have been subjected to a rigorous, scholarly analysis. One conclusion which few scholars would disagree with is that Mark was the first gospel to be written and when the authors of Matthew and Luke came to write their own account, together with other sources, they made free use of Mark – plagiarism was not frowned on in those days. Almost the whole of Mark is incorporated in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. Not only did Matthew use Mark, sometimes word for word, he used it at times in a somewhat creative way. If there

was something he did not agree with he did not hesitate to alter it. For example, in Mark's account of the rich young ruler, our Lord says to him, *Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.* This was a major difficulty for Matthew which he solves by radically altering Jesus' words to, *Why do you ask me about what is good?* Which is not at all what Mark wrote.

When Matthew came to write his gospel he was not so much like a secretary taking down the words at an angel's dictation, rather he resembled a historian making critical use of the sources and references spread out before him. Which gives a totally different aspect to inspiration than that of Rembrandt's painting. Here are no heavenly voices, but men using their God-given reason and their critical judgement to produce their work.

It may be argued however that what applies to the Gospel writers does not necessarily apply to other biblical writers. What about the prophets for example? Surely here, if anywhere, are those who did indeed hear angels' voices which enabled them to gaze into the future.

But consider these verses from a Gospel we read a few weeks ago: Jesus said to the crowds, *When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, "It is going to rain"; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, "There will be a scorching heat"; and it*

happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but you do not know how to interpret the present time. His hearers were weather-wise, as are most people who live close to nature. They knew that when a small cloud appeared over the Mediterranean rain was on the way; when the wind veered to the south a scorching sirocco was to be expected. But those who were wise to read the signs of the skies were fools when it came to interpreting the signs on the political horizon. Which raises the question: Did prophets predict the future by gazing into a crystal ball; falling into a trance; hearing heavenly voices; or relying on dreams?

I think not.

It seems to me they relied on an awareness of what was going on around them; on a sensitivity to the signs of the times within their own nation, within the surrounding nations and with a conviction that they lived in a moral universe where every action carried its consequences. The prophets may have had their heads in heaven, but they had their feet firmly on the ground..

Jeremiah is a good example. He had an overwhelming sense of God and a vocation which he found at times unbearable, but from which he could not escape. He was aware, more than any of his contemporaries, more than the

rulers of his nation and their diplomats, of what was happening on the international stage. He was appointed a prophet to the nations – note the plural. And because he could see beyond the narrow boundaries of his own society which limited the vision of others who should have known better, he was obsessed with the necessity of warning his nation of the inevitable consequences of its policies. *I see a cauldron*, he cried – in his imagination he saw Babylon, a cauldron bubbling in the north which would spill over and fatally scald the little nation of Judea.

So Jesus questions his hearers, *You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?* As one commentator writes: Jesus' *premonitions of disaster were based in part ... **on his ability to interpret the present time.*** He saw that to reject his way was to choose the path leading to conflict with Rome and to inevitable catastrophe. His political awareness was much more acute than that of the nation's leaders.

I prepared what I have just said for a sermon I intended to preach a few weeks ago, but, as some of you may remember, I decided at the last minute to preach on something else. I was uneasy with what I had written. I

believed it to be true, but only half-true. And this half-truth might have given the impression that I believed that the Gospels and the writings of the prophets could be reduced to a merely human activity. This and two other considerations have led me to qualify what I originally prepared. The first consideration is a text in the book of Exodus: *The Lord said to Moses, See, I have called by name Bezalel ... and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, for work in every craft.* Similar words are applied to another craftsman who, among other things, was responsible for the liturgical garments of the priests. As one commentator writes, *Inborn artistic genius and skill is something that defies all logical explanation.* The ancient Hebrews believed it to be the indwelling of God's Spirit in the artist. The other consideration is a re-consideration, a reconsideration of Rembrandt's portrait of Matthew. As I have contemplated it afresh I have come to the conclusion that the painter is trying to tell us much more than what appears on the surface. I am persuaded that Rembrandt could just as well be painting himself as painting the Evangelist. Substitute a brush for the pen and a canvas for the manuscript and you come very near to a self-portrait, it could then just as well be entitled *Rembrandt and his angel.*

But I think it goes much deeper even than that. What I suspect Rembrandt is trying to convey is the creative process itself and for the figure of the Evangelist you could substitute any great writer, or painter, or composer. What Rembrandt is telling us is that the creation of a work of art is as much a mystery to its creator as it is to anyone else. If you asked any great artist, composer, poet, *Where does it come from?* I suspect they would confess that they themselves did not know. If I am right, what Rembrandt's portrait is saying is that at the heart of all human creativity there is mystery. Therefore if you ask me do I believe the Gospel writers and the prophets were inspired? I answer unhesitatingly, *Yes*. If you ask me do I believe Titian, Shakespeare, Milton, Beethoven, Dickens were inspired? I must, following the example of the author of Exodus, also answer, *Yes*. This mystery at the heart of all human creativity is that which we call God. It is the whisper of his angel which we overhear when we are confronted by a profound work of art. God's inspired word extends way beyond the pages of Holy Scripture.