

Revisiting

Aileen LaTourette revisits Mark's Gospel, reading it as if it were fiction .

When I began to think about this idea of reading Mark's Gospel as fiction, I started with questions about fiction/imagination. Fiction is mostly defined by what it isn't. It isn't fact. Clear enough. But it is true? Like myth, of course, with the truth of the imagination, skirting questions of what is truth and what is imagination. True with the force of psychic truth, if it works, if it, in that precise phrase, *rings true*.

So on to Mark. I found my emotional responses were mostly to the character of Jesus, rather than the plot. The events that made up the plot seemed to be like magical realism – the first example of which is fairy tales, for most of us. And we accept the events in them without question, we just do. We know we're in another place, where other rules apply. We like being there, in imaginative time and space.

So, then, Jesus of Nazareth. I was fascinated by the relationship he had with evil spirits – how they knew each other. Almost immediately he starts telling them what to do – *Begone!* basically – and they shake their hosts about and shriek and scream, but they go. Most interesting (1: 34) is this: 'He would not let the demons speak, because they knew who he was'.

So there's a kind of conspiracy of silence between Jesus and the demons. And secrecy seems to be a key theme. When Jesus heals the leper in 1: 40, he bids him not to tell anyone. 'Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news.' You wonder if this wise Jesus of N doesn't realise that to tell someone not to tell means they probably will? Or at least this ex-leper will?

But then: (v. 43) 'Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places'. Is this man ambivalent about his own powers, disturbed by them? It's interesting. I remember a little book by John Berger about Picasso – and unlike Don Cupitt, I do like a lot of Picasso, despite his misogyny – called *The Success and Failure of Picasso*. Among other things, Berger talks about how Picasso found his gift hard to manage because it was not under his conscious control. Rather like

physical beauty – it comes without any effort on his part and it could leave just as arbitrarily. Not that he doesn't work, but the talent or whatever you wish to call it, genius if you like, is just there, and that is frightening.

It could be the same with healing? Jesus seems more at home or at ease in his skin with parables. There is a certainty about the voice here – more about this later. The Sabbath stuff (2: 23-26) is quite wonderful, against the rigidity of law. Great dialogue, and JC has some great lines. And then we have more of the evil spirit conspiracy (3: 11-12): 'Whenever the evil spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, "You are the Son of God." But he gave them strict orders not to tell who he was.'

It's nice that JC (I will call him this from now on. It's not in Mark I know but I feel like some kind of fundamentalist talking about Jesus – interesting inhibition) argues against being possessed, himself, by pointing out that he casts out Satan and therefore can't *be* him – the line 'a house divided against itself cannot stand'(3: 26), borrowed or stolen by Abraham Lincoln about the American Civil War.

I realise I am doing the opposite of what I intended and talking about theme, if not plot, but it is very interesting that the evil spirits recognise him. This is some kind of parallels that meet in infinity thing – good and evil ending up knowing each other. Maybe because he isn't afraid of them? This is an element in the story that takes me in, that really grabs me. Evil is fascinating and here it is personified and it has a voice – we have the demons asking to go into pigs and before that the great demon-line: 'My name is Legion' (5: 9). Now there's a Satanic line worthy of Milton. I do feel a bit sorry for the pigs in this bit, rushing into the lake and drowning, and I'm not surprised the people plead with JC to leave their region (v.17) – they're no doubt worried for their livestock.

The pig thing reminds me of the poor fig tree. JC is a bit petulant here (11: 14) in telling the tree it will not ever bear fruit, just because it hasn't



El Greco: *Jesus Driving the Moneychangers from the Temple*. commons.wikimedia.org

offered him any. I thought – well – he could just as easily have made it fertile, right? Cured it of its barrenness? But he's in a bad mood, obviously, and later on the poor tree has actually withered. This seems both bad-tempered and show-offy and then we get the lesson about how prayer can do anything, but is that a nice way to make the point? I feel his Jewish mother should ask him that question, and sit him down to a good meal – or perhaps a nice Jewish wife (like the one who pours the expensive oil from her alabaster jar on his head – though the version where she washes his feet with it and dries them with her hair is much more erotic – but he defends her (14: 4-9), even if he says she was anointing him for burial, which again seems less than getting into the spirit of the thing). Anyway, after the fig tree gets it, comes the bit about throwing the money-changers out of the temple, which seems less righteous than it used to somehow and more part of the fig tree tantrum, brought on by hunger and frustration.

This aspect of JC – a kind of self-righteous rage – is less attractive than it was when retold as gospel. He teases people with his identity or authority, (11: 11) and intimidates people in a fairly high-handed way. He certainly brooks no disagreement. I kind of like disliking him. It makes him seem more human. He has a temper, he can even sulk. He sulks quite a lot, actually. On the other hand, he teaches in parables, which are quite enjoyable – oddly, I found myself thinking of Proust's 'asides', which are the whole point, really – though this story is driving a much more determined narrative.

There are other bits of demon-chasing – the demons 'convulsing' their host and then leaving (9: 26) and when the disciples ask about their own failure to cast out the demon JC tells them it had to be driven out by prayer – kind of resonant, that quiet statement. JC knows his demons. And they know him. My emotions are mixed and I need to re-read. This central character is puzzling and very mixed. Tragic, certainly. There does seem to be an

element of hubris? On the other hand there's the politics of the time, the nets that continually swirl around him and which he has to duck and dive to avoid.

The parables are kind of wonderful. Stories – JC likes stories. His voice comes through very clearly. I have not had, or taken, the time to grapple more seriously with this but strangely enough this reading as fiction has made me feel that I will. The language is compelling and the character of JC is compelling. It's so full of paradox. The minor characters, the disciples he calls, especially Peter, and those he heals, are also quite vivid. I have to say I enjoyed it, that it took me to surprising places – I was afraid it would be desperately over-familiar and reading it this way, it was not. It became a good read.

It isn't depressing, despite the ending – or because of it? Is there a tragic catharsis in the Aristotelian sense? A cleansing of the emotions through an experience of pity and fear? Sort of, I guess I would say. Rather wishy-washy. (Me, that is). The form of this novel is very interesting. Very poetic in the best sense, meaning economical and charged. Also highly dramatic, with lots of dialogue. Very highly *voiced*, like both poetry and drama. Very little of it reads as prose.

I think the questions that arise for me are to do with what the 'other' way of reading it deadens – which is precisely the story. You hear it enough in that vein, and you think you know it. And you don't. You've missed it, or it has missed you.

The vulnerability of JC came through to me quite strongly. He is in danger from the start and everywhere. It made me think of people I know and have known who seem like that – and the way in which everyone is like that – and the devices we use to hide from it. Protect ourselves. His solitude also comes through. Easy to romanticise. There are

questions about that. This was a good thing to do and has sent me back to considering lots of things about this book.

One quick addendum – shortly after writing this I picked up *Judas*, the latest novel by the wonderful Israeli writer Amos Oz. Oz makes Mark's gospel central to his story – he picks out the fig tree incident, in particular, in its pettiness and meanness, as proof that JC is not divine, but all too human, particularly as any Jew would know that fig trees do not bear fruit till after Passover.

Which leads to the question – does he know he won't be there, after Passover, to eat figs or anything else? And curse the tree for that? The earth on which he will no longer walk, the food he can no longer eat and enjoy in a human way – there is kind of Kazantzakis feeling here, a feeling of a JC reluctant to die because he liked human life. To lose, as someone put it recently, 'his place at the table' – or under the fig tree, when the harvest comes in and you can grab one, warm from the sun, in your human hand.

Aileen La Tourette is a poet and novelist. Her most recent novel is *The Oldest Girl* (Caliband, 2011). In 2016 she won the Live Canon International Poetry Competition and edited *The Green Door: Poems by Paper Voices* (Psychology News Press, London). She was a lecturer in Creative Writing at John Moores University Liverpool, retiring in 2011.

This 'Revisiting' was written in response to an invitation by David Lambourn for his Workshop on *Reading Mark's Gospel as Fiction* at the annual SOF Conference in July.

Readers are invited to submit to the Editor a 'Revisiting' of a novel, poem or other literary work that has been important to them. This may be any length between 700 and 1500 words.

God and the Planet

Nietzsche wrote
God is dead, we
Have killed him.

I shudder to think
Our planet is dying
We are killing our home.

John Cragg

