

Gospel of Thomas – Effort and grace

The *Gospel of Thomas* starts with the saying: “And he said, “Whoever discovers the interpretation of these sayings will not taste death.” Thomas sees Jesus clearly laying the responsibility for our salvation on our own shoulders by encouraging us to make the effort to understand and act upon his teaching. The discovery of the Truth lies in a combination of our effort and the grace inherent in his words. The emphasis in this Gospel is therefore on personal endeavour and personal responsibility, albeit aided by grace, to discover who we truly are: “Jesus said, if they say to you, ‘Where have you come from?’ Say to them, ‘We have come from the light, from the place where the light came into being by itself, established itself, and appeared in their image.’ If they say to you, ‘is it you?’ say, ‘We are its children, and we are the chosen of the living father.” Jesus points us therefore in this Gospel very directly to our Divine origin. Again the emphasis is on the presence of God, the Kingdom, being within us and moreover amongst us at every moment: “Jesus said, if your leaders say to you, ‘Look, the kingdom is in heaven,’ then the birds of heaven will precede you. If they say to you, ‘It is in the sea’ and then the fish will precede you. Rather, the Kingdom is inside you and it is outside you.”

This emphasis on each of us containing within ourselves a spark of the Divine was a belief held by many of the early Church fathers, such as Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria and Origen; it was considered an apostolic doctrine in the first few centuries. But it was also a main tenet of the Gnostics. This may well have been the reason that this view was later discredited and supplanted by the ‘orthodox’ interpretation, which stressed that we were in truth made in the ‘image’ of God, but that in the ‘fall’ this ‘image’ was completely shattered. St Augustine stressed that therefore only by the grace of Christ could we be saved. We ourselves could do nothing, which was the opposite of the message of Jesus in the ‘*Gospel of Thomas*’. The opposition to Augustine’s view was also expressed by John Cassian in his dispute with him. Cassian based his view of the importance of effort and personal responsibility, as well as the role of grace, on the discipline of prayer, the experience and the teaching flowing from this by the Desert Fathers and Mothers. Cassian’s view was shared by many in these early centuries and by John Main amongst others in our present century.

It is therefore not surprising that finding the true interpretation of Jesus’ sayings in the *Gospel of Thomas* is similar to the deeply attentive reading of Scripture that Origen stressed: ‘*lectio divina*’, which according to him both led to and was aided by contemplative prayer. This profound intuitive engagement with the text was considered to result in a meeting with the presence of Christ, and consequently would lead to a true understanding of the spiritual meaning of Scripture. This spiritual understanding, in turn, would lead to a complete transformation of consciousness: a ‘*metanoia*’, a turning

around. Then we would see reality as it truly is, and experience that in our essence we are already one with the Divine through the consciousness of Christ that dwells in our hearts.

But the emphasis on personal effort and deep intuitive understanding, rather than pure belief in the accepted teaching, put the Gospel of Thomas outside the canon of accepted orthodox Scripture of the 4th century with its emphasis on the literal surface interpretation.

Thomas' Jesus is very aware of the difficulty of the effort required to seeing Ultimate Reality: "The Father's Kingdom is spread out upon the earth, and people do not see it." The main difficulty being that we have covered over the Divine spark within us by being focused on our material body and its needs: "Jesus said, I took my stand in the midst of the world, and in the flesh I appeared to them. I found them all drunk, and I did not find any of them thirsty. My soul ached for the children of humanity, because they are blind in their hearts and do not see, for they came into the world empty, and they also seek to depart from the world empty. But now they are drunk. When they shake off their wine, then they will repent."

This Gospel challenges us to let go of our habitual ways of perception dictated by our material being, the 'ego', which make us "drunk" and "blind". We do not need to let go off the 'ego' itself, but of the disordered drives/desires that are a product of our survival needs, upbringing and environment. All we need to do is to wake up and discover who we truly are. This same exhortation to 'wake up!' and 'Be alert' is also found in the Synoptic Gospels. This re-discovery of our true nature is the most important element in our life, although it is not easy: "Jesus said, let one who seeks not stop seeking until one finds. When one finds, one will be troubled. When one is troubled, one will marvel and will rule over all." It is troubling to realise that the reality we have accepted as the only objective and permanent reality is in fact shaped by the thoughts, images and needs of our material being. But if we persevere, we can part the veil of these illusions and become aware of our true nature and the true nature of reality. The result will then be a real sense of wonder.

Wishing you all a Blessed Easter filled with Light and Joy!

(Adapted from 'Journey to the Heart' – the chapter on 'The Gospel of Thomas')