

Jesus every time

I am often asked: "Mark, does every sermon have to lead to Jesus?" The problem may lie in the breadth of our biblical imaginations. If we do not see what the New Testament writers saw, then we can only preach a reduced Jesus. And if that's all we can see, and all we can preach, then I can understand the question. I can't stand hearing Jesus tacked on to a sermon. It's worse than not hearing about him at all.

The New Testament writers held a simple conviction: the good news that had rocked the world was about Jesus, not them. The simplest, shortest definition we can possibly give of the Gospel is this: Jesus (full stop).

News is always a story. In this case it was a very long story: Yahweh had made good his promise(s) to Abraham and thus to the rest of us. At long last Yahweh had done everything: he had turned up in person; he'd judged; redeemed; re-created. He had set everything to rights and delivered the anticipated resurrection. All done. In one person.

If you were Jewish, you had some major adjustments to make. If you were part of the sprawling cosmopolitan Graeco-Roman cities, you had an alternate world story to learn, to interpret, and to apply. This story was as big as the end of every nationalist and imperialist agenda, of every social and intellectual convention premised on status. In one simple outrageous story, the world had been offered an alternative to the colossus of Roman power and Greek intellectualism.

We can watch how this played itself out in the imaginations of the NT writers by paying attention to the trajectories of their writing.

Pick an author, any author (ok, I know James doesn't quite fit . there *is* an explanation for him). Where did they start and finish? Jesus. Pick any OT theme: what did they do with it? They reworked it in light of the Gospel; the events of Jesus. Pick any description of God: how did they expound this? By anchoring it in Jesus. How absolutely gobsmackingly huge and central and crucial and radical and dramatic was the cross and resurrection to these writers! They couldn't talk about anything without weaving in and out of these astounding realities. Did they ever run an argument . ever . without starting from, wrapping it around, and finishing it with, Jesus?

This didn't mean they didn't talk about anything else. Of course they did. But could they talk about anything without talking about Jesus? No. For our earliest brothers and sisters, Jesus's resurrection had changed everything.

So how do we fare? Does our preaching look like the wonder and brilliance fuelled in the NT writers by what happened in Jesus? Thankfully, there are many who faithfully labour to do just this. But there are some dreadful alternatives out there.

Jesus is still the greatest story on earth. His story is still changing people. *He* is still changing people. The question I began with only betrays our own lack. *Of course* we need to preach about all manner of texts and topics. But if we are to follow the lead of the NT writers, how can we adequately talk about anything without talking about Jesus?

As we indwell more deeply the profundity of who Christ is, and of what he has accomplished, why would we finish anywhere else?

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