

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: Thomas Notes (which will make more sense when you receive the texts!)

Infancy Gospel: 1-10: We are used to some very special people showing early signs of being special - including some musicians, such as Mozart. On the whole, Bible heroes were not infant prodigies. The Bible highlights the very special birth of Jesus, but there is just the one reference to his childhood, at age 12. Here are imaginings: some rather attractive, some repulsive. The idea of small children playing being a profanation of the Sabbath is extreme, but not wholly out of the scope of rigid Sabbath interpretation. On Joseph's side in trying to control these alleged vengeance use of Jesus' divine powers? Would you have been as tolerant a teacher as Zachaeus in dealing with this very rude pupil? How do you picture the child and teenage years; and any idea why Jesus waited until about age 30 to declare Himself?

Infancy Gospel 11-19: Some of these miracles sound very much like ordinary wishful thinking converted into narrative. It is all totally inconsistent with the Nazareth folk being puzzled by the preaching and miracles of the adult Jesus they had known as an ordinary boy. I wonder, mischievously, why the writer did not assume that Jesus sprang from the room able to read and write. 16 assumes that Jesus had an elder brother, James. Not easy to reconcile this with Bible narrative and assumptions – though you might feel that Joseph and Mary having other children is entirely consistent with the special Birth of Jesus.

19 is mainly the Bible narrative, but with a little elaboration. Does the elaboration add anything?

Coptic Gospel 1-28: You will recognise quite a lot of what is said here? The assertion that knowledge is power would not puzzle. The assertion that knowledge is eternal life does raise questions. But no need to sign up to the Gnostic idea that knowledgeable insiders are the ones going to heaven, Try "If you know and live God you will experience God's love here and hereafter". The perseverance message is good... and maybe take "ruling" as "being in charge of yourself and your circumstances in good times and in bad". Knowing yourself means being able to take both strengths and weaknesses into account: knowing what I have to give and what I need to receive.

Don't be too bothered about bits you can't make sense out of. We are probably all in the same position. But read twice and reflect before giving up. For example, there are bad ways of fasting, praying, and giving alms; but these things are not bad in themselves. Indeed, praying and alms giving are necessary.

The Bible too reports the difficult stuff about causing dissension. It isn't that dissension is good, or indeed inevitable, but it is clear enough that faith and life-style conflicts can arise. Think of a burglar's wife becoming a convinced Christian and asking her husband to change his ways. Think of a child challenging a parent on the parent's moral behaviour.

I'd love to know what you make of 22 – which seems to contrast with the Bible saying about eyes and ears etc being separate and necessarily so. I think it may be a matter of emphasising the need to strive for consistency and equality without losing essential difference. Men and women are different, though the differences differ in different people; but the one is not “better” than the other.

Coptic Gospel 29-56: Gnostics tended to play down the body. In fact there are Bible passages portraying the holy and blessed in the frail and vulnerable body: some truth there! However, the orthodox view is that bodies matter, and are to be respected – not least damaged bodies. The stripping off message perhaps exaggerates the legitimate point that clothes can be given too much attention. Clothes matter, but get things in proportion!

42 intrigues me. “Become passers-by”. There are various ways of reading this. You might opt for “Don’t pass by on the other side, and ignore being needed; but pass by, notice, and act”. 44 is a Bible passage, and always a slightly uncomfortable one. How can you get away with turning your back on two Persons of the Trinity, but be condemned for ignoring the Holy Spirit. The usual interpretation seems to be that when you get a direct message from the Trinity God (Holy Spirit activity), there is a special need to respond rather than ignore. 47 is a very effective way of putting the impossibility of doing the right and wrong things at the same time.

Be careful with the “elect” idea. It features all too often in orthodox discussion as a way of explaining why some get it” and others don’t. Maybe hang on to the reality that God chooses us all, whether we are anxious to respond or not,

55 takes us to another awkward Bible story: “Hating” relatives. Usually understood as a, perhaps over-dramatic, way of talking about priorities. OK to hate evil, but never OK to hate people.

57-85: 57 is familiar, though the familiarity sometimes breeds contempt. 58 is a short and striking statement: a lovely way of addressing the meaning of suffering – not something God sends, but something God helps us make positive use of. The last bit of 64 is not a condemnation of people who earn their living by doing business or selling things; but of those who don’t put first things first. What do you make of 67? And 75.....?

The tail end of 76 is one of the most memorable passages in Thomas. In an ECO interpretation, it is about finding God in the least of His creation.

Verse 85 is more orthodox than perhaps it sounds: the idea that God didn’t intend death, and introduced it because Adam and Eve failed the test. On this understanding, living human life for ever would mean sinning for ever.

86-114: Note the constant emphasis on establishing who Jesus is. The reality of the three years of Jesus and the disciples must have been a long period of moving from the human

teacher to the God Incarnate. 94 is interesting in this Gnostic setting: it repeats the core message that God is there when you take the trouble to look for God. 100 is intriguing: it adds Jesus to the God and Caesar options, 101 is also intriguing, in adding love to the hate option – and in a sense saying what we want to hear.

107 again adds to the familiar parable, Any thoughts as to why?

112 is another passage requiring thought. It seems to be saying that soul does not depend on flesh, and flesh does not depend on soul. How far are these two interdependent in human life?

The last two verses seem to require apology rather than study. This is an extreme version of Adam did not need Eve. God thought he did....and God thought both male and female were needed....equally needed and equally valued and equally loved. We enter the kingdom of heaven together. The writer seems to be implying that God made a mistake...despite his earlier recognition that God in Jesus needed Mary.