

THE  
LIVING VOICE  
OF THE

*Gospel*

THE  
GOSPELS  
TODAY

FRANCIS J MOLONEY SDB



**garratt**  
PUBLISHING

Published in Australia by  
John Garratt Publishing  
32 Glenvale Crescent  
Mulgrave Vic 3170

Copyright © 2006 Francis J Moloney sdb

Cover and text design: Lynne Muir  
Edited by Cathy Oliver  
Printed by Tien Wah Press, Singapore

All rights reserved. Except as provided by Australian copyright law, no part of this book may be reproduced without permission in writing from the publishers.

First published 2006

1            2            3            4            5

The National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry :

Moloney, Francis J. (Francis James), 1940- .

The living voice of the Gospel : the Gospels today.

2nd ed.

ISBN 978 1 920721 33 6.

ISBN 1 920721 33 9.

1. Bible. N.T. Gospels - Criticism, interpretation, etc.
2. Christian life. I. Title.

226.06

Where scripture quotations are drawn from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, these are copyright ©1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, and are used by permission. All rights reserved.

*For the Salesians of the Australian Province  
1960-2006*

## Acknowledgements

All the material in this book has been freshly written, or re-written from earlier publications by the author. Earlier studies that have contributed to the following texts are:

*The Gospel of Mark. A Commentary* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002).

*Mark. Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004).

*This is the Gospel of the Lord. Year A* (Homebush: St. Paul Publications, 1992), 13-49.

*This is the Gospel of the Lord. Year B* (Homebush: St. Paul Publications, 1991), 82-91.

*The Gospel of John* (Sacra Pagina 4; Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1998).

“The Function of Prolepsis for the Interpretation of John 6,” in *The Gospel of John. Text and Context* (Biblical Interpretation Series 72; Boston/Leiden: Brill, 2005), 169-92.

## Note on quotations

Unless otherwise stated, all quotations from the Biblical texts are the author's own translations, largely guided by the fine traditional translation of the Revised Standard Version (RSV). Occasionally, where more inclusive language is called for, my translation has been further guided by the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

Quotations from the Second Vatican Council are taken from A. Flannery (ed.), *Vatican Council II. The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Dublin: Dominican Publication, 1975).

## Abbreviations

- LXX The Septuagint: the pre-Christian Greek Translation of the Hebrew Bible.
- MT The Masoretic Text: the pointed text of the Hebrew Bible.
- NRSV The New Revised Standard Version.
- PL *Patrologiae cursus completus, series Latina*, ed. J. P. Migne
- RSV The Revised Standard Version
- YHWH These four letters respectfully represent the name for God in the Hebrew Bible. I use them throughout to indicate the God of Israel.

## CONTENTS

Preface	vii
<b>I Reading a Gospel</b>	<b>11</b>
1. Reading a Gospel Today	13
<b>II The Gospel of Mark</b>	<b>43</b>
2. Reading the Gospel of Mark	45
3. Reading Mark 1:1-13: A Prologue to the Gospel	71
<b>III The Gospel of Matthew</b>	<b>91</b>
4. Reading the Gospel of Matthew	93
5. Reading Matthew 1:1-2:23: The Infancy Narrative	127
<b>IV The Gospel of Luke</b>	<b>163</b>
6. Reading the Gospel of Luke	165
7. Reading Luke 22:1-24:53: Passion, Death, Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus	202
<b>V The Gospel of John</b>	<b>235</b>
8. Reading the Gospel of John	237
9. Reading John 6:1-71: Bread from Heaven	276
<b>VI The Gospels Today</b>	<b>307</b>
10. Modern and Contemporary Gospel Criticism	309

## PREFACE

**T**HE FIRST EDITION OF THIS INTRODUCTION to a contemporary reading of the four Gospels was published in 1986. I signed off on the script on the Feast of Saint John Bosco, the founder of my Religious Congregation, the Salesians of Don Bosco, on January 31, 1986. The first edition was published in Australia by the then Collins Dove, in Great Britain by Darton, Longman and Todd, and in the United States of America by Paulist Press. It has obviously served a need, as it is nowadays impossible to obtain a copy of that edition. I am pleased to present a complete rewriting of this introduction to a contemporary reading of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John. I am grateful to Garry Eastman, formerly of Collins Dove, but now the Director of John Garratt Publishing, who has encouraged me for some years to republish this volume. What follows has the shape of the original edition, but its contents have changed very markedly.

A great deal has happened in Gospel studies over those years, especially the development of more literary and narrative readings of these texts. These methods of interpretation were in their infancy in 1986. They now occupy center-stage, and I have been deeply influenced by them. However, if the book that follows is somewhat different from the original version of *The Living Voice of the Gospel*, it has been written for the same purposes and the same audience. The Gospels resonate deeply in the minds and hearts of the many people who have followed lectures, courses, seminars and days of reflection dedicated to some form of study of these narratives. The problem enunciated twenty years ago, however, remains. Some of us have been equipped to read these texts in their original language, aware of the socio-cultural, historical and religious setting that produced them. We are well schooled in the

rhetorical and literary techniques that determine the spirit and the shape of the narratives as a whole, and the formative parts of each narrative. But most Christians have not been equipped with these tools. What follows is an attempt to bridge that gap somewhat for the interested lay reader of the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John.

After more than forty years since the close of the Second Vatican Council, and the restructuring of the Weekly and Sunday Lectionaries, too few people have captured the intention of the post-conciliar commission that led to this restructure. There are still many who are unaware that the Church asks us to meditate, week by week, on a cursive reading of the Gospel of Matthew (Year A), the Gospel of Mark (Year B) and the Gospel of Luke (Year C). No year is dedicated to a reading of the Gospel of John. However, this profound text is regularly used during certain high periods of the Liturgical Year, especially during the Easter and Christmas Seasons.

The Roman Lectionary has served as a model for Lectionaries that have developed within other Christian communities and Churches across the past forty years, and also the Common Lectionary. Identical readings are not found across all Lectionaries, and some lectionaries offer alternative selections from time to time. However, the principle that guided the formation of all Lectionaries was the same: to provide both preacher and faithful the opportunity to move through Lectionary cycles that made possible a Gospel catechesis that reflects the four-fold Gospel tradition. The Christian life is based upon an acceptance of the person and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth that come to us from the Gospels. The aim of this presentation of the four Gospels is to assist all committed Christians in their receptivity to the Word, as it is proclaimed in the Liturgy, and in their following of Jesus of Nazareth as Gospel-inspired believers.

The structure of the book that follows is simple, and strives to follow a didactic model that leads from the general to the particular. The first chapter deals with the development and the nature of a Gospel, and the uniqueness of each of the four Gospels. With these general principles in mind, the reader will find eight chapters that deal with each Gospel in turn: Mark, Matthew, Luke and John. Two chapters are devoted to each Gospel. In the first of these two chapters I outline the general and overall theological message and literary structure of the Gospel under consideration. The second chapter is devoted to a closer reading of a discrete literary section from that Gospel. This closer reading should

introduce the reader into a contemporary method of reading a Gospel text. The choice of the passages for a closer reading, however, has been determined by another criterion. As we will see in the introductory chapter, the Gospels contain a number of so-called “literary forms.” I will attend to four different literary forms in the four close readings of Gospel texts: the prologue to the Gospel of Mark (Mark 1:1-13), the infancy of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew (Matt 1-2), the death and resurrection of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 22-24), and the miracles, the bread of life discourse and consequent response to the word of Jesus in the Gospel of John (John 6:1-71). At the end of each section devoted to one of the Gospels I will provide a list of valuable single-volume commentaries on that Gospel. Many major commentaries upon the Gospels run into two or even three volumes. These fine commentaries are generally too technical, and at times too expensive, for the intended audience of the book that follows.

Both the more general chapters on the message and structure of each Gospel, and the chapters dedicated to a detailed reading of a text should be read with the Gospel texts open at your side. Most modern translations are adequate, but I personally prefer the RSV and the NRSV. The book will close with a chapter describing the important developments in the interpretation of the Gospels that led to the current approaches to the Gospel narratives and also into research into the figure of the historical Jesus. Every attempt is made to avoid technical language, and the book is written in the spirit of words that Paul wrote to the Thessalonian Christians almost two thousand years ago: “When you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of human beings but as it really is, the word of God” (1 Thess 2:13).

There are many fine introductions to the New Testament, ranging from the scholarly to the very simple, and the many possible shades of difficulty between these two extremes. To my mind, the best contemporary scholarly introduction to the New Testament is Udo Schnelle, *The History and Theology of the New Testament Writings* (trans. M. Eugene Boring; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998). Well-informed and well written, but less scholarly, are two books that I would recommend. Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament. A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (2d ed.; New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) contains a lucid and beautifully presented setting of the books of the New Testament within their historical, literary and cultural setting. Ehrman’s



main concern is, however, the setting of the books. Robert A. Spivey and D. Moody Smith, *Anatomy of the New Testament. A Guide to Its Structure and Meaning* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.; Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1994) have inspired the work that follows, as an earlier edition inspired this book's first appearance. Spivey and Moody Smith approach each book of the New Testament with a long introductory chapter, providing general background to the book, the message and meaning of the book, and an indication of its overall literary structure. They then take a section from the document under consideration, and subject it to closer analysis, to show how the more general principles help the reader to understand the detail of a specific text. A sixth edition of this book is in preparation. I have always found the approach adopted by Robert Spivey and Dwight Moody Smith singularly helpful for my own reading and teaching of the New Testament. For this reason alone, this more modest introduction to the Four Gospels was originally written, and now appears in a second edition.

The years between 1986 and 2006 have been, for me, years of intense academic and teaching activity. After seven years as the Katharine Drexel Professor of Religious Studies and two years as the Dean of the School of Theology and Religious Studies at the Catholic University of America, Washington, DC, USA, I have returned to my home Salesian Province of Australia. As a sign of my gratitude to my Salesian confreres who have always supported me, and never failed to make me most welcome in their communities when I returned from overseas, I am dedicating this second edition of *The Living Voice of the Gospel* to the Salesians of the Australian Province I have known and with whom I have shared so much over the past 46 years. May we all learn to live in a way that more closely reflects the way of Jesus, as traced out for us in the Gospels.

*Salesian Province Centre  
Ascot Vale, Victoria, Australia*

PART I

# Reading a Gospel



## CHAPTER ONE

# Reading a Gospel Today

This chapter is concerned with the development, nature and function of a Gospel, and the uniqueness of each of the four Gospels as theologically motivated narratives. The Gospels are neither factually accurate records of what Jesus said and did, nor are they literary inventions. Originally the stories of Jesus were told and retold in many settings (oral tradition) and in the earliest liturgies (liturgical tradition). The inspired writers of the Gospels looked backward to the Jesus traditions they received and forward to the present and future needs of their own communities. Eventually, the Christian Churches adopted these texts as Sacred Scripture, as they continued to speak eloquently of what God had done and continues to do in and through Jesus Christ. Not only in the Incarnation, but also in the Gospels “the Word has become flesh and dwells among us” (John 1:14).

Chapter 1  
summary

THE FIRST OBSTACLE A CONTEMPORARY READER of the Gospels must overcome is the inclination to read the Gospels as if they were history books. We are products of the Enlightenment, a period when reason was enthroned, and the only acceptable “truths” were those that could be proved to be *factually* true.<sup>1</sup> This generates two problems among our contemporaries. Many read the succession of events reported in the Gospels from the life of Jesus uncritically, accepting them as accurate reports of events and words of Jesus and other characters in the story. Everything is *factually true*. Others, however, see that such an interpretation is impossible. There are too many contradictions across the four Gospels, impossible juxtapositions of events, time sequences and shifts in geography. Such readers conclude that the reports are not *factual*, and run the danger of regarding the Gospels as irrelevant mythical inventions of the early Church, probably written to substantiate its own existence.

The Gospels are neither factually accurate records of what Jesus said and did, nor are they literary inventions. The authors of these inspired texts were fundamentally concerned to communicate what we would call “theological truths.” To do this, they reached back into the historical origins of the Christian Church and its traditions. This must never be lost from view, as we must avoid a contemporary subjective reading of the texts, searching for “what this says to me today.” There is a close link between the historical origins of the Christian Church in the life and teaching of Jesus, and in the founding experiences of his death and resurrection. Subjective readings are based on the relevance of a book or a passage for an interpreter and his or her particular life-situation and religious point of view. The events reported in the Gospels, and many of the words spoken by Jesus reach back to the events and words of his own lifetime. We will consider this aspect of the Gospels in the final chapter of this book (Chapter Ten: *Modern and Contemporary Gospel Study*).<sup>2</sup> But the Evangelists never imagined that their accounts of the life and teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus would ever have been read as a “history book” in the way we understand “history” at the beginning of the third Christian millennium. The most important single contribution that modern Gospel interpretation has contributed to the history of the interpretation of the Bible is an emphasis on theological, rather than historical questions. Closely associated with this *theological* approach to the Gospels is the very recent turn among scholars to a greater appreciation

of the fact that each of the Gospels is a deliberately contrived *narrative*. What is meant by these claims calls for further explanation, and indeed the readings of the Four Gospels that follows this introductory chapter presupposes that Mark, Matthew, Luke and John are *theologically motivated narratives*. Some introductory reflections, using the Gospels themselves, on what this means in practice are called for.

## The Gospels and a “Life of Jesus”

An attentive reading of the four Gospels, especially when they are read side by side, makes it clear that it is impossible to trace a simple historical account of the life of Jesus, to summarize what he said, to trace his day-to-day movements across a week, a month, or a year.<sup>3</sup> We speak of “the Gospel,” as if there were one Gospel, a unified story of the life of Jesus, but this is not the case. Even though the four Gospels have a great deal of material that is similar, and even identical, there are many passages that may appear the same, but when read carefully betray confusing differences. Mark, Matthew and Luke have much in common. They are generally called “Synoptic Gospels.” The word “synoptic” comes from the Greek word for the eye, and the expression *sun-opsis* literally means “with the eye.” The term came from the practice of placing the texts of Mark, Matthew and Luke side by side on a page, in parallel columns. Such a presentation of the texts shows the close similarities and the sometimes surprising differences. These similarities and differences are a good first indication that three Evangelists use the same tradition, but sometimes in slightly different ways.<sup>4</sup> John can hardly ever be fitted into the Synoptic scheme, but even here there are surprises. The Johannine account of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes is followed by a sea journey, and culminates in a confession of faith from Simon Peter (6:1-71). This report largely repeats the events and the sequence of events that one finds in Mark (8:1-33), Matthew (15:32-16:23) and Luke (9:10-22). One must not simply discount anything in any of the Gospels as not having roots in the historical events upon which the Christian Church was founded. Nor can we, however, ignore that each Evangelist is shaping the tradition in a slightly different way as he writes his story of Jesus.

Matthew 5:1-7:28 contains what is popularly called the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew sets the scene for the discourse by telling his readers: “Seeing the crowds, he *went up the mountain*, and when he sat

down *his disciples* came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught *them*, saying ..." (Matt 5:1-2).<sup>5</sup> Jesus then begins his sermon with the beatitudes (vv. 3-11). The sermon then proceeds uninterrupted until 7:28. No-one interrupts Jesus, as he moves from one issue to another. Marking the end of the sermon, Matthew again remarks, "And when Jesus finished these sayings, *the crowds* were astonished at his teaching" (7:28). He appeared to leave the crowds in 5:1, so that he could sit with his disciples at his feet in 5:2. But they are still present, amazed at his teaching, in 7:28. We have uncovered an initial narrative tension in this carefully composed story.

The Gospel of Matthew devotes three lengthy chapters to the Sermon on the Mount. It is a memorable collection of Jesus' teachings, with particular focus upon the way a person must live, and pray, to belong to the Kingdom that Jesus has come to establish. His disciples, and/or the crowd are told what is demanded of them, if they are to follow Christ: witness, patience, marriage, swearing oaths, retaliation, praying, almsgiving, fasting, money, judging, and many other teachings that have become central to a Christian life and practice based upon the Gospels. In sum, disciples are to be perfect, as their heavenly Father is perfect (see 5:48). This significant discourse, delivered solemnly on the top of a mountain (the original Greek says "*the* mountain"), must have marked a memorable day in the public ministry of Jesus. One would think that this event would have left an indelible mark on the tradition. But a search through the Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of John will provide no trace of such a day, or even of the message of that day. This lack of evidence from two of the other major witnesses to Jesus leaves us somewhat perplexed, if we are hoping to discover in Matthew 5-7 a "history" of a day in the life of Jesus, in the twenty-first century sense of that word.

At first glance, it looks as though there may be some consolation for the contemporary historian in Luke 6:12-49. In verse 12, Jesus goes up onto a mountain to pray. He prays through the whole night, and then chooses his twelve apostles (vv. 13-16). Two important elements that are unique to the Gospel of Luke have already appeared in vv. 12-16. Before major events in the life of Jesus, he devotes himself to long hours of prayer, and only in Luke are twelve of the disciples called "apostles."<sup>6</sup> Having established a group of twelve followers who will be his apostles, he sets out with them. The Lukan text continues:

And he *came down with them* and stood on a *level place*, with a great crowd of his disciples and a *great multitude of people* from all Judea and Jerusalem and the seacoast of Tyre and Sidon. They came to hear him and be healed of their diseases. And those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all the crowd sought to touch him, for power came forth from him and he healed them all (vv. 17-19).

The scene for the sermon that follows is set. Jesus, with his Twelve Apostles, after *descending* from the mountain is sought out by a multitude of disciples and both Jews (Judea and Jerusalem) and Gentiles (Tyre and Sidon). The text resumes: “And he lifted up his eyes on his disciples and said...” (v. 20a). The Lukan version of the beatitudes follows in vv. 20b-26. Luke has arranged the tradition in a carefully balanced statement of three beatitudes, matched by three woes. The beatitudes are followed, as in Matthew, with a discourse on the quality of life demanded by those who wish to enter the Kingdom, during which Jesus is never interrupted. However, the discourse is much shorter, occupying only 33 verses in the Gospel of Luke (6:17-49). Nevertheless, everything found in the Lukan sermon *on the plain* is also found in the Matthean sermon *on the mount*. What is also intriguing is that while Luke does not gather everything from Matthew 5:1-7:28 into his 6:20-49, many of the passages found in the Matthean Sermon on the Mount are found elsewhere in Luke. Matthew and Luke had access to the same traditions, but the former gathered them all into one long sermon while the latter used some of the same traditions in a shorter sermon. He sensed that he could better enhance the message of his story of Jesus by using some of those traditions elsewhere.

But the twenty-first century historian must face a number of problems. Was the original sermon on a mountain, or on a level place? Was it delivered to the disciples, or to an unspecified crowd, or to a multitude of disciples, Jews and Gentiles? What motivated the presence of the crowd: wonder (Matthew) or were they seeking to hear his word and be cured (Luke)? Did he say all that we find in the three chapters of Matthew, or only what we find in the thirty-three verses in Luke? Why is there no trace of this important discourse in the Gospels of Mark and John? If readers look to the Gospels determined to find in them the raw data for a “life of Jesus,” as historians of the third millennium understand the life-story of any great person, the texts themselves present insurmountable difficulties. But this is not our only interpretative option.