Recently I enjoyed watching an archive recording from the 1960s of an interview with Margaret Rutherford. People of a certain age – as well as aficionados of old films – will remember her as the first face of Agatha Christie's nosy, meddling yet somehow endearing amateur sleuth Miss Marple. Margaret Rutherford was amply built and somewhat jowly, and very different from the later TV Marple played by the trim and somewhat waspish Joan Hickson. It is said that Agatha Christie preferred Hickson's portrayal and did not like the Rutherford character, though she did dedicate one of her later novels to Rutherford, so she can't have thought too badly of her.

We don't seem to have many Miss Marple figures any more, and that is for the very good reason that she – and many more like her – were products of the post-war period when there were fewer men to go around, and jowly, amply built ladies, however lovely their characters, could easily get left 'on the shelf' living out a single life, even though they might not have chosen that life if given the chance. I remember many such from when I was a boy. They are often described as old maids, but I was taught that they were maiden ladies – a kinder and more courteous title altogether. If they were a family friend, they would be called 'auntie', possibly as a thoughtful way of providing them some contact with the children they did not have themselves, and many of them shared houses in order to make their meagre pensions go further.

In the present age I find myself exasperated to see more salacious interpretations given to their often lovely and innocent friendships. Trying to understand what such people were really like, and also taking on the challenge that one's own memory may be rosier than the reality, takes a lot of effort, and it also includes acknowledging in all things the possibility that we might have got it all wrong.

You may by now be wondering what this has to do with reading the Gospels. As with any aspect of life, and certainly any portrayal of people and events in words or in drama, every understanding varies, and every interpretation is different. While the

four Gospel accounts all aim to give an authentic picture of Jesus, each has a different purpose, a different agenda, and a different audience. Each is aiming to give an account which works for a particular audience, and in each case they are relying on verbal accounts and memories of events which took place some decades earlier, and these were already affected by the understandings and biases of those who told the stories.

If memories and accounts of real and fictional maiden ladies can differ so much over five or six decades, think how much the accounts of the life and teaching of Jesus might differ among his followers.

In the coming weeks, we will be examining how Matthew tells the stories that he thinks Jewish converts to Christianity might need to hear; how Mark is thought to have acted as the ghost writer for Peter's reminiscences; how Luke made a careful effort to check his sources (thus producing a Gospel account that is the nearest to what we today describe as history); and how John distils vivid memories of incidents in the life of Jesus to produce a spiritual and theological resource that could bring life to the early Church.

We will also – if we want to take the Gospel accounts seriously – be wanting to know what sort of literature they are, so that we can understand the nature of the writing. A good example of this might be the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapters 5 to 7. If in our imagination we start thinking about Jesus just sitting down and delivering this word-for-word, we will be missing something. Matthew does indeed present Jesus as teaching in the manner of Rabbis of the time: he would sit down and talk to his disciples or others who came to listen to him teach (and – as is portrayed most of all in John's Gospel account – argue with him), yet the density of the teaching, and the fact that some of it appears in other contexts in Mark and Luke, suggests that this sermon is in fact a collection of his best teachings – a compendium of highlights, if you like.

The fact that it is put together in this way does not in itself make the teaching any the less true, nor indeed does it suggest that this might be Matthew's teaching not that of Jesus. Every age – and every famous person – has collections of sayings. There is one such in my house called *The Wicked Wit of Winston Churchill*. And there is no suggestion that all the quotes in that should be apocryphal, or made up to suit an occasion as something the subject might well have said but didn't – what Italians call *ben trovato*.

So here's my list of some things we need to bear in mind when reading the Gospel accounts, as we will be over the coming weeks.

a. Why was the Gospel written?
b. Who was it written for?
c. Why was this particular teaching/story/parable chosen to be included?
d. What did it mean when it was written?
e. What might it mean now – and is that consistent with its original intention?
f. What does it add to the picture we have of Jesus and our understanding of his teaching?

This list is frightening enough, and if I were giving an academic course on understanding the Gospels, it would be a lot longer! But what we have set before us is a set of Lent Addresses, and the purpose at the end of the addresses is that we might understand a bit more about the person and teaching of Jesus than we did when we started.

So let me add a thought which governs the way in which I read the Gospels. Over a long period starting in the nineteenth century there was (and still is, for all I know) an academic dispute over what we need to do to find out what Jesus actually said – the exact words he uttered. This involves trying to establish an agreed Greek text – bearing in mind that the written Gospels were initially handed down on a series of

handwritten manuscripts – and also trying to work out what the words might have been in Aramaic (if indeed Jesus did speak Aramaic, and if he did, which dialect). It also means trying to cancel out all the other layers of narration and interpretation there might have been between the words being uttered and whatever was written down several decades later. This *ipsissima verba* debate raged long and hard.

One of my theology teachers was a Canadian Jesuit called René Latourelle. His discipline – one of which he was more or less the founder – was Fundamental Theology, which explores the relationship between Theology and other disciplines and seeks to re-establish Theology's credentials as a science among others. Part of this is the understanding of the way God speaks to us – also called revelation – and especially how God speaks in Jesus. Latourelle went through the debate on the actual words of Jesus in excruciating detail, and then added his own tool for interpreting the Gospel accounts. If you read and think and pray and then pray and think and read again you will begin to see beneath the text an authentic figure, and the way you work out whether parts of the Gospel account come from him or from the Gospel writer, or someone else, is to ask whether this saying or action is **in the style of Jesus**. Is this his style?

One of the reasons I like this is because it emphasises the way our understanding of Jesus does not need to be exact in order to be authentic. We need to approach the Gospel passages with a certain humility. As I suggested this morning, if we are (as we should be) looking for the fullness of God's Word, we are only ever going to find facets and shadows of the truth of the one who was and is both fully human and fully divine.

In the coming weeks we will look for that person in the Gospels. We will keep an eye out for his style, and we will do so with the humility that means at the end of the process we might know a little more, yet realistically will in this life still be far from the truth. Let the voyage of discovery begin! **PC, 26th February 2023**