



Simon Parke **Gospel Rumours of Love (2020)**

I first came across Simon Parke about 30 years ago as a columnist in the Church Times. He was always a good read, with a keen and satirical eye for ecclesiastical hypocrisy. He later left the church to follow other pursuits and re-emerged as a writer, therapist and retreat leader. He wrote a series of crime novels about 'Abbot Peter', based around the enneagram characterizations and has now recently produced this novel about Jesus.

The story is told from three perspectives: that of Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Jesus and, most tantalizingly, of Jesus himself. It recounts familiar gospel stories – filling in some of the blanks with great creativity. He attributes some of Jesus' teaching to others: Jesus learns from his father, Joseph, the wisdom of building on a solid foundation and from the desert-dwelling zealots that faith comes above family.

Like the four canonical gospels, Parke presents a particular understanding of who Jesus was and what he tried to achieve. And like them, he deliberately plunders and 'plagiarizes' source-material not only from the familiar gospels, but also the apocryphal gospel of Mary, Christian hymns and folk tales.

Parke says he was inspired to write after reading Gerd Theissen's Shadow of the Galilean. I must read this book again, because my (25? year-old) memory of Theissen's book is that it was enigmatic to the point of utter frustration – a footprint in the sand washing away in the surf. This is much more solid and we have a much firmer sense of Jesus with Parke. And it is a disturbing sense. Jesus is not particularly 'attractive' at all. He is controversial and careless, uncompromising and fierce. Yet somehow also charismatic.

Like Theissen (mentioned above) and Paula Gooder's Phoebe, this is a work of historical imagination but it does not quite read like a 'novel'. Naomi Alderman's The Liar's Gospel, Colm Toibin's Testament of Mary, Anita Mason's The Illusionist and Christos Tsiolkas' Damascus perhaps do this better. But what Parke does do well is explore the nature of faith. Towards the end he has Mary Magdalene recalling that she no longer thinks of Jesus much but the whole way she thinks has changed because of him.

This is a good read and I like the end result. It has the ring of plausibility and offers perspectives that are sometimes safe and traditional and at others quite alarming and thought-provoking. It is a perceptive interpretation of Jesus and at the end, whether you agree or not, it lingers long in the imagination.