

Thinking about Jesus Again

Prologue: Based on my recent book: *Jesus* (with the subtitle *Uncovering the Life, Teachings and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary*)

***Memories from childhood:** “Tell Me the Story of Jesus” and “I Love to Tell the Story” – “of unseen things above, of Jesus and his glory; of Jesus and his love.”

***AND: It matters greatly how we tell the story** – for more than one reason

*It can make the story of Jesus difficult to believe, or persuasive and compelling

*Because of Jesus’ significance for Christians: he is for Christians *the decisive disclosure or revelation or epiphany* of the *character and passion* of God.

I. Ways of Telling His Story in Contemporary Christianity

1. Jesus as the Dying Savior: As Substitutionary Sacrifice for Sin. He died *in our place to pay the price of our sins* (this is what makes it “substitution”)

*The Jesus many of us grew up with – and still hear about

*Mel Gibson’s “The Passion of the Christ”

*Emphasizes his death as the primary purpose of his life

2. Jesus the Divine-Human and Thus a “Superhuman.” Usually goes with the first one. The earthly Jesus was more than human – he was also divine, super-human. Familiar and widespread.

*Jesus as “*Superman*”: quote from Robert Capon, *Hunting the Divine Fox*, p. 90

3. Jesus as Judge at the Second Coming

*A contemporary manifestation: the Jesus of *The Left Behind* novels by Jerry Jenkins and Tim LaHaye. The Jesus of “the rapture” and “the second coming.”

*The “*killer Jesus*” who will destroy most people and condemn them to eternal torment.

4. Jesus as a Great Teacher.

*Yes – but inadequate and often banal

II. A Historical-Metaphorical Way of Telling his Story. Affirmed by mainstream historical scholarship. **Its three foundations:**

(1) The gospels are *a developing tradition*, written in the last third of the first century. As such, they combine *memory and testimony*

(2) Much of their language is metaphorical: *memory and metaphor*

*Metaphor refers to the more-than-literal, more-than factual, meaning of language

(3) Distinction between *the pre-Easter and post-Easter Jesus*

*Pre-Easter: What Jesus was like before his death:

*Post-Easter: What Jesus became after his death:

***Two seemingly negative results:**

(1) Language referring to the exalted status of Jesus – as Messiah, Son of God, Lord, etc., is post-Easter testimony and does not go back to the pre-Easter Jesus

(2) So also language referring to the saving significance of his death is post-Easter

So: What was the pre-Easter Jesus like? His message, activity, intention?

III. My Sketch of the Pre-Easter Jesus

1. The Shaping of Jesus: The Importance of Context/Matrix

*Grew up in a Jewish peasant village in the Roman Empire

*A pre-modern domination system: politically, ruled by a few; economically, half to 2/3 of wealth went to the elites; religiously, legitimated by “royal” theology; and chronically violent (systemic violence and warfare)

2. The Shaping of Jesus: His Experience of the Sacred/God

*Jesus as a Jewish mystic. Mystics are people who have vivid and typically frequent experiences of God/the sacred, and who are deeply shaped by such experiences

3. A “Profile” of Jesus: Mystic, Healer, Wisdom Teacher, and Prophet

4. His Message/Activity: Proclaimer of “the Way” and “the Kingdom”

*His audience: primarily the peasant class, “the people.” He spoke primarily in rural areas – small towns, hamlets, the countryside.

(1) “**The Way**”: **the path of centering deeply in God.** A path/way that was egalitarian in a twofold sense: open to everybody, apart from status and institution; and producing an egalitarian community.

**NT metaphors for “the way”*: “dying and rising with Christ” (Paul); “born again”(John)

(2) “**The Kingdom of God**”: **Its Centrality** (Mark 1.15 – and “Ask any one hundred...”)

*It’s *for the earth*: the Lord’s Prayer

*It’s a *theo-political* metaphor, both religious and political. “Kingdom” was a political term/image in his world. And it’s the kingdom *of God*.

*It’s about what life would be like on earth under God’s kingship/lordship, instead of under the lordship of the powers that rule this world

: *God’s kingdom is about *justice* (economic justice) and *peace* (non-violence as both means and goal)

*The Kingdom of God is “the dream of God” for the earth, God’s passion for the earth

5. Execution and Resurrection. Jesus’ passion for the kingdom of God – his challenge to the powers that ruled his world and his advocacy of an alternative vision of how life in this world should be – led to his last week, execution, and vindication by God.

This is the political meaning of Good Friday and Easter. Of course, they also have a more-than-political meaning – but not less

What Would His Message Be to Us?

*Center in God – the God of the Torah and Prophets

*Participate in God’s passion for the world. God loves the world – but not the world as it is. Rather, God has a lover’s quarrel with the world. We are called to change the world.

Love God, and love what God loves – the world.