

Jesus in Context

Steven Epperson, Parish Minister
May 2, 2004
UCV

This reading from the 19th chapter of Leviticus is printed in the readings section of our Hymnal under the title "The Heart of the Torah." I chose it to introduce this sermon for it reminds us that Jesus was born into, accepted, and sought to promote the affective religious landscape sketched out by this passage from Leviticus. It reminds us that according to the earliest, most reliable portraits we have, it is obvious that Jesus was a Jew, a faithful son of the Jewish people in First century Palestine.

As well, these sources remind us his time and culture were shaped and governed by the commitment of his people to strive to be faithful to the way of Torah, or Jewish law. That Torah created a world that brought the entirety of life, including civil and domestic practices, under divine authority, from making sure that the scales in the marketplace were accurately calibrated to prescribing the acceptable ways to worship God. First Century Jews, "believed that they should understand the divine law and obey it." And from time to time, certain individuals and groups stepped forward and claimed that their understanding and interpretation of the law were the best, and that they were the truest representatives of God. "In general terms, this is where Jesus fits." He was convinced he knew the will of God and he set out with a sense of urgency to share it and accomplish it during his life. (E.P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, 48) As we know, the urgency with which he pursued his vision led him to his death. We also know that his disciples went on to create what became a world-wide religious movement of extraordinary diversity; a movement most of whose dogmas, institutions, and practices would have been completely foreign to the man who is claimed to be their founder and architect.

It is clear from the oceans of ink spilt over the centuries attempting to describe him, clear from the institutions and edifices that have been raised in his name, clear from the myriad portraits painted, that beliefs, hopes and desires have shaped and determined our views and understandings of the historical Jesus. Not the other way around.

For my part, this is unfortunate. It is far better, I think, that we should not seek to change "the historical Jesus to agree with our preconceived notions" of who he should or should not have been, or "what he could or could not have said and done." Our fantasies should give way before reality. We should allow him to be what he was—a 1st century Jewish teacher, wonder worker, and prophet who believed, mistakenly as it turned out, that the Kingdom of God would break forth miraculously and be established in his life time. (E.P. Sanders, "Historical Jesus and Christian Theology..." 30 March 1999, 15)

It is inevitable, given the age and cultures in which we have grown up, that at some time or another we have had to formulate an answer to the question of "who was Jesus?" "Who, or what, is he to me?" For some, the issue has been highly charged and existentially acute. For our well being or misery in this life and the next hung on that answer. For others, a rough and tumble idea has been sufficient for us to navigate in a largely secular landscape. For most, our answers have changed strikingly over time. They may barely resemble those of our youth and young adulthood.

But whatever our experience in the past, given the times through which we are currently passing and that lay before us, given the culture wars raging around the globe and the extraordinary media and governmental resources being used to wage them, it is time, for the sake, minimally, of being well informed global citizens, that we have some relatively clear ideas backed up by reliable historical sources about how to answer the question of who Jesus is for us. And we should try to answer who is Muhammad, and Buddha, and those other "prophetic women and men" who we claim as sources of our living tradition. And then teach by the

best in our sciences and our earth centred traditions to create a new story of our cosmos and our place within it. For Unitarians, who claim to promote a wide open and responsible search for truth and meaning, a search aided and abetted by the wisdom of world religions, the guidance of reason, the rhythms of nature and the direct experience of conscience, we should shudder at and reject the alternative.

For the alternative is this: people with opinions, needs, and fantasies already formed by their economic, political, and cultural environments turn to Jesus and discover, remarkably, that he already agrees with them and that he promoted their agendas. And then they proceed from their incredible discovery to enlist him as a final, unimpeachable authority to implement and carry out their own programmes. Jesus thus becomes the prophet of laissez-faire, free market capitalism, a Marxist revolutionary, a blue eyed Aryan racist, the first feminist, the founding genius of Madison Avenue marketing, a progressive social reformer, the first hippie Aquarian and founder of the New Age movement, the commander-in-chief of the righteous armies of Armageddon...do you get the picture? Nearly a century ago, it was Albert Schweitzer who first and most profoundly took note of this phenomenon. After having surveyed the many "Lives of Jesus" written by biblical scholars in the 19th century, Schweitzer perceived that their authors looked into the well of history for Jesus and saw their own reflection. That the resulting portraits of their Christ were, in fact self-portraits of the men who created them. That the Jesus who emerged from their pages was not a first century Jewish teacher and prophet of the imminent breaking in upon history of the Kingdom of God. Rather, he was an upstanding, 19th century Christian, bourgeois moralist who, essentially, validated the status quo of Middle Europe.

The industry of fashioning images of Jesus is still going ahead full steam. But the landscape has shifted dramatically and ominously under our feet since 1906, when Schweitzer published his path breaking study. Let me cite just three events:

- The attempt to destroy the Jewish people in the 20th century.
- The migration of a post-modern perspective from the academy to popular culture.
- The engagement by politicised and disciplined fundamentalists in a culture war against modernity and their use of print and visual mass media to wage it.

In the first instance, a nearly 2000 year old project by gentile Christians to uproot Jesus from his Jewish roots, to deify him, and then to blame the Jewish people collectively for his death contributed to a situation where genocide was thinkable. The silence of the churches and the widespread collaboration by Christians in that work of death exposed the poverty of Christian theology and practice. It made manifest the danger that inheres in wrenching Jesus from his historical and cultural context in order to recreate him in our own demonic image.

In a second fateful shift, we live increasingly in a post-modern age of fragmenting authority and of the generous validation of nearly all subjective states and utterances as equally valid. A perspective that holds that there is no truth. There are only "interpretations," whose relative merits have little or nothing to do with rational proof, scientific method, or the exacting criteria of historical analysis. In this setting, works of fiction like Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, and Tom Harpur's fanciful and speculative *The Pagan Christ*, are read as works of credible scholarship. At least Brown's intellectual thriller, claiming that the church conspired to hide evidence that Jesus was mortal, married Mary Magdalene and had children whose descendents live in France (ah those French...), at least he calls his book a novel.

Harpur claims to have dug deep into the origins of Christianity, only to discover that there never was a man named Jesus. And that the church suppressed the earliest accounts of a symbolic and mythical Christ and of a Christianity informed by ancient Egyptian religion that taught that everyone has a spark of divinity which can be realised through spiritual struggle, epitomised by the passion of a mythic Christ. The only problem

with this tale of a no-Jesus, original cosmic faith based on ancient truths, is that it too is a fiction, sadly clothed in the guise of fact. No credible scholar of the 1st century, secular, Christian or Jewish, that I am aware of, thinks or maintains that the historical Jesus never walked the earth. And I scanned the bibliography of *The Pagan Christ* in vain for references to the works of Jacob Neusner, E. P. Sanders, Geza Vermes, Paula Fredriksen, William Green, Gerd Theissen, Martin Hengel, the list goes on... Trustworthy, careful, exacting scholars of the 1st century, its languages, history, and culture. Now Harpur's mythical Christ is not very scary. He's gentle, non-dogmatic, anti-institutional, mystically oriented and inclusive. A reflection of the mature Tom Harpur himself, no doubt, and of who he wants Christ to be for our age. But again, the problem of wrenching Jesus from his historical and cultural context, is that it gives anyone free license to inscribe on him any image we wish to project. Any agenda we want him to enact. Harmless enough, perhaps, in Harpur's case, but not, in view of the third 20th century cultural movement I mentioned above: and that is the fundamentalist war against modernity.

Our world has changed in the last thirty years as a result of the reaction by those who perceive that their values and practices are grievously threatened by the secular society around them. Before that they tended to shun engagement with politics and popular mass media culture as a little bit dirty and little bit pointless. (John Green, quoted in "The Return of the Warrior Jesus," (RWJ), in NY Times, April 4, 2004) And don't we know that is no longer the case. The image of a patient and forgiving Jesus, who suffered with the sinner, long the staple of evangelical Christianity, is being displaced by a fearsome, apocalyptic warrior Christ. The Lamb has stepped back to make way for the Lion. I'll cite just one example. The "Left Behind" series of end time thrillers, whose co-author, Tim LeHaye was co-founder with Jerry Falwell of the Moral Majority, is emblematic of the emergence of this darker, more martial, macho concept of Jesus. These eleven books have sold 55 million copies, and have generated countless study guides, calendars, devotional readings, and a thirty-volume companion series for children called "Left Behind: the Kids," in which "four teens are left behind after the Rapture and band together to fight Satan's forces."

I am not altogether certain why they needed to do this. Because according to the final installment of the adult series just published by Tyndale House, under the title *Glorious Appearing*, seven years after true Christians were raptured up, the Second Coming of Christ arrives, and boy is he ticked off. Jesus appears in the clouds with a "a conviction like a flame of fire" in his eyes. And by merely speaking, he superheats the blood and eviscerates the flesh of millions of unbelievers. The Antichrist is defeated, the Jews convert, and the glorious thousand year Kingdom of Christ begins. We cannot dismiss this sadistic fantasy of global, spring cleaning as the harmless ravings of a lunatic fringe. Dreams of wiping out Tel Aviv, Baghdad, I mean Babylon, and New York City, have moved to the front page and to the nightly news. Slogans of crusades and the clash of civilisations are now discussed matter of factly by talking heads and figure in the citations to a godly purpose behind the US military actions in Iraq and the global war on terrorism.

And this new, wrathful Jesus? Well he fits into the pre-millennialist expectation of the end of history--the decline of civilization, the breakdown of morality and order. "The warrior Jesus returns to set everything right again." (Timothy Weber, cited in "RWJ") According to Ted Haggard, president of the National Association of Evangelicals, the wrathful Jesus in the book series is an antidote to our "stain-glass windows and our popular culture," to our "effeminate," "marshmallowy, Santa Claus Jesus, which is not at all in keeping with the gospels." (cited in "RWJ")

That reference to the gospels brings us in the end, to where this sermon began. What we can know and say credibly about Jesus in the context of his times and the content of his teaching and actions resides in those four texts written between 70 and 100 AD. We know that they are not historically objective, eyewitness, or verbatim accounts of his words and deeds. They are products of faith written by believing communities. Nevertheless, a careful reading of these texts, informed by the exacting, critical and thorough criteria of the discipline of history, by scholars who know the languages, the cultural and political environment of 1st Judaism, and the politics of classical Roman administration, yield a modest but credible account of what

Jesus said and did. And that together, they can help us answer the questions of “who was he,” and perhaps “who he may be for us.”

We know that he was born about 4 BC, near the time of the death of Herod the Great. That he spent his childhood and early adult years in Nazareth, a village in Galilee. He was baptised by John the Baptist. He called disciples and taught in the towns, villages and countryside of Galilee. His teachings centered on a call to repentance, of living Torah true lives, especially in view of his firm belief that the end of time and the establishment of God’s Kingdom was at hand. Indeed, that it would happen in his life and the lives of his disciples. He was a charismatic teacher who freely shared his message with solid citizen and social and moral outcast alike, claimed by his followers to be a powerful healer of the physically and mentally sick.

About the year 30 he went to Jerusalem for Passover where he created a disturbance at the Temple. That act led directly to his arrest and interrogation by the High Priest Joseph Caiaphas, whose job, as delegate of the power of Rome in Jerusalem, was to see that there would be no disturbance, no political demonstrations of any kind in a city packed with pilgrims assembled for Passover and worship at the Temple. Subsequently, he was sentenced and executed as a political insurgent on the orders of the Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate.

Subsequent to his death, we also know that his disciples at first fled. Then they claimed to have seen him in some manner after his death. As a consequence, they believed he would return again to found the kingdom, and they formed a community to await his return and sought to win others to faith in him. But that is another story. (E.P. Sanders, HFJ, 10-11; Geza Vermes, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew*, 206-7)

I grant that this is a rather modest narrative. But must we allow it to be drowned out in this, our clamorous age? Must we retreat from the field before the images of a fanciful or fearsome Christ? Consider the longed for content of the mundane, decent, earthly kingdom which he preached, for which ultimately he died. And which he ardently believed was to imminently burst forth. A world where there would be enough left in the fields and vineyards to feed the poor. A landscape where we would be secure in our goods and our good name because we would not stoop to rob, lie, and defraud. Where the labourer could trust that she would receive a decent and timely wage for her work. Where the mighty and the marginal would be judged fairly. A world where compassion would flourish because we would love our neighbour as ourselves.

I enlist him for no cause. Incise on his forehead no letters of divinity and call him forth Golem-like to save me. Cite him as no final authority in order to fulfill my fantasies. May he, however, in this age of thunder and trumpets quietly continue to inspire my heart’s longing and work to spread what measure of justice and compassion I can. That’s enough, and the answer to the question of who he is and will be for me for quite some time to come.

For more on the historical Jesus let me recommend the following as a good place to begin:

- E.P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, (Allen Lane/The Penguin Press, 1993)
- Geza Vermes, *Jesus and the World of Judaism*; and *The Religion of Jesus the Jew*, (Fortress Press, 1983, 1993)
- Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews: A Jewish Life and the Emergence of Christianity*, (Yale U Press, 2000)
- James H. Charlesworth, *Jesus within Judaism: New Light from Exciting Archeological Discoveries*, (Doubleday, 1988)