

The Radical Jesus for Today

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Context, context, context: We cannot know the historical Jesus but we can each create the Jesus that makes sense for us in our own time and place.

One of my personal drivers is that survival means adapting to the changing world. This is even more appropriate as we look to the new normal beyond the present pandemic. In this new normal the Church will need take a more exploratory provisional route of encouraging people to create their own 'Jesus'.

As I have studied the Jesus stories, freed from traditional creeds and church required words of belief, I have discovered the Rabbi Jesus who was wholly human, full of compassion, especially for the poor, the exploited, the marginalised, the oppressed – and he even had compassion for his enemies.

It was a life that was energised by his seeking of justice and mercy for all. It put him on the side of the poor rather than of the powerful. His message and way of life was that his God could best be found in the gutter rather than in the palace.

But for the vast majority of people in our post modern world God does not exist. And even if God is no more than just another human construct that amounts to simply the highest level of compassion and actions of justice and mercy that the human brain can envisage, as explained almost 40 years ago by Don Cupitt [*"The Sea of Faith", BBC (1984)*] I am still happy to live by that insight embodied within Rabbi Jesus who challenges the commitments that I make and the road that I take.

It is compassion that enables ordinary folk to do extraordinary things for others, especially for those who are in need. But here is the challenge for me: although I do not miss creedal Christianity, without the Church I would never have had the foundational stories that have enabled me to create the Rabbi Jesus that makes sense to me now.

There is a place for the Church in our post-modern world, but not if it continues to do, to say and to expect members to accept words of faith that are increasingly meaningless for the majority of folk who will seldom, if ever other than for rites of passage, enter a Church building. In our post-modern world the majority of folk, especially those generations now missing from the Church, are not going to accept 'truth' handed to them by creeds, doctrines and pulpit preachers. Post-modern folk now want to discover 'truth' for themselves. That is a challenge to a Church structure built upon telling others of the One Way, Truth and Life – the ancient mega-story that has little relevance to life today.

So what can I suggest for the edifice that is now past its sell by date? It is right for people today in this multi-choice, mix and match, post-modern world to want to create their own 'God' rather than simply accept or reject outright the creedal 'God' of the traditional churches. However, such emphasis upon creating one's own 'God' is risky in that one's own 'God' can:

- [a] become self-supporting of one's own way of life and prejudices, and
- [b] begins to look remarkably like one's self!

That is why there should be the encouragement to create one's own experiential 'God' to be shared within a group whose members are non-judgemental and compassionate, but who are not afraid of asking questions of one another to ensure that one's created 'God' really is more than a self-fulfilling mutual benefit society of one's self!

Now that community of fellow travellers may be in a traditional Church but it is more likely in future to be in a small group in which words of common belief are not required but in which the central point is a sharing in and living out of what it means to follow the way of Rabbi Jesus in our world. There are communities like this but they are few and far between. Even so they just may be the way to preserve the Jesus stories in individual and communal actions that will change both the self and the world around us.

Dr. Ernest T. Campbell, minister at The Riverside Church in New York half a century ago preached a sermon on 25th November 1973 titled "Who are the poor?" In the sermon Campbell made a very important point that is as relevant today as it was then.

"When a person comes to terms with God he loses the capacity to 'see things flat without a moral squint.' The conscience becomes sensitized, compassion is enlarged, care is extended, and love finds another outlet in a suffering world. To come to terms with the God revealed in Scripture is to develop a concern for the poor. To the believer poverty is not merely economic or political, it is a matter of morality as well. In Old Testament law the people of God were given explicit instructions on how the poor should be dealt with in the Hebrew Commonwealth. One prophet after another rose up to warn against the neglect of the impoverished. Typical is Isaiah's cry, 'What mean ye that ye beat my people to pieces and grind the faces of the poor?' (Isa. 3:15) Mary, in her Magnificat, uttered as she carried the babe in her womb, testified to a God who 'exalted them of low degree who has filled the empty with good things and the rich sent empty away.' (Lk 1:52) According to St. Luke, the first words spoken by Jesus at the commencement of His ministry were a direct quotation from Isaiah: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor.' Jesus went so far as to say that a ministry to the needy was a ministry to Him: 'Inasmuch as ye did it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye did it unto me.' (Mat. 25:40)."

And if we are to understand the context of the life of Rabbi Jesus we need to remember that he thought and acted as a Second Temple Jew. He was not a Christian.

He was from among the poor and the oppressed. According to Matthew's Gospel, Joseph the human father of Rabbi Jesus was a manual labourer. According to Luke's Gospel [2:24], eight days after the birth of Jesus, Joseph and Mary took him to the Temple but they were either extremely mean or extremely poor because they gave the minimum offering permitted under the Law of Moses – two pigeons rather than the usual lamb. And although in his ministry Jesus mixed with some of the wealthy, such as Levi the tax collector, he mainly visited and ministered to the poor, the marginalised and the outcast, people such as fishermen and prostitutes - those who were oppressed and exploited by Roman Imperialism, imposed upon them mainly through the vassal religious.

So how might this apply to us today? Part of the answer can be found in Matthew 23:11: "the greatest among you will be your servant. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." And part of the answer is to serve others – we can

all do that – but some of us will need to learn to love our 'self' before we can truly love others. To follow the Way of Rabbi Jesus has little to do with being religious but it is everything to do with finding and serving the sacred that comes to us moment by moment in both the beauty and the nastiness of what it means to be human. Religion, for an increasing number of people today is getting in the way of developing and deepening their experiences of the sacred.

Seeking the Kingdom of God [or as I explain my experience of it, the Kin-dom of God] does not mean looking for something beyond the horizon. Nor does it mean waiting until we enter the mystery beyond our death. But it does mean living Heaven on earth here and now where we can truly encounter the sacred - at this moment, in this place, with the people here with us today. However, this raises a real issue concerning the invitation to live what I consider to be the Jesus Way. What follows can only be a signpost towards the ideal for which I seek, but the challenge is how to do this without setting up a sense of guilt for non-attainment in myself or within others?

The Kin-dom of 'God' is always here and now.

To live the Kin-dom is to live the spirit of unprompted compassion, servant-hood, forgiveness, generosity and mercy even when we know that such a way of life may not be reciprocated to us.

To live the Kin-dom is to be concerned about the welfare of the less fortunate, of the marginalised and the oppressed.

To live the Kin-dom is to live in peaceful harmony with self, with others and with all Creation, concerned with such as carbon justice and with stepping gently on the earth.

To live the Kin-dom is to realise that we are temples of the Sacred and that this is a 24/7 way of life, not just for those special or regular visits to official places of worship.

To live the Kin-dom is to overcome our ego, self-centredness and vanity by putting ourselves into the shoes of others and thus sharing in their pain and anguish as well as in their joys and celebrations.

To live the Kin-dom is a way of life that prefers to give rather than constantly expecting to take or to receive from others.

To live the Kin-dom is in the simple ways of smiling often, encouraging always and to greeting others with warmth and appreciation.

To live the Kin-dom is to constantly see the divine, the Namaste Spirit within all whom we meet, regardless of their goodness or otherwise.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER [in addition to your own questions]

- 1] “Context, context, context: We cannot know the historical Jesus but we can each create the Jesus that makes sense for us in our own time and place.” To what extent do you agree with this statement? And what may be the implications for churches that are emerging from Covid-lockdown into a new normal, to encourage individual creations of Jesus?

- 2] “It is compassion that enables ordinary folk to do extraordinary things for others, especially for those who are in need.” But what happens if we become 'compassioned out'?
- 3] If we are to understand the context of the life of Rabbi Jesus we need to remember that he thought and acted as a Second Temple Jew, but how did Second Temple Judaism think and act within yet another period of brutal foreign domination and local vassal leadership?
- 4] “Some of us will need to learn to love our 'self' before we can truly love others.” To what extent do you think that statement is true, and, if it is true, what are the implications for self and others within a church situation?
- 5] How can the foregoing “To live the Kin-dom” signpost list avoid setting up a sense of guilt for non-attainment in myself or within others?

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