

'JESUS SHAPED CHURCH- CHRISTIAN SHAPED LIVES'

Four talks given to a PCN conference at Bloomsbury Baptist Church, London

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1. JESUS SHAPED FAITH

Have you ever wondered how many millions of paintings in the world there must be depicting Jesus? And if we were to put them into subject categories, awarding gold, silver and bronze medals for the three most depicted scenes, guess what they would be? The gold medal would go to paintings of the Crucifixion, the silver to the Birth of Jesus and the bronze to the Madonna and Child representations. Have you ever wondered how much music has been written inspired by the gospel story of Jesus? From early plainsong, through to music of Bach and Handel, musicals such as Godspell and Jesus Christ Superstar, the exciting compositions of Karl Jenkins – where would musicians be without the Jesus story? And think of poetry and Shakespeare and how much of our literature depends on some knowledge of the Bible and the Jesus story.

Even amongst today's non churchgoing population we still take for granted some understanding of phrases like the Good Samaritan, maybe the Prodigal Son.

Film makers and film audiences are still captivated by the Jesus story, from the American blockbusters like the 1965 film 'The Greatest Story Ever Told', or Piero Pasolini's 'The Gospel according to Matthew', produced also in the 1960's with a cast of Italian nobodies and through to the recent Mel Gibson 'The Passion of the Christ'.

And finally in this introduction think of the millions of books of all shades and theologies written about Jesus. The Bible is still often placed in hotel bedrooms although I gather one hotel chain is thinking of placing Fifty Shades of Grey in every bedroom ! But today religious books abound in a way perhaps never dreamt of by the early Church Fathers. I have one bookcase alone filled with books written in the last decade or so about the historical Jesus. Some of them are on display today. The output is phenomenal. Let me just rattle through some of these recent titles around the historical Jesus: it becomes almost like the reading of a litany

In Quest of Jesus Tatum

Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time Borg

Jesus A New Vision Borg

The Meaning of Jesus Borg and Wright

Who on Earth was Jesus? Boulton

Who Killed Jesus? Crossan

Excavating Jesus Crossan and Reed

The Historical Jesus Crossan

Jesus a Revolutionary Biography Crossan

Honest to Jesus Funk

The Once and Future Jesus Jesus Seminar

Profiles of Jesus Hoover

The Jesus Debate Powell

Jesus for the Non-Religious Spong

Radical Jesus Vincent

How Jesus Became Christian Wilson

Jesus and the Victory of God Wright

Simply Jesus Wright

Jesus Remembered Dunn

Jesus and the Eyewitnesses Bauckham

The Historical Jesus of the Gospels Keener

Saving Jesus From the Church Myers

Jesus still commands central place in western thought and culture as a significant figure in history, although you may want to question whether this is decreasingly so, not least amongst the younger generation.

My own personal journey of rethinking Jesus came when a retired clergyman friend thrust into my hands in 1999, this little book, which had been first published in the States 5 years earlier: 'Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time', by Marcus Borg. Until then, like many liberal Christians, I had in my mind rejected much of the traditional doctrines and teachings about Jesus. I knew from my undergraduate days, studying history, that much of what the bible said about Jesus would not pass the test of critical scrutiny. And so I knew well what I couldn't believe about Jesus but this book began to help me refocus on what was believable and indeed what I could begin to give my heart to. The following year I invited Marcus Borg to speak at St Marks Sheffield, where I had then been vicar for 12 years. I think it was one of the first invitations Marcus had received to speak in a UK parish church and it certainly marked for many people the start of a new journey.

Having then been excited initially through the writings of Marcus Borg, I went on to delve more and more into the person of Jesus and this first talk is an attempt to share what I think is the essence and significance of Jesus of Nazareth.

There are two books, both in a sense from a fairly conservative perspective which attempt to summarise so much of the historical Jesus work. Lion publishing produced this very readable book in 2000, 'The Jesus Debate' by Mark Allan Powell, which summarises some of the main scholarship at the time, those who had written different viewpoints on Jesus. Secondly in 2003, James Dunn, in the first of his monumental works on 'Christianity in the Making', summarises much more academically the story of the quest for the historical Jesus. The story told in these books is that of a reawakening of historical awareness through the Renaissance and the Reformation, through important writers of the past such as Reimarus, Strauss and Schweitzer, through the rise of biblical criticism in the 19th century, right through to the contemporary scholarship of today, to people such as Crossan, Wright and many others. In recent decades of course it has been the work of the Jesus Seminar in the USA that reinvigorated the Jesus debate and also there came a fresh

analysis of the Jewishness of Jesus through scholars such as Sanders and Vermes which have influenced considerably our understanding of Jesus. I have found the scholarly attempts to portray the Jesus of history fascinating, rather like a detective story. Of course this means taking the New Testament books as historical documents and applying the same rules to them as you would apply to any historical writings.

Yet we know that as a historical figure Jesus cannot quite be studied in the same relatively impartial ways as we might study, say, Napoleon. God gets in the way. Because nearly all of our understanding of the person of Jesus comes from the New Testament gospels and letters and all of these are written as theology, not biography. They are written with a purpose; we are relying on the memories, the religious background and worldview of people in a religious age so different from our own. To us, Jesus comes as one who is 'remembered' and those memories are not from cool, analytical and academic researchers but from disciples, apostles and apologists for this new Christian way. This seems obvious to us but for many people, not least in our churches, there is a real tendency to read the gospels as a literally true record of all that Jesus did. Huge questions, we know, litter the Jesus of history quest. Who at that time and subsequently did people think Jesus was? Who did Jesus think he was? What was his self understanding? What was the reason for the gospel writer's work in the first place? It's a vastly complicated field of hypotheses.

I am pretty certain in my own mind that we are on safe ground with this analysis:

Jesus was an influential Jewish teacher, living in Roman occupied Lower Galilee at a time of increasing economic hardship for his fellow Jews. Influenced by the charismatic preaching of the Baptist, Jesus went on to attract a band of followers; he preached a Judaism which focused on striving for God's impending Kingdom, about which he constantly described in parables. His religion was wholly theocentric, God-centred, in which he, Jesus, played the 'man of God' par excellence. It was towards God, the heavenly Father, our Father, that Jesus directed his and others' prayers and supplications. Borg describes Jesus as being a lens on to God, always pointing not to himself, at least in the Synoptic gospels, but to God. Jesus showed immense compassion for people, not exclusively Jewish, he seemed to have a particular bias to the poor and the unloved, a particular regard for the young, in his presence there was a sense of being made whole; he was an excellent story teller who knew his Hebrew scriptures. He was angry, as was many a Jew, at the collusion of the Temple with the Roman power. He seems to have deliberately set himself on a path of confrontation with the Jerusalem Temple authorities and an incident in the Temple meant that he was quickly executed by crucifixion by Pilate. His message of love, compassion and forgiveness inspired his followers to continue to work for God's kingdom on earth, expectant though they were, of the imminent judgement of God, intervening for his people. Jesus didn't go around speaking of himself as Son of God but in a short time after his death the early Christians, the followers of the Way, spoke of him as the Christ of God, as Lord and Saviour.

Most Christians, I guess, would agree with this description, with these brushstrokes. But of course for most Christians it would not only be incomplete but incoherent because it does not refer to a greater theological narrative about Jesus. That is to say a theological and doctrinal garment, which is wrapped around this description. The wrapping as you know would look something like this : Jesus was the preexisting Son of God sent by the Father as the Word incarnate, born of the Virgin Mary, a God Man who performed miracles, including nature miracles, which attested to his divinity. His death on the Cross was God's way of restoring fallen humanity through Jesus' own atonement for our sins and through the power of God was raised from earthly death and exalted to God in heaven. Moreover

this Jesus will return from heaven to finally judge humankind at the general resurrection. The stuff of creeds and catecheses.

Between these two portraits, one you might call the likely historical core and one the larger picture, which may or may not contain some historical plausibility, how do we arrive at a Jesus shaped Faith?

One question might be : are there signs of increasing agreement between the more traditional and conservative believers and more liberal/progressive folk? Lets take the birth stories of the Christmas narratives in Luke and Matthew. A modernist take on Christmas seems now generally supported by most serious scholars in understanding the Christmas narratives as theological and not historical constructs. I won't go as far as to say that no serious scholar believes in a literal birth story of Jesus, with attendant shepherds, wise men, angels etc. But take James Dunn, an esteemed and fairly conservative academic: On page 343 of 'Jesus Remembered' he writes

"Are there, then, no historical facts concerning Jesus' birth to be gleaned from the birth narratives? The prospects are not good." 'perhaps what we see most clearly in the birth narratives is diverse elaboration of the core conviction that Jesus was born of God's Spirit in a special way"

There is a consensus by most serious scholars that the birth stories are not historical fact at all. But have most churches and indeed most clergy been willing to be honest and clear about the Christmas stories?

Lets look briefly at other aspects of the life of Jesus : miracles, healings and exorcisms, atonement and resurrection. Here we are on complicated ground, where views differ widely. How do we deal with those nature miracles for example? Jack Spong in an early 1974 book, 'This Hebrew Lord', describes the gospel writers' ways of using the Hebrew scriptures to frame the Jesus story and to show how Jesus exceeded in power and authority even men like Moses and Elijah. The miracle of the multiplication of bread and fishes overtakes the manna from heaven in Exodus. The story of Jesus' ascension looks back to the chariot ride of Elijah into the heavens and the Spirit falling on Elisha. Now the Spirit of Pentecost comes down on a much greater multitude. Stories to underline the significance of Jesus, not factual occurrences.

Well to some extent some conservative Christians might agree with the metaphorical nature of such biblical stories. Borg in his book Reading the Bible Again for the First Time boldly states that the books of the bible contain both fact and metaphor and that we must distinguish between the two. Remember Crossan's remark that describing Jesus as the lamb of God did not mean that Mary had a little lamb.

But the most common of the actions of Jesus were the healings as recorded in the gospels and later in the book of Acts. This is a difficult area. The healing ministry of the Church is still very much central to its life. We may try to explain away such miraculous healings and exorcisms through a modern day understanding of science and medicine. But do even progressive people, who have some belief in a 'God' wish to deny the possibility and occurrence of such healing? Marcus Borg lays considerable stress on the healing ministry of Jesus. In his major work on Jesus, Borg says this about healings:

"To attempt to explain how these healings happened is beyond our purpose and probably impossible.a psychological explanation doesn't work as a comprehensive

explanation.....within the thought world of the synoptic stories, Jesus' healings were the result of 'power'. 'Jesus's exorcisms were also the result of the power of the Spirit'.

We shall need to return to the concept of the church as a healing community and what that might mean.

Progressive Christians and conservative believers clash over an understanding of the death of Jesus. For the majority of Christians still, notions of salvation and blood sacrifice are central. Jesus atones for the sins of the world. Substitutionary atonement appeases a wrathful God. Sin gets everywhere in our liturgies and prayers. But so much of this is bad history and bad theology. It is bad history because it presumes that God planned the death of Jesus when one can account pretty well for why his execution took place. It was human inevitability and not a divine necessity. In his own way, Jesus challenged the domination system of Rome and Temple. It was this passion for the kingdom of God, for the rule of Jahweh, which got him killed. Jesus died **because** of the sins of the world, not **for** them in any substitutionary sense. Penal substitution is simply bad theology because no Jew or Christian until St Anselm would dream up such a notion of the God of the Judeo-Christian heritage. Whilst many views on atonement and indeed salvation remain, I sense however, and I don't think this is just wishful thinking, a growing unease, even within evangelicalism, with penal substitution and blood sacrifice notions. A Jesus Shaped Faith might then be able to understand the death of Jesus in ways which help 21st century folk, as we think about the confrontation with evil, the self sacrifice which people make.

But the ultimate challenge to my brushstrokes of Jesus is how then do we understand the Resurrection for a Jesus shaped faith?

For some Christians like Spong the resurrection is largely explained in a kind of gradual awakening to a new dimension of reality rather than a one off physical event. Many scholars, I guess, dismiss the idea of physical resurrection and empty tomb – remember famously David Jenkins – and emphasise the visionary experiences of Paul and others which gave rise to this testimony. Borg talks of the reality of a vision of Jesus, imparting a sense of presence to his followers; Crossan says Emmaus keeps happening. They stress an ongoing sense of continuing empowerment. I find that this is difficult to distinguish from simply saying that the spirit of God empowers people, even though Jesus is dead. Jesus is Lord can become a phrase, a creed, indicative of a determination to continue the kingdom work of Jesus. Yet for the vast majority in our churches, the resurrection of Jesus has an objective reality of some kind, be it a physical resurrection from the tomb or verifiable visions of a Jesus alive in a new way. So a Jesus shaped faith will need to speak about empowerment, of new beginnings but will it have anything to say of resurrection and eternal life?

And so we have to recognize that it will be a long and difficult struggle to try to reach a consensus on how we shape and fill out a faith around the person of Jesus. However I do think that there are some guiding principles in the task of reconstructing a Jesus shaped faith.

First we need to attend to good scholarship, there's a lot of rubbish around. And we need to be honest about so much of the life of Jesus that we are never going to know about. And that should make us humble.

Secondly lets not fool ourselves and create a Jesus in our own image. In all of this quest to come to a definitive understanding of the historical Jesus, there will always be the danger as Schweitzer famously remarked when he gave up on the search for the real Jesus, that

we simply end up seeing our own reflection, like peering into a well. I think that is so often the case. Many of us want a nice, liberal, Guardian reading Jesus, like ourselves. This is also bad history.

Thirdly we need to accept that for some people, many agnostocs, atheists, non realists, Jesus remains an extraordinary human being, an exemplar of goodness and compassion, a fighter for justice and peace, an extraordinary teacher of the Golden Rule and much else, with wisdom which transcends time and place. These folk, and many of you may wish to be regarded as in this category are co workers for the Kingdom not enemies of the church. At the same time those conservative Christians who have views very different from our own, are, in the main, sincere people who live good lives.

Fourthly, remember God gets in the way, as I said earlier. A Jesus shaped faith has to take seriously what God, Abba, Jahweh, meant to Jesus, what the power of this God meant for him and what 'God' means for us. A Jesus Shaped Faith takes us in a direction it seems to me, which helps, of course, in my shaping of God. Some of you may well wish to leave God out of this faith and I understand that but I cannot.

So my landscape for a Jesus shaped Faith accepts the premise that Jesus is a lens onto 'God', a definitive disclosure of what God would be like if God were understood in human terms. Jesus demonstrated in word and deed how a man of God brings the Spirit, the power of God into the lives of people. That was his charisma, as it had been with prophets before him. The Jesus of the gospels reveals to me the fullness of a human life driven by a spiritual power, which is marked by a sense of anger at injustice, overwhelming compassion for all in need and seen in joy, love, grace and forgiveness; in short a man fully alive, revealing, in the words of Irenaeus, the glory of God. This remarkable Jew, critical of his own Jewish hierarchy and Temple, profoundly influenced by the highest calling of his faith to love God and neighbour, transcended his own culture and showed radical hospitality and love beyond the boundaries of Jewish legalism. In this he was truly a boundary breaker. His presence and his teachings, his actions conveyed such a sense of power that people felt the presence of God, of Yahweh. I remain agnostic over the resurrection of Jesus and our own future survival and I think a Jesus shaped faith needs to be supremely honest in this regard.

Like Brian McLaren, I do not wish to be a 'vampire Christian', recruiting Jesus for his blood to manage my sins. Rather I want Jesus to recruit me to be his disciple, that is, I want to have the same passions for the kingdom of God on earth as Jesus had. But it is the kingdom of God. This is the springboard for a Jesus shaped faith. This is the springboard for a passionate Christian community, the church.

QUESTIONS

- 1. If we strip Jesus of his doctrinal coat but regard him as a 'man of God', is that sufficient to call him Lord?**
- 2. Is there sufficient evidence and understanding of Jesus to make us want to be followers of the way?**