

## **THOUGHTS ON RELIGION: JESUS WHO?**

This is the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent, the season of preparation before Christmas for Christians around the world. For years when I was a United Methodist, I prepared services for the Advent Season. Actually I liked Advent way more than Lent, the season of preparation for Easter. Even the miraculous trimmings for Christmas seemed more possible than those for Easter, though I no longer believe in either. I still enjoy Christmas though, and I still value what I think are the ethical teachings of Jesus. It is of course a challenge to sift through all the layers of theology to find Jesus and what he may have taught.

The class we have been holding recently on Bart Ehrman's book, *Jesus, Interrupted*, has helped us to look at the many different views of Jesus that appear in the New Testament, each with its own theological perspective. It has also provided a good reminder that everything written about Jesus, was written years or decades after he died. Some was likely based in an oral tradition including stories of his teachings, healings, and journey. Much of what was written down decades later was clearly added to enhance his reputation, explain the meanings of his teachings, and further the theological positions of the writers. This is why I call this sermon, *Jesus Who?* We really know so little that can be held with any great level of historical or scientific certainty about Jesus. With most historical figures, there are at least some external sources, but virtually every mention of Jesus comes from within the Biblical collection of Christian writings or the writings by other Christians whose works were excluded from the New Testament when it was compiled in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century.

The Jesus Seminar has been working for many years to decide which New Testament passages and sayings from the Gospel of Thomas can be attributed to Jesus based upon the best Biblical scholarship currently available. If one were to thumb through the Jesus Seminar's collected 5 Gospels, it is easy to see how few passages were held to actually come from Jesus. As one studies the history of Christianity, it is also easy to see how much of Christianity stems from Paul rather than from Jesus, so one must also look to Paul's writings to understand Christianity!

Many scholars and others somewhat less scholarly have attempted to discover the historical Jesus. Albert Schweitzer comes to mind immediately, as does Thomas Jefferson, who literally cut out parts of the New Testament such as anything miraculous to discover a more rational Christianity. The Jesus Seminar has taken the most systematic approach, with a large group of scholars and other interested persons exploring, studying, then voting on the authenticity of each passage. We will not likely know much more about the historical Jesus than we do now, at least not during this life! For most Christians, that is just fine because it becomes a point of faith, belief. Of course, since there are many ways to understand Jesus, even within denominations, there are still a wide range of perspectives.

One of the other factors that prompted the sermon title, “Jesus Who?” is the tendency for people to think of Christ as Jesus’ surname. Christ or Christos is from the Greek word that is often used to translate, “Messiah” from the Hebrew. In the New Testament, which was written in Greek, this is the word used as a title for the Messiah, which of course is also a Title used to describe the one who would save the people. Herein lies another problem for discovering the historical Jesus, whose name by the way is a transliterated form of Jeshua or Yeshua or Joshua which also mean God saves! And since Jesus was a Jew, whose expectation was more for a Messianic King like David who would unite the people and return Israel to a place of power and prominence in the geopolitical realm, it took some significant reinterpretation by early Christians to fit the Crucified Jesus into that Jewish expectation. Early Christians searched the Hebrew scriptures for passages that would connect Jesus with Jewish Messianic thought. This is also problematic because the prophetic writings within the Hebrew Scriptures are more in the nature of social criticism, usually calling for the current King to repent of evil and return to the straight and narrow! One other significant issue in the quest for the historical Jesus arose in the 4<sup>th</sup> century in the dispute over the relationship between Jesus and God. The Council of Nicaea, called by Constantine to unite Christianity, voted to make Jesus and the Holy Spirit parts of the Trinity with God, and put forth the Nicene Creed which declared Jesus co-equal to God, fully God, and also fully Man! Complicated enough yet?

Now it really would have helped if Jesus had written down his teachings or dictated them as Paul often did with his epistles! Unfortunately for the quest to find the real Jesus under all the layers of story, myth, and theology, he did not. Though almost certainly charismatic and articulate, it is not that likely that someone with Jesus' likely peasant background would be literate. This almost certainly poses more problems for those expecting a middle class, educated, blue-eyed, Caucasian, heterosexual but unmarried Jew who isn't really a Jew. Probability lies more on the dark-skinned, dark-eyed, Jewish peasant, who may well have been married to Mary Magdalene. The Da Vinci Code raised many interesting questions, but especially the question of why a man of Jesus' age would be unmarried—it just wasn't done. Even the Bishops of the early church married, until concerns about church property being claimed by children of Priests pushed the church to create a celibate or unmarried priestly class hundreds of years later. A good Jewish boy certainly would have married!

Now of course, some of this could be explained as being a mystery, and teachings explaining these and many other questions of the historical Jesus and the Christian Religion became points of faith, not to be questioned. Only the clergy generally had access to Bibles until the advent of the printing press, and even then, Catholic laypeople were discouraged from seeking their own interpretations of the Bible well into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The Protestant Reformation opened the study of the Bible for Protestants, but most interpreters of scripture were still clergy until the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Today, many groups claim to follow the literal words of the Bible, but due to the discrepancies and disagreements between and within gospels, that really is an absurd claim. Every individual and group selects and interprets those passages which best explain his, her, or their understanding of Jesus and the Religion.

So here we are in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, with even our calendar essentially based in the history of Jesus and Christianity, and we really know so little about him. The canonical Gospels each tell a story about Jesus, but like those who contend our nation was founded on Christian beliefs, there is more theology than history in such writings. On the other hand, the mythos of the Jesus story is compelling and instructive at many levels. Yes, it has too often been used destructively to empower leaders, nations, Popes, Emperors, Kings, Queens and churches.

It is also a heroic story that has empowered hundreds of millions of followers over two millennia to live a healthier more hopeful life. The teachings and values attributed to Jesus generally match well the teachings of other religious founders and exemplars. The call to respect and love others as well as oneself is an important core value which has not always been followed during Crusades, Wars, and other conflicts, but it is a foundation for the relationships between Christians and also between Christians and others. The miracles attributed to Jesus and accompanying his birth and resurrection are not essentially different from such stories of Roman and Greek and other Gods and demi-Gods. In general terms, we can take them as a sign of how important a figure people came to see Jesus to be. The birth stories of Jesus, appearing only in Matthew and Luke were also crafted long after Jesus' death to emphasize his importance.

Those birth stories are really what I want to focus on for the rest of the sermon, for in them and in a few other passages of scripture we get answers to the question of who Jesus is. The passages in Matthew and Luke tell different stories which are often conflated into a single saga of divine incarnation intended to fulfill Jewish Messianic Expectations and to inaugurate a new relationship between people and God. The birth of Jesus, whether of fully human origins and extent or actually incarnating the divine is seen by many Christians as a turning point in human existence, a moment offering humanity a new start in a new relationship with God. Of course, the cynic in me must acknowledge that humans only recognized this turning point much later and built up the Christian mythos to explain it theologically. Hence, the stories of Jesus' birth were written to conform to a growing belief system rather than discovered as any kind of historical journal. Like many legends and myths, the stories were well enough constructed to aid the development of the Christian religion. They were not written as history nor to be taken literally, though fundamentalists and other biblical literalists have had an interesting time with them in the last couple of centuries! Even the authors had to work to have Jesus born in Bethlehem, the city of David, since he grew up in Nazareth!

Without the birth stories, the Jesus tradition would not have been as interesting to me and to many other Christians. I think in many ways, the authors of Matthew and Luke both hit upon streaks of brilliance to add those stories, no matter how fanciful and unlikely might be the details. A baby born in a manger

when his refugee parents couldn't find a place to stay at the inn, and then greeted by Wisemen who follow a star, Choirs of Angels, Shepherds as well as animals, it is all great theater, perfect for the annual Christmas play. Great material for Christmas carols! The pathos, the drama, Bravo!

Also helpful for softening Jesus' image as an insurrectionist, a troublemaker, a zealot. Already known for hanging out with an unruly band of Galileans, it didn't hurt to provide an image of baby Jesus come to fulfill messianic hopes. A baby, but so much more than just a baby. Later voted God in 325 A. D. it was a great touch to cast Jesus as a child of God, foreshadowing his later ascension into the Trinity.

I really like the candlelight Christmas Eve service of Carols! I like the magic, the mystery, the mythos. Even if I can no longer believe most of the Christian mythos, I still enjoy the Carols, the stories, and the respect and goodwill that Christmas offers. I have been disappointed by many persons claiming to be Christian in recent days who would put all Muslims in concentration camps, who would refuse to help refugees, who would lump together all Muslims with the Jihadists rather than bring respect and love to the borders of our nation.

Even with all the deaths from attacks such as in Paris and San Bernardino, I cannot justify closing our borders to those in need, nor can I support the idea that we need more guns in the hands of everyone. The excitement of the Old West can stay in the movies. I would much rather see honest and open dialogue about human needs resulting in a loving response.

One of the more telling criticisms of American society by Muslims is that we are too much focused on just our own wants and needs without considering others, too consumer oriented, too much addicted to stuff. It is hard to deny, and the responses of certain candidates for high office, like the recent practices of Congress to deny funding of programs addressing human needs, are strong evidence for the failure of many American leaders to practice the values of Jesus even if they claim that they are Christian.

This season of Advent is a good time to focus on the smiling loving baby Jesus! It is a season of hope, a season of dreams, a season of magic! So may it be!