

Introduction

Today is Palm Sunday. The start of Christian Holy week. Today is the day of Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem. We can read in Marks Gospel, Chapter 11.....

- 1And when they came nigh to Jerusalem, unto Beth phage and Bethany, at the Mount of Olives, he sendeth forth two of his disciples,*
2And saith unto them, Go your way into the village over against you: and as soon as ye be entered into it, ye shall find a colt tied, whereon never man sat; loose him, and bring him.
3And if any man say unto you, why do ye this? Say ye that the Lord hath need of him; and straightway he will send him hither.
4And they went their way, and found the colt tied by the door without in a place where two ways met; and they loose him.
5And certain of them that stood there said unto them, what do ye, loosing the colt?
6And they said unto them even as Jesus had commanded: and they let them go.
7And they brought the colt to Jesus, and cast their garments on him; and he sat upon him.
8And many spread their garments in the way: and others cut down branches off the trees, and strewed them in the way.
9And they that went before, and they that followed, cried, saying, Hosanna; blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord:
10Blessed be the kingdom of our father David, that cometh in the name of the Lord: Hosanna in the highest.

My topic this morning is entitled "Jesus the Man". I thought it appropriate not to focus on Jesus the God, of Catholic and Orthodox Christianity as portrayed in the Gospels, but to look at the human being behind these stories and see if there is relevance to us today. Indeed I sometimes wonder if the earthly Jesus came back today, what would he think to find out he was worshipped as a god, indeed very god of very god, the pre-existent word of god, to find out his mother was a virgin and queen of heaven and so on. Would he turn to Peter and like Dorothy in Oz say, "I guess we're not in Kansas now, Toto". This is not an easy task and to attempt it I am grateful to the many biblical scholars of the Jesus Seminar who for the past two decades or so have been trying to get at the real Jesus. What we must always remember is that the stories of Jesus contained in the gospels are not eye witness accounts but are the products of established Christian communities long after his death. They do not agree with each other and are clearly trying to portray Jesus in their own image. In addition, there is no contemporary source that even mentions Jesus, it seems he was too unimportant to the world during his lifetime to be worthy of a mention. However, by studying the materials available, including the works of the early church fathers and by understanding the religious, socio economic and political situation at the time, they have arrived a something of a consensus, and it is this consensus, plus my own interpretation, that I use for the basis of my address today.

Reading

Gandhi on Jesus

To me, it implies a spiritual birth. My interpretation, in other words, is that in Jesus' own life is the key of his nearness to God; that he expressed, as no other could, the spirit and will of God. It is in this sense that I see him and recognize him as the Son of God. But I do believe that something of this spirit that Jesus exemplified in the highest measure, in its most profound human sense, does exist. I must believe this; if I did not believe it, I should be a sceptic; and to be a sceptic is to live a life that is empty and lacks moral content. Or, what is the same thing, to condemn the entire human race to a negative end.

It is true that there certainly is reason for scepticism when one observes the bloody butchery that European aggressors have unloosed, and when one thinks about the misery and suffering prevalent in every corner of the world, as well as the pestilence and famine that always follow, terribly and inevitably, upon war.

In the face of this, how can one speak seriously of the Divine Spirit incarnate in man? Because these acts of terror and murder offend the conscience of man; because man knows that they represent evil; because in the inner depths of his heart and of his mind, he deplors them. And because, moreover, when he does not go astray, misled by false teachings or corrupted by false leaders, man has within his breast an impulse for good and a compassion that is the spark of Divinity, and which some day, I believe, will burst forth into the full flower that is the hope of all mankind.

An example of this flowering may be found in the figure and in the life of Jesus. I refuse to believe that there now exists or has ever existed a person that has not made use of his example to lessen his sins, even though he may have done so without realizing it.

The lives of all have, in some greater or lesser degree, been changed by his presence, his actions, and the words spoken by his divine voice.

I believe that it is impossible to estimate the merits of the various religions of the world, and, moreover, I believe that it is unnecessary and harmful even to attempt it. But each one of them, in my judgment, embodies a common motivating force: the desire to uplift man's life and give it purpose.

And because the life of Jesus has the significance and the transcendence to which I have alluded, I believe that he belongs not solely to Christianity, but to the entire world; to all races and people, it matters little under what flag, name or doctrine they may work, profess a faith, or worship a God inherited from their ancestors

Address

To understand Jesus the man we must first understand the religious, political and economic situation into which he was born.

Galilee was an agricultural society. A small number of wealthy aristocratic religious and political people at the top of society owned the bulk of the wealth while the majority of the populous were poor and illiterate, a situation familiar in our own history. Galilee itself was not historically a Jewish area having been forcibly converted to Judaism only 100 years prior to Jesus' birth under the Maccabean Kings, who had successfully driven out the Greek Syrian king Antigonos from the region. However this Jewish kingdom did not keep its independence long. The expansion of the Roman Empire meant that Rome

was now running the show and Galilee was under the rule of the puppet king Herod Antipas, son of Herod the great. Galilee had revolted twice against Rome, and as a boy Jesus must have witnessed the brutality with which it was crushed.

Religiously Judaism was a very different animal to the Rabbinical Judaism we see today. It was split into many diverse groups. The Sadducees were the aristocratic party, largely concerned with temple worship, only supporting the written law and having no concept of resurrection or life after death. The Pharisees were the forerunner of Rabbinical Judaism. They supported the oral law. They believed in the resurrection. They represented Judaism in the Diaspora, being particularly strong in the city of Alexandria in Egypt. The Essenes represent the major apocryphal group of the times. They expected god to act and bring an end to the world. As revealed by the Dead Sea scrolls they were preparing for a military conflict with Rome, assisted by armies of angels.

It is into this background that Jesus enters the world stage. Tradition says he was a carpenter but the word in the bible simply means master or craftsman so it is quite possible he was a stone mason working to rebuild the nearby city of Sefhoris, the new capital of the Antipas Kingdom. One must assume that he led an ordinary life until at some point he became a follower of John the Baptist. Was John his cousin as the gospel's say. Was that what drew him to his side or did he look at the world around him and decide "There has to be something better than this?" John was announcing the coming of the kingdom of god and practicing baptism east of the Jordan possibly as a political expedient of keeping out of the reach of the authorities or possibly symbolically re-enacting the Exodus and crossing across the Jordan into the Promised Land. The gist of his message that god would deliver the Jewish people if they turned from their sins and led more holy lives. John eventually fell afoul of Antipas and that was effectively the end of his movement. One wonders if Jesus was the natural successor to John or whether he decided to start up a new movement. Whatever his motives, he gave up the family business and began his ministry. What can we deduce from his ministry?

1. His Movement Was Jewish.

It was well within the context of Judaism, albeit a radical form. Jesus seems to have supported the teachings of the Law and the Prophets as witnessed in Matthew, "*Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach [them], the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.*"

He does however seem to have taken a more liberal interpretation of the Law, as witnessed by his views on the Sabbath and his intervention in the stoning of an adulteress. Forgiveness of sins and reconciliation was his take on the law. He also seems to have opposed the Pharisees and the Oral tradition which he thought was too much of a burden on the people. His was to be a lighter load. He opposed the Sadducees symbolically by overturning the money changers tables in the temple. Religion was not to be a money making racket for the rich. Symbolically on his death the curtain in the Holy of Holies was torn in two. Access to the divine was for everyone, not just the Priesthood.

2. His Movement was Messianic.

The Jewish world at the time was expecting a Messiah and I believe Jesus considered himself to be such a person. His early followers certainly thought him to be the Messiah and he was crucified as such. It is unlikely either of these would have happened if he went around denying it. Certainly His concept of Messiahship was different. He was no warrior David. His Kingdom of God was a spiritual kingdom, not an Earthly kingdom. When he entered Jerusalem it was neither on a warhorse like Pilate would have ridden nor a donkey as a Davidic King would have done but on a colt a wild untrained horse. He redefined the role of Messiah. His was to be the way of peace through Justice not the Roman or Davidic way of peace through victory and conquest.

3. His Movement was radically inclusive.

For one thing women appear to have equality with men in his kingdom. In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and John following the kingly entry into Jerusalem, Jesus has his feet anointed by Mary, the sister of Martha. Luke has an unnamed sinner. If, as some might say, this was a dinner custom of the day, I cannot see it being significant enough to be recorded in the gospels. I see another meaning. A king must be anointed. Here instead of the king's head being anointed by the high priest, the king's feet are anointed by an ordinary woman. The ways of this world have been turned upside down. He had a reputation for being a healer. But if we reject the supernatural healing stories of the gospels we can find a symbolic meaning. The deaf, the lame, the blind, and so on that Jesus healed were all those who were excluded from the temple. By healing them he made it clear, God's kingdom was for all. Not just the perfect people.

4. His Movement was Ascetic

The disciples were all called to give up their ordinary lives to follow him and as we read in Matthew's Gospel, *"Do not think that I came to bring peace on Earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I came to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's enemies will be the members of his household. He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of Me. He who has found his life will lose it, and he who has lost his life for my sake will find it."* As Joseph Campbell points out in his book, *Myths to Live By*, *"The idea of this teaching is of an ascetic absolute abandonment of all the concerns of an normal secular life, family ties, community and all leaving the dead ie those that we call the living "to bury their dead" and in this earliest Christian teaching is seen to have been of the order of the early Buddhist or the Jain. It is "forest teaching" And what it does to the general apocalyptic theme is to transform its reference radically from a historical future to a psychological present: the end of the world and the coming of the day of god are not to be awaited in the field of time but to be achieved right now in solitude, in the chamber of the heart."*

5. His Movement Was Political

As Marcus Borg comments, *“The most common early Christian statement about Jesus was Jesus is Lord and given that that was one of the titles of Caesar, to say Jesus is Lord in the first century was to commit high treason.”*

Dominic Crossan goes further, *“Son of God, divine, god incarnate, lord, redeemer, liberator, savior of the world. All of those were the titles of the Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus, before Jesus ever existed and if he had never existed. And what we have to ask is what it meant to take the titles of a Roman Emperor who lived on the Palatine hill in Rome and apply them to a Jewish peasant from the Nazareth region of Galilee. It was a joke and the Romans weren’t laughing.”*

He may not have intended it to be a political movement, but if you assert the authority of God and his kingdom over the authority of Caesar and his empire it cannot be anything else but political and it is for this political offence that he was killed. Roman religion was built on the cult of the emperor as god. Any challenge to this was treason and ultimately this cost Jesus his life.

So where does this leave us here in Glasgow in 2012? When we worship Jesus the cosmological Christ, we are saying that the world is a mess but don’t worry, God will sort everything out. All our sins will be forgiven. The bad people will burn in hell eternally and the good people will go to heaven. The fallen state of man will be restored and the lion will lie down with lamb and everything will be rosy in the garden. This is for me a childlike viewpoint. As children we all loved our super heroes. No matter how bad the situation, Superman, with all his super powers will arrive and save the day. But I must reject this view. I reject the view that the world’s problems are due to man’s sinfulness. Yes much of humanity’s problems are caused by man’s inhumanity to man, but to blame disease, death, pestilence, earthquakes on mankind is nonsense. It is equally nonsensical to assume that human sacrifice or even deicide can fix everything. This idea was certainly prevalent in first century Palestine and amongst some Evangelicals today. For me however that concept belongs in our past.

But when we strip Jesus of his divinity and look at the man I still cannot number myself amongst his disciples. He was very much a man whose ideas were shaped by his experiences and understandings of the society he lived in and these do not apply to me. I am not Jewish. I do not worship his god nor do I believe that his people are chosen by god as his special people. I do not believe in the concept of a messiah, human or otherwise, who can single-handedly bring about a radical change in the world. If the world is to change for the better it needs all of us to change it. In that sense we must all be messiahs. I think politically he was naïve, if he thought on entering Jerusalem in triumph that the whole Roman Empire was going to collapse around him.

I reject his asceticism. To preach love for your neighbor while turning your back on those you love is bogus. I believe the problems of this world cannot be solved by opting out and hoping for an early death like the Jains, having finally extinguished the will to live. Life is for living and the problems of living must be confronted head on.

There are, however, some positives I can take from Jesus the man. I do admire his radically inclusive community and his teaching about love, forgiveness and reconciliation like the parable of the Good Samaritan and his ability to recognize the worth and dignity of every human being. For this alone I will add him to my list of influential people on my spiritual journey. Is it enough to build a religion around him....no, for in truth, stripped of his super powers, superman becomes plain old Clark Kent. But perhaps we don't have to build our religion around him. As we read from Gandhi this morning,

"I believe that he belongs not solely to Christianity, but to the entire world; to all races and people, it matters little under what flag, name or doctrine they may work, profess a faith, or worship a God inherited from their ancestors".

Like Gandhi himself, and many other great people from different times and different cultures, Jesus belongs to all of humanity. We can learn from them all, learn from their experiences and carry the best of their message with us on our way.