

# INSIGHTS

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## IMAGES OF THE RELEVANT JESUS

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Old Quest, New Quest, Jesus Seminar Quest—for many Christians, scholars who search for the historical Jesus work in a cloister of irrelevancy.<sup>1</sup> Today, the principal interests of faith are not apologetic or historical, out of which grow the scholarly quests, but are spiritual; interests which seek to relate the presence or the absence of God to intrapersonal, interpersonal, and environmental realities. The Jesus, whom most Christians experience giving us access to God, is not the historical person who lived behind the Gospels. He, rather, the living Lord and Savior who two thousand years ago functioned as the main character of the gospel narratives themselves and now relates to us spiritually through an identity informed by those stories and the stories of Christians who have known Jesus to this day. The church fulfills its purpose when, through its storytelling in worship, service, evangelism, fellowship, and education, it relates well the experienced dimensions of ultimacy (the presence of the Spirit; the living Christ; God, the source and sustainer of life) to the practical concerns of ordinary life. Then there is gospel.

Who is the relevant Jesus, the Jesus who inspires gospel in the church today? What images inform a Christological identity that helps? What follows is one pastor's perspective.<sup>2</sup>

### JESUS THE BABY

It's midnight above the shepherd's field in Bethlehem, as it can be midnight in our own souls. Suddenly a brilliance surrounds the shepherds and a voice announces the birth of a baby. At midnight, only two matters are significant for this child and his identification: he is wrapped in swaddling clothes and he is lying in a manger (Luke 2:8).

"The baby is wrapped in swaddling clothes." To see Jesus swaddled is to see him helpless. Like any other child born into this world, his parents must care for him, clothe him, and nourish him or he will die. The swaddling clothes are a sign, a sign of helplessness, a presage for the life of a man of whom it will be said, "He saved others, he cannot save himself."

"The baby is lying in a manger." To see Jesus lying in a manger, in an animal's feeding trough, is to see him homeless, without a place, "for there was no

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room for them in the inn." This too is a sign, a sign of homelessness, an omen, for the child grows into a man who is later forced to say of himself, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

These signs above the midnight field are given to the shepherds and to us. As signs they point to this: the eternally omnipotent and omnipresent God comes to us in the form of a tiny baby, humanly helpless and materially homeless, the infant Jesus, helpless and homeless. Why like this? Perhaps only that we might hear God's promise: that above the midnight field, in the midst of abysmal darkness, out of the most extreme emotional or material poverty imaginable, God seeks us to lead us to life. God is no distant deity, abiding in unattainable heights, to which we must laboriously climb; rather, God is with us, having experienced our own helplessness and our need for a place. The angel makes this clear: "For unto you this day is born a Savior, a deliverer, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger."

### JESUS, TEMPTED AS WE ARE

All of us face temptation. Some temptations are specific, concrete moral choices, like whether to steal or cheat or eat too much chocolate. Some temptations are more subtle, going to the heart of our basic ways of living, our values, and our perspectives on life. Temptation is an urge, not necessarily to do evil, but to act out of character with our real identity, our self-understanding as Christians.

Just before he begins his public ministry, Jesus faces three temptations in the wilderness that are still relevant and powerful for us today. In facing these temptations and in winning over them, Jesus pioneers for us a path to follow.<sup>3</sup>

The first is the temptation of materialism—to think that we can live by material goods alone. "Command this stone to become bread," Satan says. Certainly Jesus could fulfill both his own legitimate physical needs and popular messianic hopes by such an action, but he refuses, quoting God's words to Israel in another wilderness, "Man shall not live by bread alone."

The temptation that Jesus faced two thousand years ago is still very real for us. It's a distortion of life that says, "If only I have enough money, if only I can get a nicer house or car, if only I'm successful, I'll be o.k." We all have legitimate physical needs. It's right for us to meet them. The distortion occurs when we begin to ground our identity and our security in our possessions and so pursue them at all costs.

Jesus offers a different vision of economic life. He calls us to serve our neighbors and our families through our vocations. In and through our work Jesus invites us to share in God's creativity by producing and distributing goods, by providing services in a way that meets human needs and creates a world more peaceful and just. His vision encourages us to do all this while keeping our physical, emotional, spiritual, and family lives in balance. When we face and overcome the temptation of materialism, when we ground our

identity in God's grace and not in what we possess or might possess, we begin to live life as God intends.

The second temptation Jesus overcomes is the temptation of security—to feel that we can be fully secure and invulnerable from harm. Satan says, "Jesus, throw yourself down from the temple. You're invulnerable, nothing can happen to you, you're God's son." Jesus says, "No. Don't tempt God." It's a distortion of life to think that any human being, even the Son of God in human form, has absolute control over her or his own destiny. Ultimately in life and in death we belong to God. Each moment of life is a gift of God's grace. No one, not Jesus, not the most responsible, healthy person is invulnerable to harm, to disease, to injury, or to death. When like Jesus we face and overcome the temptation to secure our own destiny, to consider ourselves invulnerable, and when, alternatively, we ground our security in God's grace, not our ability to prolong our own lives, we begin to live life with a sense of freedom that God intends.

The third temptation Jesus faces in the wilderness is the temptation of status—to find fulfillment in social prestige and positions of power. Satan says, "Jesus, worship me and the world is yours." Certainly a little pragmatic obedience to the prince of this world would be a small price to pay for the prize of the very kingdoms Jesus wants to win. But Jesus rejects the offer of fame and power, quoting the Torah, "You shall worship the Lord, your God. Only Him shall you serve."

In our culture, many face the temptation to find fulfillment in social prestige and positions of power. It's not wrong to be great, but it is a distortion of life to confuse power and fame with greatness, to base our own sense of worth and esteem on someone else's estimation of us, on how we stack up to other people. Today we seem to let the press, advertising executives, and television determine whom we'll call great, while many to whom we would never give a pedestal deserve the accolade of greatness because of the patient, humble, loving way they live. When we face and overcome the temptation to find fulfillment, to define our greatness on the basis of social prestige and positions of power, and when, alternatively, we ground our greatness in God's grace, in the fact that we are loved and forgiven by God, we begin to live life with the sense of fulfillment and joy that God intends.

The relevant Jesus shows us that with God's help we can overcome the temptations of materialism, security, and status.

### JESUS AND THE ETHICS OF RIGHT VERSUS RIGHT

It's the first day of Jesus' ministry (Mark 1:21-39). He comes out of the wilderness, calls his disciples, goes to the synagogue, and casts out a demon. Now, in the afternoon, he comes to Simon's house, where he heals Simon's mother-in-law. The word gets out. By sundown, the sick and the disturbed from all over Capernaum start coming. Simon's living room turns into a waiting room and the crowd overflows onto the street. Jesus does as much as he can for as

long as he can, but finally he's exhausted and he goes to bed.

In the morning, Jesus gets up early and goes to a "deserted place" to pray. The disciples get up, see the crowd still waiting for Jesus and go out to find him. The text puts it more strongly: "They hunted for him." They finally find him and tell him that he has to come back. Everyone's looking for him. Now Jesus has to make a choice. He can either go back to Capernaum and set up a dazzlingly successful family practice or he can ignore these people who are in obvious need and go on to the neighboring towns to proclaim the gospel there.

Here on the first day of his ministry Jesus has to make a choice between competing goods, a choice between being helpful or being faithful. We can imagine the pressure he feels. For Jesus to choose to go on to preach in the neighboring towns means that he must hear the cries of anger and betrayal from those who have patiently waited for him back in Capernaum. We can imagine his desire to please his newly recruited disciples. Still, Jesus makes the other choice.

We're all confronted with choices like this because, like Jesus, we're subject to the limitations of time and space. Often we must choose between competing goods: between the demands of family and the demands of work; between the call to love ourselves and the call to love others; between the call to be helpful, to serve those in need, and the call to be faithful to other commitments; between the necessity to meet present obligations and the necessity to plan for the future.

Jesus understands the limitations of space and time, the difficulties we face when we must choose between competing goods. The relevant image for us is the portrayal of Jesus faithful to his purpose and priorities, after a time of prayer.

First, Jesus honors his long-term commitments. Jesus is on a mission. His objective is to preach the message of God's love to all who will listen. For him everything else is secondary. His purpose gives his life direction and guides his choices. He decides not to go back to Capernaum, but to go preach in the neighboring towns. Why? "Because," he says, "this is what I came out to do."

Second, Jesus makes his choice after a time of prayer. To be faithful in prayer means that we remember to take our cues from the right prompter. There in Simon's house, Jesus must have felt the conflict brewing inside him. How easy it would have been to stay there, to take his cues from his disciples, to be prompted by the accolades of the people, to solidify his reputation as a great healer, to avoid the cross, the destiny of suffering that was set before him and his disciples. After all, these people needed help. Faced with all this, Jesus gets away, to a deserted place, to center himself in the love of God, to pray, and to listen for God's cues. The relevant Jesus prays and remains faithful to his purpose and priorities.

### JESUS' WAY OF LIVING

The Jesus of the Gospels is a teacher of wisdom. He gathers together his disci-

ples and like Moses before him sets out for them a standard, a way of life. Jesus' way of living stands in sharp contrast to the elaborate, bureaucratic, innocuous religion we call Christianity. As in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:7), the relevant Jesus still defines for us what it means to be a Christian disciple today.

First, *in dealing with ourselves, integrity*: so that not only will we not murder, but we will not hate; not only will we not commit adultery, but we will so respect the sanctity of other people, that we will not even imagine or propose it; that our word will be as good as our bond; and that our good deeds will not be paraded in front of others, but will be the spontaneous expression of the good life within us. In dealing with ourselves, integrity.

Second, *in dealing with others, love*: so that we will not allow anyone's ill will to reduce us to the level of hating back or retaliating; goodwill so inclusive, that, like the God who sends rain on the just and the unjust alike, we will show love to the grateful and the ungrateful, to the friendly and to the hostile. In dealing with others, love.

Third, *in dealing with God, trust*: so that our religion will not mean praying on street corners, or thinking that God will hear us for our much speaking or our much doing, for either our sophisticated theology or our generous benevolences. The relevant Jesus calls us to a perfect confidence with God, to a release of anxiety, to the serene experience of inward fellowship with an Unseen Friend, so that seeking God's will on earth, we will be at peace about lesser matters. In dealing with God, trust.

### THE INCLUSIVE JESUS

Who are the recipients of God's grace? Who among us are "loved by God?" The relevant Jesus answers, "All are loved by God." The inclusiveness of Jesus is portrayed in the Gospels through numerous encounters, statements, parables, and actions. Primary among these are the images that surround table fellowship, on the basis of which the Lord's Supper has been given sacramental significance.

The gospel images of Jesus and his disciples eating with sinners are set in the context of the exclusive table fellowship of the Pharisees. On this Jacob Neusner writes:

The basis for this society was meticulous observance of laws of tithing and other priestly offerings as well as the laws of ritual purity outside the Temple where they were not mandatory. The members undertook to eat even profane foods (not sacred tithes or other offerings) in a state of rigorous Levitical cleanliness. These rules tended to segregate the members of the fellowship, for they ate only with those who kept the law as they thought proper.<sup>4</sup>

Who in the time of Jesus would be excluded from Pharisaic table fellowship on the basis of laws of ritual purity? Women who menstruated and were therefore unclean; children who had not yet received the *yetzer tov* (the good nature); the poor who could not pay the Temple tithe; the maimed, the blind,

lepers, the deaf, the dumb, all of whom were disqualified through the Levitical "blemish"; sinners, tax collectors, Samaritans, and Gentiles.

Track through Jesus' ministry in the Gospel of Luke. Who is included? Jesus and his disciples eat with women and they are the first witnesses of his resurrection (10:38-42; 23:55-24:12); the maimed (6:11), the lame (5:17-26; cf. Acts 3:1-11), the blind (18:35-43); lepers (17:11-19) all receive healing and enjoy table fellowship (14:13; 14:21); tax collectors enjoy table fellowship and forgiveness (5:27-32), as do sinners (5:32; 7:36-50; 15:3-32; 17:14); the poor are fed (6:20-23; 14:13; 14:21); Samaritans (17:11-19) and Gentiles (7:1-10) are included. Following the resurrection even the Pharisees get a second chance to repent and become the people of God (Acts 3:11-26). In the love of God no one is excluded.

Jesus' acceptance and inclusion of sinners at the table is rooted in his redefinition of the nature of God. The Levitical understanding, "Be *holy* as God is *holy*" (Lev. 19:2), where holiness means separation from everything unclean, Jesus changes to "Be *compassionate* as your Father in heaven is *compassionate*" (Luke 6:36), where compassion expresses an attitude that is nourishing, caring, forgiving, embracing, and encompassing.<sup>5</sup> A new theology requires a new ethics. According to Jesus, God's priority is compassion, not holiness.

In my view no other image of Jesus has meant more in the life of our congregation than that of the inclusive Jesus. The inclusive Jesus defines our worship. We begin each service with the words, "We are welcomed to this service of worship with the welcome of Jesus Christ himself, for in the love of Christ, all have access to God." Our invitation to the Table reflects this understanding, "All are invited to the table of the Lord," we say, "for all are loved by God." The inclusive Jesus inspires our evangelism. Experiencing God's forgiveness, our church has become a welcoming place for many who had previously given up coming to church either because they felt ashamed of their sins or shunned for their identity or devalued for their failures. The inclusive Jesus governs our dialogue. Our Session values our diversity and has set guidelines to help us honor it: we prize the emotional side of life, expecting passion in our discussions; we are intentional about the process of inclusion; we look for practical, compassionate applications of faith to life. These guidelines keep a diverse congregation unified and focused on our greater purposes while encouraging stimulating dialogue on a wide range of ethical and social issues. The inclusive Jesus motivates our mission; in recent years this image has spawned a number of new programs that demonstrate God's love in tangible ways to those in need. The inclusive Jesus engenders our love for each other, our sense of fellowship and community. In the awareness that God loves us all, we turn from being competitors, who must better one another to prove our worth, to companions, who work individually to strengthen one another and work together to build community.

## THE SUFFERING JESUS

Several years ago, on a mission trip to Merida, Mexico, a friend and I visited the great Catholic cathedral on the square. In the chancel behind the altar hangs a tall crucifix. Seated beside me was an old woman kneeling and praying. Her face was radiant. Her hands were lifted up in praise. I heard her whispering, "Alleluia, Alleluia." What was shocking about this scene, however, was that the woman was destitute. She had no teeth and very little hair. She had a deep scar on the side of her face. Her hands were twisted and gnarled and beside her were a pair of crutches. "My God," I prayed, "what this woman must have been through in her life. God, what questions must she have for you? What complaints must she be able to raise against you? But now, here, what lights up her face?" In Spanish, my friend asked her, "What is it that makes you say, 'Alleluia?'" Pointing to the crucifix she said simply, "He is with me."

The suffering Jesus is perpetually with us. To understand what this means we must first unlearn our most common definition of suffering. Suffering is not the same as pain. Suffering is rather what we do with our pain, what we do with any disruption that seeks to steal our freedom and vitality. The word "suffering" comes from two Latin words: "fero," which means "to carry" or "to bear," and "suf," which is a form of "sub," which means "from beneath" or "below." To suffer means to come up under something and bear it, to carry it along toward the point of understanding. Jesus says, "Whoever does not bear his cross and come after me cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:27). When life is disrupted or broken, we have options for dealing with pain: we can despair before it; we can anesthetize ourselves against pain with drugs or alcohol, or any number of diversions; we can ignore pain, stoically denying that we're hurting; or we can use our pain as an excuse for feeling victimized, for blaming others for our predicament. But Jesus' way of dealing with pain, Jesus' way of countering the disruptions of life, is the way of the suffering: to bear pain courageously; to keep it in our awareness, using it as an opportunity for an honest exploration of our own soul; to share it with God and with those who love us, who will suffer with us and so deepen our intimacy; to carry it intentionally, while it carves in us a place for a new self-understanding, while we work to discover a new, less painful way of being. Jesus Christ, the one who knows our sorrow, suffers with us; he shares our anger with the realities of life that hurt us. Christ did not come to do away with our suffering. He did not come to explain it. He came only to fill it with his presence so that through it we might find life and be healed.

The suffering Jesus relates God to our pain. For the church, the Trinity is a response to theodicy. In the being of God, alive in God's memory is the grief of loss (once a Father lost a Son). Alive in the memory of God is pain, betrayal and death (the Son was crucified). Understanding our pain, the compassionate God comforts, encourages, helps us persevere and overcome through the Spirit (the suffering Son says to us who suffer, "I will send you a Comforter." "On you will descend power from on high."). For those who grieve terrible

losses, for those who are afraid, for those who are ill, for those who are lonely, for those whose most important relationships are breaking apart, there is no more relevant image than the suffering Jesus. Alive in the memory of God is the cross.

### JESUS, FULLY HUMAN, FULLY DIVINE

The names we call Jesus—Lord, Savior, Messiah, Christ, Word of God, Son of God, and God—are all rooted in the resurrection, in the belief among the earliest Christians and us that in the resurrection, God vindicates the suffering, crucified human being called “Jesus.” If Jesus stays dead we never hear of him. The earliest Christian affirmations are not that the resurrection is something Jesus did for himself (“Jesus has overcome death”), but specifically, that the resurrection is something God did for Jesus (“God raised Jesus from the dead”). In the resurrection, God says “Yes” to Jesus. If God raised Jesus from the dead, reasoned the first Christians, then Jesus’ words and deeds, his understanding of who God is and what we therefore can be, should be heeded. They are, in fact, God’s words. Particularly since Jesus is executed with the sign hanging above his head, “Messiah of the Jews,” the resurrection, seen as confirming this identity, exalts Jesus’ human status, and begins the process of associating Jesus with messianic names and titles usually reserved for God, “This Jesus whom you crucified, God has made both Christ and Lord” (Acts 2:36). If Jesus is Lord, if God has raised him, God will also bring life out of death for those who follow Jesus as Lord, for those who make up the community of the Messiah-Christ, namely, Christians. With the first Christians asserting both that Jesus was vindicated then glorified by God, it was a short leap for them to assert both his humanity and divinity. This understanding, already present in incipient forms in the New Testament (John 1; 2, Cor 5:19), is now the central affirmation of the church’s Christology.

To call the vindicated Jesus at once both fully human and fully divine is, for two reasons, a mystery central to our identity and our living. Daniel Migliore explains the relevance of this image.<sup>7</sup>

First, if *Jesus* is fully God, then we must understand in a new way who God is and what God is like. The incredible claim of Christians that Jesus is God means that what Jesus did and suffered is also the doing and suffering of God. His preaching was more than that of an ancient prophet, it is God addressing us; his forgiveness was more than the forgiveness of another human being, it is God’s forgiveness; his companionship with the poor and sick was not just evidence of a human being’s compassion, it is God’s identity with and compassion for those in need; his passion and death for us is not just the suffering of another innocent victim of violence, it is God taking death into the being of God and there overcoming it for us. God acts, suffers and triumphs through Jesus (2 Cor 5:19).

If this is true, then we will have to rethink our traditional picture of God. The God who is angry, distant, and invulnerable, the God concerned about

purity, too holy to look on sinners, the God of moralism, law, and punishment, is not the God who became flesh in Jesus Christ. If Jesus is God, then God is impartial in acceptance, inclusive in generosity, not bound by law, but motivated by love, a God who understands us and suffers with and for us. Our ideas of lordship and divinity, our ideas about where to look for God, must be redefined in terms of a surprising love that welcomes sinners, makes itself vulnerable, and is shockingly partisan toward the weak, the poor, and the outcasts; a love that is to be found, not far away up in heaven, but here among us and within us in this mundane world. If Jesus is God we will have to redefine our understanding of who God is.

Second, if *Jesus* is fully human, then we must understand in a new way who we are and how we can live. The full humanity of Jesus means more than that he was a concrete human being like us in all respects, that he knew hunger and thirst, got tired, or experienced love and pain. When we talk about the full humanity of Jesus, we mean more than simply that Jesus was like us. We mean that in what he said and did, he was not simply *a human being*, but he was and remains for us *the norm and promise of what a human being can be in relation to God and to others*. He is the model and the means for us to become what God want us to be. He is therefore a human being who poses a considerable challenge to our ways of thinking and living.

When we look at Jesus we see a disturbing and revolutionary human being. One who taught his disciples that as human beings they could relate intimately to God, not through priests or other intermediaries, but directly and personally. He taught his followers that as human beings they could love their enemies and show God’s grace to sinners and the poor. His words and deeds angered religious people, those governed by law and tradition. He accepted those whom they rejected.

This particular kind of human life, this life of acceptance, of love, of challenging inhumanity, God vindicated in the resurrection. God said, “Yes, this is what it means to be human, this is what I want you to be.” If Jesus is fully human, then to be fully human means for us to be forgiven and to be forgiving, to be accepted and to be accepting, to be free and to be liberators, to be at peace and to be peacemakers, to be loved and to be lovers, to be filled with joy and to work for the well-being of those in need.

### WHAT A FRIEND WE HAVE IN JESUS

The Hebrew meaning of the common name Jesus is “God will save.” The naming of Jesus is a part of that great mystery in which God seeks to elevate our ordinary, common, confused lives toward something beautiful and extraordinary. This is much the goal of friendship. “Until now,” Jesus says, “I have called you my disciples, henceforth I will call you my friends” (John 15:12-17).

In “The Road to Joy,” Thomas Merton writes about a sketch of a house that a girl named Grace had drawn for him.<sup>8</sup> He regretted that the scene showed no road to or from the house. Five years later Grace redrew the picture, this time

with a road. Merton wrote to Grace, "I am glad you still draw things with love, and hope that you will never lose that. But I hope that you and I will secretly travel our own road to joy, which is mysteriously revealed to us without our exactly realizing ..."

The relevant image is one of secretly traveling the road to joy together with an intimate friend, surprised by what is discovered along the way. The profound connection of friends is one of the most precious gifts of life. There is one friend who walks beside us in love, who knows and understand us, who accepts and guides us, who employs and develops our strengths, who forgives our failings, who shares our joys, who comforts our sorrows, who has experienced our dilemmas, he is one with whom we communicate and commune even without intentional effort, he is one who suffers for and with us, who gives us access to the God of life and challenges us to become more than we are. This friend is Jesus. ❁

#### NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> Perhaps Marcus J. Borg begins to address this concern. I found his book (*Meeting Jesus*) a beautiful and powerful attempt to make relevant the conclusions of recent scholarship on the historical Jesus to modern faith. In my view, however, Borg's portrayal of Jesus as a teacher of alternative wisdom whose message of compassion flies in the face of the theology and politics of his contemporaries is discernible from a narrative reading of the gospels themselves. Most Christians will continue to get their information about Jesus from the Bible and their friends, not from scholars's books or articles about him.

<sup>2</sup> The great privilege of ministry is the opportunity to be invited into people's lives in ultimate moments, moments that confront us with our finitude and need for God. The images of the relevant Jesus set out below are ones that have helped me personally and ones that I have witnessed functioning well in the church in moments like these: in worship, in times of grief or illness, when we are overwhelmed by busy schedules, when struggling to resolve conflicts in marriage, on mission with a difficult decision. While these images of the relevant Jesus have become a part of me, little of what I write here originates with me. I can't remember when I first learned some of these portrayals of Jesus. I'll footnote where I'm certain of the sources. For the most part, I am indebted to parents, teachers, pastors, friends, and fellow Christians.

<sup>3</sup> This interpretation of Jesus' temptations is based on Diogenes Allen, *Temptation* (Cambridge, Mass.: 1986).

<sup>4</sup> Jacob Neuner, *First-Century Judaism in Crisis* (New York: Abingdon, 1975), 36

<sup>5</sup> Borg, *Meeting Jesus*, 46-50

<sup>6</sup> See Nils Dahl, *"The Crucified Messiah" and Other Essays* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1974)

<sup>7</sup> The following is based on Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991: 145-149.

<sup>8</sup> Robert E. Datty, ed., Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Inc. 1989), 352.