

God and Jesus: Original Impulse

Prologue: Memories from childhood: “Tell Me the Story of Jesus” and “I Love to Tell the Story ...of Jesus and his glory; of Jesus and his love.”

***It matters greatly how we tell the story** – for more than one reason

*It can make the story of Jesus difficult to believe, or persuasive and compelling

*Because of Jesus’ significance for Christians: he is for Christians *the decisive disclosure or revelation or epiphany of the character and passion of God.*

I. Ways of Telling His Story in Christianity Today

1. Jesus as the Dying Savior: As Substitutionary Sacrifice for Sin. Jesus paid for our sins by dying in our place.

*The Jesus many of us grew up with – and still hear about

*Mel Gibson’s “The Passion of the Christ”

2. Jesus the Divine-Human and Thus a “Superhuman.” Usually goes with the first one. The earthly Jesus was more than human – he was also divine, super-human. Familiar and widespread.

*Jesus as “*Superman*”: quote from Robert Capon, *Hunting the Divine Fox*, p. 90

3. Jesus as a Great Teacher. Yes – but inadequate and often banal

II. A Historical-Metaphorical Way of Telling his Story. Affirmed by mainstream historical scholarship. **Its three foundations:**

(1) The gospels are *a developing tradition*, written in the last third of the first century. As such, they combine **memory and testimony**

(2) Much of their language is metaphorical: **memory and metaphor**

*Metaphor refers to the more-than-literal, more-than factual, meaning of language

(3) Distinction between **the pre-Easter and post-Easter Jesus**

*Pre-Easter: What Jesus was like before his death:

*Post-Easter: What Jesus became after his death:

***Two seemingly negative results:**

(1) Language referring to the exalted status of Jesus – as Messiah, Son of God, Lord, etc., is post-Easter testimony and does not go back to the pre-Easter Jesus

(2) So also language referring to the saving significance of his death is post-Easter

So: What was the pre-Easter Jesus like? His message, activity, intention?

III. My Sketch of the Pre-Easter Jesus

I. The Shaping of Jesus: The Importance of Context/Matrix

*Grew up in a Jewish peasant village in the Roman Empire

*A pre-modern domination system: politically, ruled by a few; economically, half to 2/3 of wealth went to the elites; religiously, legitimated by “royal” theology; and chronically violent (systemic violence and warfare)

2. The Shaping of Jesus: His Experience of the Sacred/God

*Jesus as a Jewish mystic. Mystics are people who have vivid and typically frequent experiences of God/the sacred, and who are deeply shaped by such experiences

3. A “Profile” of Jesus: Mystic, Healer, Wisdom Teacher, and Prophet

4. His Message/Activity: Proclaimer of “the Kingdom of God”

*His audience: primarily the peasant class, “the people”

“The Kingdom of God”: its centrality (Mark 1.15 – and “Ask any 100 scholars...”)

*It’s *for the earth*: the Lord’s Prayer

*It’s a *theo-political* metaphor, both religious and political. “Kingdom” as a political term/image in his world.

*It’s about what life would be like on earth under God’s kingship/lordship, instead of under the lordship of the powers that rule this world

*God’s kingdom is about *justice* (economic justice) and *peace* (non-violence as both means and goal)

*The Kingdom of God is “the dream of God” for the earth, God’s passion for the earth

5. Execution and Resurrection. Jesus’ passion for the kingdom of God – his challenge to the powers that ruled his world and his advocacy of an alternative vision of how life in this world should be – led to his last week, execution, and vindication by God.

This is the political meaning of Good Friday and Easter; they have more than a political meaning, but not less

Concluding Comments:

1. The Christian Life: “Believing in Jesus”? Or “Following Jesus”?

*The *modern* (post 1600) meaning of “believing in Jesus” – to believe statements about him, biblical and doctrinal

*“Following Jesus” – discipleship – is quite different. To follow his way, his path, to follow him and his vision. And this is the pre-modern meaning of *believing* in Jesus: it meant “to be love” Jesus. To believe in Jesus is to be love him and follow him.

2. What Would His Message Be to Us?

*Center in God – the God of the Torah and Prophets

*Participate in God’s passion for the world. Change the world.

Love God, and love what God loves – the world.