

Who Is Jesus?
Christianity 101 part 3
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January 28, 2007

Luke 4:14-22 (The Message)

Jesus returned to Galilee powerful in the Spirit. News that he was back spread through the countryside. He taught in their meeting places to everyone's acclaim and pleasure.

He came to Nazareth where he had been reared. As he always did on the Sabbath, he went to the meeting place. When he stood up to read, he was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Unrolling the scroll, he found the place where it was written,

God's Spirit is on me;
he's chosen me to preach the Message of good news to
the poor,
Sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and
recovery of sight to the blind,
To set the burdened and battered free,
to announce, "This is God's year to act!"

He rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the assistant, and sat down. Every eye in the place was on him, intent. Then he started in, "You've just heard Scripture make history. It came true just now in this place."

All who were there, watching and listening, were surprised at how well he spoke. But they also said, "Isn't this Joseph's son, the one we've known since he was a youngster?"

I want to start this morning by asking you a rather simple question:
What do you know about Jesus?

Think for a moment — what do you know?

Now, I hope you understand that I just asked you a trick question.
Why is it a trick question? Because it really is two questions.

- ! What do we know historically about Jesus?
- ! What do we know about Jesus through faith.

Those are two very different questions. One is a question of history — what we can KNOW about Jesus from a historian's point a view.

The second is a question of faith. How we know Jesus from the point of view of faith — which may or may not be based on historical memory.

So, what do we know about the Jesus of history?

E.P. Sanders, The Historical Figure of Jesus 1993 writes:

“Most scholars who write about the ancient world feel obligated to warn their readers that our knowledge can be at best partial and that certainty is seldom attained. A book about a first-century Jew who lived in a rather unimportant part of the Roman empire must be prefaced by such warning. We know about Jesus from books written a few decades after his death, probably by people who were not among his followers during his lifetime. They quote him in Greek, which was not his primary language, and in any case the differences among our sources show that his words and deeds were not perfectly preserved. We have very little information about him apart from the works written to glorify him.”
(Preface p. xiii)

“Nothing survives that was written by Jesus himself. The more less contemporary documents, apart from those in the New Testament, shed virtually no light on Jesus’ life or death, though they reveal a lot about the social and political climate. The main sources for our knowledge of Jesus himself, the gospels in the New Testament, are, from the point of view of the historian, tainted by the fact that they were written by people who intended to glorify their hero.” (p. 3)

Sanders does suggest that we can know a number of things about Jesus.

There are no substantial doubts about the general course of Jesus’ life: when and where he lived, approximately when and where he died, and the sort of thing that he did during his public activity. . . . I shall first offer a list of statements about Jesus that meet two standards: they are almost beyond dispute; and they belong to the framework of his life, and especially of his public career. . . .

Jesus was born c. 4 BCE, near the time of the death of Herod the Great;

he spent his childhood and early adult years in Nazareth, a Galilean village;

he was baptized by John the Baptist;

he called disciples;

he taught in the towns, villages and countryside of Galilee (apparently not the cities);

he preached ‘the kingdom of God’;

about the year 30 he went to Jerusalem for Passover;

he created a disturbance in the Temple area;
 he had a final meal with the disciples;
 he was arrested and interrogated by Jewish authorities, specifically
 the high priest;
 he was executed on the orders of the Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate.

We may add here a short list of equally secure facts about the aftermath of Jesus' life:

his disciples at first fled;
 they saw him (in what sense is not certain) after his death;
 as a consequence, they believed that he would return to found the
 kingdom;
 they formed a community to await his return and sought to win
 others to faith in him as God's Messiah. (p. 10-11)

We have only one non-Biblical source about Jesus. It is written by a first century Jewish historian by the name of Flavius Josephus. What is fascinating about Josephus is that he was a "Benedict Arnold", what I mean is that he switched sides and joined forces with the Romans against his own Jewish brothers and sisters.

The only thing that Josephus writes about Jesus is:

At this time there appeared Jesus, a wise man. For he was a doer of startling deeds, a teacher of people who received the truth with pleasure. And he gained a following both among many Jews and among many of Greek {Gentile or non-Jewish} origin. And when Pilate, because of an accusation made by the leading men among us, condemned him to the cross, those who had loved him previously did not cease to do so. And up until this very day, the tribe of Christians (named after him) has not died out.

What is most interesting about Josephus is that it tells us how non-Christians saw Jesus. What does it tell us?:

- ! Jesus was a "wise man" — a teacher of wisdom.
- ! He did "startling deeds" — minimally, a reference to his reputation as a healer.
- ! He gained a following among Jews and Gentiles.
- ! He was crucified by order of the Roman governor after he was accused by "leading men" among the Jews.
- ! His followers continued to love him after his death.

- ! His followers became known as Christians and continued to exist when Josephus wrote near the end of the first century.

What about the Bible? What does the Bible tell us about Jesus?

Paul's letters are the oldest "Christian" documents that we possess, and they do not really talk about the life of Jesus. Paul does not seem interested in Jesus' earthly life at all.

The gospels are products of early Christian communities in the last third of the first century. As I shared two weeks ago:

1. The gospels are not a direct divine product as the notion of biblical inerrancy supposes
2. As documents written in the last third of the first century they are the result of a developing tradition.
3. Calling them community products means that the gospels were written from within and for early Christian communities.

- ! The gospels combine memory and testimony
They contain the communities' memory of the historical, earthly Jesus — the Jesus prior to his death and they contain their post-Easter faith proclamation of his significance.

In other words, they tell what Jesus meant to them and the time of their writing.

One of our challenges is to discern what is earlier (the voice of Jesus) and what is later (the voice of the community.)

- ! Much of the language of the gospels is metaphorical, in other words not to be taken literally.

Jesus did not see himself literally as bread, or literally as light; but rather metaphorically as the bread of the world and the light of the world.

Why have I spent so much time telling you this?

Because people want to know.

They want to know who this Jesus is that we worship.

So if somebody — an non-Christian friend comes to you and says: “Show me Jesus?” What would you say?

Would you show them the Bible?

Would you show them a picture?

Would you show them a minister?

Would you show them Ridge Church, and the fellowship that is gathered here on a Sunday morning, and say that is where you can find Jesus?

Or is Jesus just a myth, a figment of somebody’s imagination.

So I ask you — If I say — Show me Jesus — WHAT WOULD YOU SHOW ME?

Maybe, just maybe, you would have the courage to point to yourself — you just might do that, if you were the spitin’ image of Jesus.

I know that doesn’t make any sense. But can you show me yourself, not because you know who Jesus is, but because Jesus lives in you.

Does Jesus live inside you? — because, my friends, there is nothing else.

Let me try and tell you this in another way.

Walter Wangerin is a great story teller, and I want to tell you one of his stories. He says it is a true story, but I am not sure that really matters.

When Walter was a young boy, his mother once said to him: “Wally, you’re the spitin’ image of you grandpa.”

And Walter thought: “I wondered what the spit was.”

Walter’s grandpa used to spit tobacco, so did that mean that when he grew up that he would be able to spit tobacco like his grandpa. Was that the spit?

His grandfather was the caretaker of a cemetery in St. Louis, and when Wally would visit him in his office he would spit tobacco.

Wally knew that his grandpa loved him and he would always put on a show for him.

He would lean back and spit — a beautiful brown wad — just like a comet.

"Mom said I'm the spitin' image of my grandpa, and I wondered if that meant that when I grew up I would be able to spit tobacco like him?"

Grandpa would tell Wally the secrets of life and death

! when you died your hair and nails continued to grow

! when a body was cremated, sometimes it would sit up and scream

A day came when Mom said that we needed to go and see grandpa, I was confused because we never went to see grandpa in the fall.

But you see grandpa was dying

And it felt like I did something wrong

Grandpa was dying

! nobody said what dying was

! nobody said what you do for dying

As they rode to St. Louis, Walter said that he sat in the car, very small

! nobody said what dying was

! nobody said what you do for dying

When they arrived, they were ushered into the house and it was very quiet

! nobody said what dying was

! nobody said what you do for dying

The kids were all sent into the living room while the parents were in the other room

! nobody said what dying was

! nobody said what you do for dying

After a while grandpa called Walter in to see him — and he walked very small — his mother walked him to the bedroom door, but then let him go in on his own. And Walter asked his grandfather — "Is this what dying is, that you are no longer the same?"

His grandfather didn't say a word, then he smiled, and he told Walter what you do for dying — he didn't tell him, he showed him — they shook hands — and Walter said that he knew what dying was — for Grandpa had invited him in and he was a part of it.

Walter knew what you did for dying — and it was OK.

Two weeks later, the call came. As the phone rang, he said he knew what it was. As his mother talked on the phone, tears began running down her face,

and she kinda slid down the wall. But Walter knew what to do. He knew what dying was and he knew what you do for dying. So he walked over to his mother — not small, but BIG, because he knew what to do — and he reached out and shook her hands. His mother grabbed him and pulled him close and said: “Walter, you’re the Spitin’ Image of your Grandpa” — and I wondered what the spit was!

Many years later, Walter was visiting with an African American woman, she had just lost her husband, and in the midst of their conversation they were talking about her son Arthur. And she said that Arthur is the spitin’ image of his dad.

“SPIT, Did you say spit?” “No,” she replied, “I said spitin,” and there is a big difference!

It’s not spit — it is the way that southerners say spirt. You are not the spit image of somebody, you are the spirit and image of somebody.

And at that moment Walter realized that he didn’t just look like his grandpa, but that his grandpa lived in him. His spirit was a part of him. He was the spirit and image of his grandpa.

So when I ask you to SHOW ME JESUS, if you are the spirit and image of Jesus then you can show me yourself. If you have been drawn into Jesus life, by his death and a profound handshake — you just might point to yourself.

If it is the spirit of Jesus that is within you!