

# DOES JESUS MATTER ANY MORE?

*David Boulton, SoF NZ conference, September 2009*

I bring you greetings from SoF UK and SoFiA Queensland, whose conferences I have just had the pleasure of attending. One of the delights of being at a Sea of Faith meeting, whether in England, Australia or New Zealand, is encountering a wonderful diversity of viewpoints. We are a very ecumenical gang – united in our differences. Which prompts me to tell the story of the ecumenical gathering where someone rushes in shouting “The building’s on fire!”

The Methodists immediately gather in a corner and start a prayer meeting.

The Baptists cry out, “Where’s the water?”

The Congregationalists shout “Everybody for themselves!”

The Presbyterians mumble “No problem! We are the brands predestined to be plucked from the burning.”

The Fundamentalists bellow “Flee from the wrath to come! - Matthew 3:7”

The Salvation Army make a joyful noise, praising God for the blessing fire brings.

The Plymouth Brethren send the women out to tackle the fire while they get on with splitting.

The Lutherans nail a notice to the door giving 95 reasons why the fire is not justified.

The Quakers say they will not be moved till moved by the Spirit.

The Unitarians get up, and both leave in different directions.

The Roman Catholics form a procession and march out in grand style.

The Anglicans... wake up.

The United Church Council of New Zealand appoints a chairperson who will in due course arrange for a committee to look into the matter.

The Sea of Faith Network argues that fire is a human concept without objective reality, and should be understood as metaphorical, symbolic and expressive.

Don Cupitt whispers to his neighbour, “There’s another book in this!”

But I digress...

I recently published a book called *Who on Earth was Jesus?: The Modern Quest for the Jesus of History*. I've been peering over the shoulders, as it were, of contemporary scholars and Jesus detectives, watching them at work as they sort out their sources, subjecting the texts to critical analysis, correlating the documentation with social, anthropological and other contextual information, and, of course, arguing among themselves as to what it all means. Perhaps this may remind you of that wonderful cartoon, now very popular as a greetings card, in which a woman opens her door to an earnest young man who asks "Have you found Jesus?" And as we look closer we see a pair of sandals sticking out at the foot of the curtains... Where, then, has the real Jesus been hiding?

Who on Earth was Jesus? is one question, but there's another even more important one: Who on Earth *is* Jesus? Or, more bluntly, what the hell does it matter? Modern critical scholarship has separated out the historical human Jesus from the divine Christ of Faith. So, if the historical Jesus is not Almighty God, and does not speak with divine authority, what on earth does a late Iron Age teacher in an obscure corner of the long-defunct Roman empire usefully have to say to those of us who live in the post-modern Space Age a couple of millennia after his death? If the best our brightest critical minds can manage by way of bringing us the gist of Jesus' authentic message is a hypothetical *Q* that offers us no more than a glimpse of his vision, and that hedged about with scholarly qualifications and downright disagreements, don't we have to ask, Is it worth the candle? Is Jesus worth standing up for?

That's the question I'm going to put to you. I'm inviting you to share the hard work with me as we prepare to go interactive. I want you to imagine yourselves transported from a lecture hall to a courthouse. You are the jurymen and jurywomen, 140 good men and women and true. Does Jesus matter anymore? You are about to hear the arguments, for and against. And when we've done, you are going to deliver your verdict.

I shall argue first, to the best of my ability, and with all due sincerity, why you should find that Jesus is best relegated to our past, and has nothing of significance to offer our present or shape our future. Then I'll switch from prosecution to defence, and try and persuade you that Jesus, the wholly human Jesus, does matter after all. More than that, that two thousand years after his death, there is a profound sense in which Jesus lives, and - get this! - Jesus saves! Then you will retire, ponder your verdict and deliver it, whereupon I shall either pronounce Jesus free without a stain upon his character, or reach for the black cap.

## **The case, then, for the prosecution: Jesus is irrelevant.**

Jesus lived two thousand years ago, a child of what in the eastern Mediterranean was still the late Iron Age. His was a small world in a three-tiered universe: a flat disc of Earth sandwiched between Hell in the dark depths below and Heaven beyond the bright blue sky. In Heaven dwelt the God of Israel, surrounded and served by his holy angels. Its mirror image, the dark Underworld, was the home of evil spirits. Man had his dwelling-place in the filling of the sandwich, a piggy-in-the-middle destined to be a plaything of supernatural forces from above and below. Man was never free from the attentions of God and his angels, and the Devil and his demons. This was an enchanted world, where unseen forces were forever shaping a person's life and destiny: a world of ghoullies and ghosties and long-legged beasties and things that go bump in the night. But a world, too, of epiphanies, of inner voices, of daily encounters with Providence. Jesus was a child of his time, of his place, of his ethnic origins, of the religious and cultural traditions into which he was born.

His was a very young world: perhaps four thousand years old, a mere seventy generations since Adam was made out of dust on the sixth day of the creation of the universe. And it was a very small world, barely mapped beyond the Mediterranean, the "Sea in Middle Earth".

Jesus' world was a pre-scientific world. Medicine, for all but the elite, was in the hands of holy men, the spiritual healers and exorcists who manned the rudimentary health services. Physics, chemistry and biology were unknown disciplines. Jesus spoke a northern dialect of Aramaic. It is doubtful whether he was literate, or whether he had any knowledge of Greek or Latin, or of other cultures beyond his Jewish horizons. Intellectually as well as geographically, his was a tiny, restricted world.

In the two thousand years since his death, that world has been transformed. Exploration and discovery, the printing revolution, the Enlightenment, the scientific, industrial and technological revolutions, the democratic revolution; revolutions in our knowledge and understanding of cosmology, geology, medicine, psychology, religion, philosophy, communications, trade and commerce, not to mention the evolution of species, women's rights, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights... we could spend a whole weekend adding to the list.

From the Iron Age of Jesus' time we have passed through the Imperial Age, the Dark Ages, the Feudal Age, the Mercantile Age, the Early-Modern Age, the Modern Age, the Postmodern Age, the Space Age... **We live in a very different world, and in every sense a vastly bigger world, than the one that Jesus knew and understood!**

Just think about it. The least educated man or woman in this room knows more than Jesus ever knew or could possibly imagine about sickness and health, thunder and lightning, the origin and size of sun, moon, stars and galaxies, and the structure of each little flower that opens, each little bird that sings.

And everyone who is prepared to do a bit of reading can know more than Jesus ever knew even about his own world, his own time, and his own culture. Did Jesus know that the world is round? That it extended far beyond the known boundaries of his day? Did he have the capacity to distinguish between the history and the mythology that made up the Jewish tradition? Did he know one tenth of what modern Old Testament scholars know about the making of the Jewish scriptures that shaped his human values?

What can a peasant sage who lived two thousand years ago, was probably illiterate, appears to have known nothing of the classical traditions of Greek philosophy that preceded him, and certainly knew nothing of Christianity, Islam, Enlightenment humanism or any of the great world-wide traditions that were to follow him – **What practical use is he to us today?**

A good man, no doubt, according to his lights. Charismatic. A fearless fomenter of righteous discontent who was cruelly executed for his troubles. But a man bound by the limitations of his day and age. Two thousand years later, in a very different world, the world of electricity and nuclear energy, of rocket science, heart transplants and the internet, isn't it time to move on? A Jesus so theologised and mythologised, so re-worked by priests and power-elites for their own ends, so overlain with dogma, tradition, piety, sentimentality and ruthless misinformation – how can this blast from the past speak to our condition?

I put it to you that Jesus doesn't matter any more. Jesus is dead. Let him rest in peace, as I rest my case!

Now let me switch roles and put to you...

### **The case for the defence: a relevant Jesus.**

Let's be clear about what I'm now proposing to defend. I'm not talking about the Christ of Faith, Paul's Lord Jesus Christ, John's Eternal Word who "was in the beginning with God and was God", or the King of King and Lord of Lords of the Apocalypse, riding into battle on a white charger to judge and make war, his eyes as a flame of fire, his head crowned with many crowns, his vesture dipped in blood, a double-edged sword in his clenched teeth. And I'm not talking about the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, the Lamb of God blood-sacrificed to atone for every little fib you ever told, and every naughty little gleam in your wandering eye. Nor am I talking about any other human construct or theological creation.

The Jesus who, I will argue, matters today, still speaks to us today, is the Jesus conceived in an act of natural sexual intercourse between a jobbing carpenter and the girl who'd caught his fancy, and who duly arrived, not in a fabled cattle-shed in Bethlehem but most likely in a modest Nazareth bedchamber, some time towards the very end of Herod the Great's reign, emerging around 30 years later as a crowd-pulling wisdom teacher and natural healer who offended the respectable by consorting with village riff-raff, antagonised the Jewish authorities by refusing to stick to the rules, and scared the living daylights out of the local Roman power structure by promising (or perhaps I should say *threatening*) an alternative kingdom in which the mighty would be put down from their seats, the rich sent empty away, and the poor come into their blessing. Now there's a Jesus for you! A Jesus who, no doubt, was sometimes a very naughty boy, who could curse a poor innocent fig tree and shout abuse at holy hypocrites (that "whited sepulchre" taunt must have made him some powerful enemies!), but a Jesus who grew into a story-teller of genius, and a visionary with a world-wide reach.

I want to give you three reasons why this Jesus still matters. I'll list them, then develop each of them in turn.

- First, I shall argue that what we can reasonably authenticate as the message of Jesus 2000 years ago is as relevant to our world as it was to his. Yes, the world has indeed changed almost beyond recognition – but there are some things that haven't changed at all: the grotesque social injustices of poverty in a rich world, hunger amidst plenty, greed, the "Domination System" in all its varied forms.

- Then I shall argue that this message still has a visionary “saving power”, by which I mean the power to inspire, liberate and enable.
- Thirdly, I shall argue that if we are ever to challenge the churches’ conception of a superhuman Jesus, a misty-mystic Jesus, both a Friend for little children above the bright blue sky and the all-powerful Son of God who will return to judge saints and sinners “when the trumpet of the Lord shall sound and time shall be no more”, we shall find *our* trump card is the human Jesus of history.

So to my first argument, that what we can reasonably authenticate as the message of the historical Jesus is as relevant today as it was in his time.

Jesus challenged head-on the received wisdom of his day that it was the wealthy, the well-fed, the military, who were the legitimate powers that be. His alternative was simple and subversive: a just world would turn the tables to see not the wealthy but the poor, not the well-fed but the hungry, not the military but the peacemongers take possession of the kingdom. In a world turned upside down, the first would be last and the last would be first. Are we any nearer that desirable outcome today? Not much. But is it any less a desirable outcome than it was two thousand years ago?

Jesus wasn’t satisfied with conventional religious teaching that people should love their neighbours and do as they would be done by. He urged his followers to go the extra mile, to love their enemies, to do good to those who harmed them, to offer the other cheek, to put away the sword. In a world sinking into ever-deeper injustice and violence, isn’t it clear that his challenge to the Domination System of his own day is no less timely and necessary in the changed world of today?

Yes, of course we know more, our horizons are broader, we live in a world neither Jesus nor any of his contemporaries could ever have imagined. But human nature hasn’t changed, and life for millions remains nasty, brutish and short, which is why his core teaching stands the test of time.

My second argument centres on Jesus as poet and story-teller. The Jesus Seminar scholar Bernard Brandon Scott points to Jesus’ parable-form as the most original and authentic expression of his revolutionary purpose. “Jesus,” says Brandon Scott, “revolts in parable”. Each of his parables is a revolutionary prose poem revealing the nature of an alternative reality which he called the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God. Poets, said Shelley, are “the unacknowledged legislators of the world”. A modern poet, Seamus Heaney, argues that poetry at its best offers an imagined alternative to the default world, what he calls “a glimpsed alternative, a revelation of potential”. And, he continues, “once enshrined in the poem, [the revelation] remains

as a standard for the poet, so that he or she should then submit to the strain of bearing witness in his or her own life to the place of consciousness established in the poem”. A vision, then, which first captures the imagination, and then enables the transformation by which what is imagined is translated into action. This is the power of what I have called the “enabling dream”.

I see Jesus as a towering figure in the long utopian tradition: that is, the tradition of imagining an alternative way of living - brighter, better, more beautiful - and expressing it in story. Some scholars find tales with utopian characteristics in ancient Egyptian literature dating back to nearly 2000 BC, but utopianism as a distinct genre is said to have begun with Xenophon in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, who coined the word Paradise to describe the perfect Persian garden. Plato’s Republic was an early political expression. The Hebrew prophets dreamt of the utopian Day of the Lord when swords would be beaten into ploughshares and spears into pruning-hooks. Thomas More coined the word *Utopia* from a Greek construction meaning “no place”, which got mixed up with an almost identical Greek construction meaning “good place”, compounded as the “imaginary good place”. In the English literary tradition, Gerrard Winstanley’s “common treasury”, William Blake’s *Jerusalem*, William Morris’s socialist republic in his novel *News from Nowhere* and his long poem *The Earthly Paradise* – all these and more fill out the tradition. “Utopia”, writes John Carey in his Introduction to *The Faber Book of Utopias*, “is where we store our hopes of happiness”. The liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez calls Jesus’ kingdom of heaven “the Utopia that sets history in motion”: the archetypal “enabling dream”.

Yes, I’m well aware that Utopias are out of fashion. As W S Gilbert’s sham poet Reginald Bunthorne complains in *Patience*, “What’s the use of yearning for Elysian Fields when you know you can’t get ‘em, and would only let them out on building leases if you had ‘em?” Utopias become dystopias when they turn into prescriptive blueprints for an impossibly perfect society which airbrushes human fragility and fallibility out of the picture. But the authentic utopian vision, the enabling dream, is neither a blueprint nor an idle pipedream. Enabling dreams fire the imagination, alert us to new possibilities, show us alternative ways of living, of being human. They empower us to take action, to bear witness in our lives to the new consciousness established in our imagination. They do not rely on naive assumptions that “all will be well, and all manner of things will be well”, that ultimate justice is guaranteed, that perfection is attainable. All our experience tells us otherwise. But they energise that in the human spirit which inspires us to reach for the impossible, promising that paradise lies in the attempted journey rather than in a guarantee of safe arrival.

Where there is no vision the people perish. Jesus, in the kingdom teaching that is at the heart of his parables and wisdom sayings, offers “the Utopia that sets history in motion”. Isn’t the need for that vision, and the energy it generates or liberates, as urgent today as it was two thousand years ago?

And so to the last of my three arguments. Stated simply, it runs like this:

Jesus matters because what he was turned into, if not what he really was, is woven into the culture of what, until recently, we called Christendom. He is there in our literature, our art, our music. And, of course, some version of him is there in the churches dotted throughout our cities, towns, villages and hamlets - haloed, deified, spread-eagled, sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying, rising, enthroned, pale, humourless, androgynous. What would the historical Jesus, Jesus of Nazareth, son of Joseph and Mary, make of what the churches have made of him? Would he laugh, or would he cry? I imagine I hear him crying despairingly, “My friends, my companions, why have you forsaken me?”

Jesus matters because we need to undo the damage caused by those who have distorted his person, his message, and his revolutionary challenge. Robert Funk, founder of the Jesus Seminar, puts it starkly in his book *Honest to Jesus*:

“Give Jesus a demotion”, he urges. “He asked for it, he deserves it, we owe him no less. As divine son of God, co-eternal with the Father, pending cosmic judge seated at God’s right hand, he is insulated and isolated from his persona as the humble Galilean sage. In the former there is not much left of the man who loved to laugh and talk at table... who never seemed to maintain a trace of social distance in the conversation. A demoted Jesus then becomes available as the real founder of the Christian movement. With his new status he will no longer be merely its mythical icon, embedded in the myth of the descending/ascending, dying/rising lord of the pagan mystery cults, but of one substance with us all. We might begin by turning the icon back into an iconoclast.”

Yes, in an ironic paradox, it will take a *demotion* to *promote* the historical Jesus, to turn the icon into the iconoclast, to make the real Jesus worth standing up for, to make him matter. Funk sees how deification of Jesus by magic, mythology, and systematic theology, far from glorifying, actually trivialises him. Another eminent scholar, Marcus Borg, shows how by separating out the historical Jesus from the deified Christ of Faith, we find ourselves “meeting Jesus *again* - for the *first time*”!

I’ll end the case for the defence by quoting another scholar who began his ministry by preaching and writing about the Christ of Faith, then lost faith in the Christ of Faith,

and then, in his very latest book, published this year, reasserts that the wholly human Jesus matters more than ever. This is Don Cupitt in *Jesus and Philosophy*:

“Jesus’ message is genuinely remarkable. So grand and memorable is it that its historical outworking has continued to the present day. Indeed, no other moralist anywhere has had so wide and enduring an influence upon people’s social hopes”.

Jesus’ “redemptive ethics”, says Cupitt, is “concerned with spelling out and keeping alive the Dream of a better world. If the Dream is sufficiently vivid and attractive, it will shape our values and the orientation of our lives”.

So, does Jesus matter today? Does he still speak to our condition? Is his dream relevant in the modern secular world? You’ve heard the arguments, ladies and gentlemen of the jury. You are invited to confer, discuss and question, and then bring in your verdict.

*The 140 conference participants divided into 8 breakout groups, each constituting a “jury”. After considering the evidence they were invited, in Jesus Seminar style, to vote red, pink, grey or black on a scale where red is the most positive affirmation of a relevant Jesus and black a clear verdict of irrelevance. On aggregation, 74 red votes were cast, 42 pink, 6 grey and 2 black. Abstentions were counted as yellow votes!*

***The verdict: Jesus is relevant. Jesus matters. He’s still worth standing up for!***