

Hamilton Sea of Faith Middle Eastern Meal - June 20, 2008.

(Jock Crawford)

Good evening everyone. On the back of your menus is printed an adaptation from an old sermon which may be familiar to some of you as it has had quite a lot of exposure over the 82 years since it was first published.*

This succinct piece of prose distills what was known of Jesus of Nazareth and underscores the effect his unique birth, life and death has had on our western culture in a quite dramatic concluding paragraph.

We know very little of this enigmatic figure in an historical sense.

Nothing was written of him until some 20 years after his execution, firstly by Paul, who never met Jesus in real life, and subsequently by the writers of the four main gospels years later. It is helpful to remember that they were tumultuous and uncertain times and the various gospel accounts are understandably coloured by the facts of Roman occupation culminating in the destruction of the Hebrew temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD and the developing understandings, experiences and needs of the early church. As such, the gospels are not primarily *factual eyewitness accounts* as we understand the term today, but rather interpretations of remembered and retold stories as viewed through the eyes and experiences of the authors.

So what are some of the deductions that may reasonably be made regarding Jesus as a human being, particularly in the light of biblical scholarship over the last 30 years or so?

- He was a Jew, the first-born to a young mother who was protected from scandal by betrothal to one, Joseph, whose intervention in the circumstances would have saved her from the social ostracism – perhaps even stoning – in those days attaching to a victim of possible seduction or even rape.
- Jesus, as a youngster, may not have ever known who his biological father was. Is that the reason he became so closely attuned to his ‘Father in Heaven’?
- Although tradition has it that he worked as a carpenter from youth until the beginning of his ministry at around the age of 30, he may well have attended some school of higher learning for a period.
- He developed a sharp mind and had a wry sense of humour. He used these to good effect during an itinerant life as a preacher and healer, accompanied by a motley band of disciples for two or three years before his arrest.
- He had a special relationship with Mary Magdalene who was accorded the privileges of a widow at the time of his death and burial.
- Although a practising Jew with a consummate knowledge of the scriptures, his life and teaching contrasted with and challenged the accepted social and religious mores of the time.
- His ultimate challenge was made in Jerusalem when he organised and led a protest march riding a donkey in defiance of the well equipped Roman

occupation forces deployed to ensure there was no local unrest at the time of a major festival.

- He was executed as a common criminal as a result of the disquiet his actions gave the ruling religious and secular authorities.

The accretions to Jesus' simple twofold message of 'loving God' with passion and integrity and treating others with compassion have almost obliterated his humanity.

In one of the great ironies of history, Constantine, the then Roman leader of the very empire which had executed him, presided over the Council of Nicea in 325 AD which put an official end to argument and debate about the divine nature of Jesus and decreed the circumstances of his birth and who he was from the predominant theological position of the time. It also introduced a measure of imperial control over the church. The resulting combined power of church and state had profound effect on the development of Western civilisation for over 1500 years as a result, much of it beneficial but certainly not all.

Over the centuries distortions to the Christian faith, often backed by imperial power, have led to terrible excesses like the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, even the invasion of Iraq in our own time. The simple faith he espoused with wisdom and lived by example has often been ignored or twisted and manipulated to serve interests of power and wealth, both ecclesiastical and secular, which have exploited, plundered, desecrated and killed.

In spite of the inclusive way Jesus related to others, particularly those on the margins of society, many have been denigrated or ostracised by parties loudly proclaiming their unswerving 'Christian' principles. Women were treated as second-class citizens from the time a patriarchal early church sidelined Mary Magdalene and her fellow disciples until modern times; left-handed people were once burned at the stake and those of differing sexual orientation can to this day have their talents spurned and suffer exclusion and vilification. Odd cults which emphasise greed and/or exclusivity and which are the very antithesis of Jesus' teaching and example, have gained significant unthinking support, some even in our own country, and have provided their leaders with wealth and political power on a disturbing scale and denigrated the term 'Christian' to the acute embarrassment of those who revered it.

In spite of such aberrations and negativity there are millions who still acknowledge some claim on their lives and how they should live them due to the example of the man from Nazareth. Biblical scholarship and research is helping to distinguish and authenticate the historical Jesus. By increasing our understanding of the life and times of this most significant human being we are helped to identify our own ultimate concerns, find a way to follow and truth we need to know. A Christ of faith who can be understood with some integrity in the 21st century without the prescribed recitation of a 4th century Nicene Creed may thus be revealed.

Tonight, in this our southern hemisphere winter with its promise of springtime to follow, let us remember that solitary life as he asked us to do when we share bread and wine together.

*

ONE SOLITARY LIFE

Here is a man who was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another village. He worked in a carpenter shop until he was thirty. Then for three years he was an itinerant preacher.

He never owned a home. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family. He never went to college. He never put His foot inside a big city. He never traveled two hundred miles from the place He was born. He never did one of the things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials but himself...

While still a young man, the tide of popular opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. One of them denied him. He was turned over to his enemies. He went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed upon a cross between two thieves. While he was dying his executioners gambled for the only piece of property he had on earth - his coat. When he was dead, he was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend.

Nineteen long centuries have come and gone, and today he is a centerpiece of the human race and leader of the column of progress.

I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, all the navies that were ever built; all the parliaments that ever sat and all the kings that ever reigned; put together, have not affected the life of man upon this earth as powerfully as has that one solitary life

This essay was adapted from a sermon by Dr James Allan Francis in "The Real Jesus and Other Sermons" © 1926 by the Judson Press of Philadelphia (pp 123-124 titled "Arise Sir Knight!").