



## Jesus for Today

By [James D. G. Dunn](#)

What difference does Jesus of Nazareth make for Christian faith and life? The question directs us to the Jesus who came from Nazareth in Galilee, who preached and healed in the land of Israel during the late twenties or early thirties of the first century, and who was crucified in Jerusalem at the order of the Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate. We can include the firm Christian belief that this Jesus was raised from the dead three days later. But there we had better stop. To extend the question to include the exalted Lord of Paul, the "priest for ever" of Hebrews, the Christ of the creeds, "God from God, light from light," and the like would require more than one article. And it is important anyway that we give particular attention to the Jesus of Galilee, to the thirty-year focus of his life and the three-year focus of his ministry. For if we cannot speak meaningfully of that Jesus, then whatever else we want to say of the post-Easter Jesus will be that less meaningful. A Christ of faith who does not fit with Jesus of Nazareth is that much less capable of commanding the assent of faith.

It is also important that Christian faith continues to be anchored in the real history of Jesus of Nazareth. The temptation is always present for Christians to find the Jesus they want—a Jesus who taught the ideals they believe in, a Jesus who meets their emotional and social needs, a Jesus who would have been a good twentieth-century American or European (or African or Asian). But a Jesus thus reconstructed in our own image cannot make much difference to us and may simply be a tool to reinforce our own prejudices and to justify our own more dubious practices. It is the Jesus who made a difference in first-century Palestine that we need to

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keep before us. A modernized Jesus will be unable to keep us honest. Of course, an encounter with the Jesus of Nazareth through the pages of the New Testament will usually require some careful historical study. The past is very different from the present. First-century Palestine is a very different society from our own. But without such study, "Jesus of Nazareth" may simply be a phantom of our own imagining, an idol carried in procession to bless our political philosophies. Unless we recognize that Jesus of Nazareth is different from us, he cannot make a difference to us.

What, then, can we say about Jesus of Nazareth that indicates the difference he can still make to people living in a very different age and culture? In the space available, I can only outline the three most important answers to that question.

## JESUS THE TEACHER

Whatever else we can say about Jesus of Nazareth, this we can say: He was a great teacher. Even though he had had no formal training (so far as we can tell), "teacher" was the title by which he was most commonly addressed. The Gospels also give us a clear impression of his teaching style. We need only recall the many short, pithy sayings (wise sayings) that we find in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), or the vivid parables such as we find in Matthew 13 or Luke 15. The authority and forcefulness of his teaching were evidently often remarked upon (for example, Mark 6:2; 11:28). The retention of so much of that teaching in the Gospels themselves indicates clearly that he was what would later be called a spellbinder.

When we ask the "So what?" question (What difference does this make for us today?) an answer can be given in three parts.

First, there is the matter of his style. No doubt this was a large part of the secret of his success. He was a communicator par excellence. Here are no complex philosophical treatises or theological discourses, using obscure technical terms and purporting to explain the mysteries of the cosmos. Rather, we find a whole series of powerful metaphors and memorable parables that catch attention and are readily retained in the memory. And all are drawn from everyday experience—salt and light, birds and flowers, house building, market places, a woman losing a coin, special celebratory meals, greed and debt, and many others.

Here is a reminder and a model to us of effective communication. A picture painted with a few brush strokes is so often more memorable than a hundred propositions. Moreover, the use of images drawn from everyday life speaks of what today would be called the sacramental universe. For those who have ears to hear and eyes to see, nature and social relationships can speak clearly of the surprising grace of God and contain lessons of human folly and responsibility eloquent in their challenge to conscience and commitment. For societies drowning in a flood of technical jargon or gnawing at the hard crusts of stale dogmas, there may be life and liberation even in this recollection of Jesus the teacher.



Second, there are many particular teachings Jesus gave that still inform perspectives and nourish spirits. Matthew 6 contains several. For example, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them" (Matt. 6:1). The Lord's prayer in Matthew 6:9-13. "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth.... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt. 6:19-21). "Can any of you by worrying

add a single hour to your span of life?" (Matt. 6:27). "Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness . . ." (Matt. 6:33). Or we might think of the summary of the law in the twin command to love God with all your being and your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:29-31), still as succinct and as challenging a summation of religious duty as we can find. Or again the parable of the Good Samaritan, which Luke attaches to the same teaching in Luke 10:30-37, with its powerful protest against a religious bureaucracy more concerned with maintaining the system than meeting defiling human need (the priest and the Levite "pass by") and against racial prejudice and bigotry (it is the despised Samaritan who is the hero). The retelling of that parable with different characters down through history, to address the changing face of human apathy and discrimination, attests its continuing power to make us different and for the better.

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Third, we might mention the role model Jesus provides as a controversialist. That he was caught in dispute with some of the factions of the period, particularly Pharisees, is one of the more consistent features of the Gospel accounts. We may recall, for example, the disputes about the sabbath day (Mark 2:23-3:5), about divorce (Mark 10:2-9), and about the propriety of paying taxes to the Roman Emperor (Mark 12:14-17). What is striking in these accounts is the way Jesus seems to have cut through the detail of argument and counter-argument, of interpretation and counterinterpretation, to some fundamental principle, a principle that informed his attitudes and practice in a direct way, but that also could be lived out in the light of the circumstances of particular situations. In other words, a principle and not an unbending rule.

Thus, in the sabbath day dispute, he cuts through the argument about what work may or may not be permitted on the sabbath and justifies his conduct by reference to the purpose for which the sabbath was given (Mark 2:27). Likewise, in the following episode, Jesus cannot conceive of any rule or tradition that would prevent him from doing good or saving life on the sabbath (Mark 3:4). In the discussion on divorce, he cuts back through the dispute about Moses' ruling on divorce (Deut. 24:1-4) to the primary institution and purpose of marriage (Gen. 2:24). And on the



issue of paying taxes to Caesar, he responds with a classic integration of priorities and practicalities: God always comes first, even if in the real world Caesar will always be able to claim his dues (Mark 12:17).

It is no wonder, then, that the Gospels stand so firmly at the head of the Christian scriptures. For they are not merely interesting historical records of an interesting historical life. The teachings they preserve of Jesus of Nazareth still speak with "gospel effect" to subsequent generations. The portrayal of Jesus as teacher, the way he taught and what he taught, can all still function for today as "word of God," can still make a

difference for the seeker after truth, can still provide a pattern for a life of humane and mature quality.

## THE MAN WHO SHOWS US WHAT GOD IS LIKE

Christianity, of course, has never been content to think of Jesus simply as a teacher, however profound and life-changing his teaching was. What made Christianity distinct, and all too soon caused Christianity and Judaism to go their separate ways, were the claims made by Christians with regard to Christ himself. Initially, it would seem that the first followers of Jesus experienced and expressed their faith in the crucified Jesus by reference to his resurrection and exaltation to heaven. Thus, we find in the sermons in Acts, for example, that the resurrection of Jesus is the central and climactic claim repeatedly made in the earliest evangelism (Acts 2:24-36; 4:2, 10-12; 10:40-43; etc.). Likewise in Paul, the earliest of the New Testament writers, the most frequent title for Jesus is "Lord," denoting the status accorded to Jesus at his resurrection and exaltation (e.g., Rom. 10:9; Phil. 2:9-11). And Paul's own missionary work and theology seem to have been thoroughly impressed by the conviction of Christ's coming again soon (e.g., 1 Cor. 4:9; 7:26-31; 16:22; 1 Thess. 4:17).

Quite soon, however, we find the first Christians taking what seems an extraordinary step. They begin to talk about Christ's involvement in creation, Paul speaks of the "one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist" (1 Cor. 8:6). In Colossians 1: 15-17, Christ is praised as "the image of the invisible God ... in whom all things in heaven and on earth were created ... all things have been created through him and for him ... and in him all things hold together." Similarly, in Hebrews 1:2-3 we read of the Son "through whom he (God) also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of his very being. . . ." And in the unforgettable words of the prologue to John's Gospel, we are introduced immediately to "the Word" that was "in the beginning," was "with God" and "was God"; "all things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being" (John 1:1-3).

What on earth (or better, in heaven) was happening here? The subject does not seem directly relevant to our theme (Jesus of Nazareth). But since the Christ through whom creation happened is also the Jesus of Nazareth, presumably what is said about the one says something about the other. It might be argued that what Jesus became in resurrection and



exaltation is less directly relevant to our appreciation of Jesus of Nazareth, as marking what we might call a later phase in his career. But claims regarding Christ before he was Jesus of Nazareth presumably also say something about Jesus of Nazareth himself. So we need to give some attention to what we might call the pre-existent phase of Christ's career if we are to appreciate the significance such language attributes to the central phase—the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.

The great majority of New Testament scholars seem to be agreed that the language attributing a role to Christ in creation is drawn from the wisdom theology of the Old Testament and "intertestamental" Jewish literature. They are referring to the fact that, in Jewish theology in the centuries before Jesus, one of the most frequent ways of speaking of God's creating action was to say that he did so "through wisdom." For example, "The Lord by wisdom founded the earth" (Prov. 3:19). "Who is richer than wisdom who effects all things?" (Wisd. 8:5). "Wisdom through whom the universe came into existence" (Philo, *On Flight and Finding*, 109).

But what is this "wisdom?" Sometimes, it sounds like a personal being. Wisdom speaks in Proverbs 8:27-30: "When he established the heavens, I was there . . . beside him 'like a master workman (or little child).'" And

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Philo, the Jewish philosopher and near contemporary of Jesus, often speaks of Wisdom as "mother of all things." At other times, it sounds like a kind of substance or force throughout the universe, for example, Wisdom 7:25: "She (Wisdom) is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty." The resolution to the puzzle over such diverse imagery is probably that Wisdom was a way of speaking of God's wisdom, God's creative power, God's presence immanent in and throughout the universe. God as such cannot be perceived or comprehended by human mind or vision. But God has made God's self known and the character of God's creative activity in and as wisdom. Divine Wisdom is the measure of all wisdom. In other words, the Wisdom of God is a way of speaking about God insofar as God's self-revelation is made known in and through creation. The rationality evident in the make-up of the world is God's rationality. The Spirit of God, the Word of God, the glory of God, and so on, serve a similar function. They are not entities somehow separable from God, but God in God's self-revelation at various times and in various ways. We may note, for example, in the extensive description of Wisdom in Wisdom 10, it is God's activity in protecting the patriarchs and Israel that is attributed to Wisdom.



In the ancient world, this divine wisdom was generally seen as the key to righteous living. It was the secret of the good life. The longing for it is expressed in unforgettable terms in Job 28. But Israel was confident that they knew the secret. They knew where wisdom was to be found. God had given them divine wisdom in the Torah, the law of Moses. So, ben, Sira, after his great hymn in praise of Wisdom, concludes, "All this is the book of the covenant of the Most High God, the law that Moses commanded us... It overflows, like the Pishon, with wisdom" (Sir. 24:23-25). And Baruch similarly rejoices that the otherwise hidden wisdom has been given to Israel: "She is the book of the commandments of God, the law that endures for ever" (Bar. 4:1). In effect, they were saying to other seekers after a godly life: If you really want God's wisdom, we have it in

the Torah; you may discern it in creation, but you will perceive it no more clearly than in the law of Moses. Or to put it another way, they were claiming that divine Wisdom was now embodied in Israel's law. God's previously secret wisdom was made accessible in the Torah.

Against this background, it becomes clearer what the New Testament writers are doing when they use the language of Wisdom in reference to Christ. In a word, they are claiming for Christ what Jewish writers had already claimed for the Torah. The talk of Christ's agency in creation is primarily a claim for the revelatory significance of Christ. Christ ex-

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presses, embodies, indeed is the same divine wisdom that created the universe. Where Israel had concluded that the clearest expression of divine wisdom was in the Law, Christians concluded that the clearest expression of that same wisdom was now in Jesus of Nazareth. The claim is more or less explicit in John 1:17-18 and Hebrews 1:1-2. Where the apologists in Israel boldly claimed that God has given the divine wisdom to Israel in a book, Christians were soon claiming even more boldly that God's wisdom was given to humankind in a human being.

What this means can be put in surprisingly simple terms. Divine wisdom is a way of speaking of God. In the most profound analysis, the universe makes sense-God's sense. Consequently, the one who incarnates this Wisdom brings God to expression-a more graspable expression than hitherto. That is to say, Jesus shows us what God is like, as no other has done. All the universe speaks of God. The law and the prophets reveal God still more clearly. But the one who reveals God most clearly of all is Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus brings our understanding of God to clearest definition. Christians believe in a God who is like Jesus. He is the measure by which we distinguish true ideas of God from false.

This is why the key notes struck by Jesus in his ministry are so important-not just for our understanding of Jesus but for our understanding of God. When, for example, Jesus stresses that he came "to bring



good news to the poor" and "to call not the righteous but sinners" (Luke 4:18; Mark 2:17), that tells us about God's priorities. And John's Gospel can give a more developed portrayal of Jesus as the Son who reveals the Father and the "I am" precisely because this soon came to be seen as a, if not the, primary significance of his life on earth-to reveal God, to show what God is like. Such an insight does not apply merely to the thirty or so years of Jesus' life. For this Jesus of the A.D. 30s continues to provide a window into God, to reveal the human face of God, to serve as a norm and definition of the God in whom Christians believe, and still to show us what God is like.

## CONQUEROR OF DEATH

The third way in which we can speak of Jesus for today has traditionally been the most important, but also, surprisingly, is the most difficult. I refer to Jesus in his death and resurrection. The difficulty is reflected in the different emphases that different Christian traditions place upon this climax to the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

For some Christian traditions, it is Jesus in his death who has made and still makes the chief difference for humankind, -or -at least for those who believe in him. This is the conviction that Jesus' death was a sacrifice for sin, which makes atonement (at-one-ment) with God. It is a death that dealt once and for all with the problem of human sin and guilt, since it covered all that over and blotted it out. The texts that speak most clearly of this include Romans 3:25 ("God put [him] forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood"), Hebrews 9:11-12 ("Christ ... entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption"), and 1 John 2:2 ("he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world").

The problem experienced by many Christians unaccustomed to the imagery of animal sacrifice is how to make sense of this language today. How does the death of one person nearly two thousand years ago make any difference to my guilt now? Does God require a bloody sacrifice before he will forgive? Part of the problem is that the theological rationale of sacrifice and atonement in the Old Testament is never made explicit. So we are guessing a lot of the time. It is obviously insufficient simply to say that Jesus' death is an inspiring example of love going to the uttermost, though the New Testament does follow that line at least to some extent (e.g., Mark 10:43-45; John 15:13; Rom. 5:6-8). And certainly part of the solution must be to recognize the seriousness of human sin and that it requires radical surgery to cut it out of human flesh. But just how Jesus' death "works" as atonement remains obscure, and those who find the imagery of animal sacrifice offputting also find it less of a window into the full significance of Christ's death than it was when it was first framed. Nevertheless, there is something here that Christians do well to hang on to, not least in their prayers and worship.



The principal way in which Christians have in fact done so (hung on to the significance of Christ's death, I mean) is through the Eucharist, the simple ceremony that goes back to the night of Jesus' betrayal (Mark 14:22-25; etc.) and is among the earliest traditions of Christian worship known to us (1 Cor. 11:23-26). This, we might say, is a second way in which the death of Jesus still makes a difference for today. For the Lord's Supper is central in almost all Christian liturgy primarily because it focuses so sharply on the death of Jesus. The broken bread speaks of his broken body. The poured wine of his shed blood. As Paul puts it, "As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26). The enshrinement of Jesus' death in Christian liturgy thus, from the first, both attests the continuing significance of Jesus'

death and has provided a way of reappropriating it afresh for those who never knew Jesus personally or saw him die.

It is true, of course, sad to say, that the Eucharist remains a focus of Christian division rather than of Christian unity. Nevertheless, its importance and, indeed, its increasing importance for virtually all traditions speaks of its continuing potency. Why it is so potent remains also obscure. But the disputes over the theology are less important than the reality still experienced by generations past and millions present—a powerful inter-

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action of divine grace, human dependence, and effective symbol. In a way that we do not understand, but do not need to understand, the broken bread and the poured wine somehow bring an identification with the Jesus of Nazareth who spoke the words and died the death nearly two thousand years ago. And this identification still has the power to heal hurt and to reunite the broken pieces into the one body. Jesus in his death still makes a difference.

A third way in which the climax of Jesus' life makes a difference is somewhat easier to grasp. For, according to all Christian testimony and tradition, Jesus' death was not the end of him. The cross was not a glorious failure. Jesus was not left to his followers simply as a great tragic hero. From the first, and at the very heart of the gospel that first marked out the Christians, was the bold assertion that God had raised him from the dead. Some have argued that all we can speak about today is the rise of Easter faith, the surprising emergence of the belief in Jesus' resurrection. But the testimony is firm and unanimous from the beginning: The resurrection of Jesus was something that happened to Jesus and not simply to his disciples.

Here is a word at the heart of the Christian gospel. Jesus has conquered death. The vicious, enslaving nexus of sin and death has been broken.



This is central to Paul's argument in Romans 6: "For whoever has died is freed from sin ... death no longer has dominion over him"; therefore you can live as dead to sin and alive to God (Romans 6:7-11). More eloquently still, in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul underlines the significance of Jesus' resurrection: "If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain.... If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied" (1 Cor. 15:14-19). The hope rests foursquare on the fact that Christ has conquered the last enemy, death (15:26, 54-57). Equally powerful in its own way is Hebrews 2 with its imagery of Jesus as the pioneer and advance guard who opens up the way through death for his brothers and sisters to follow him and thus destroys the power of death and frees "those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death" (Heb. 2:9-15).

Death still remains "the last enemy," a contradiction to those who cherish life, a defeat to those who wish to hang on to it come what may, a shutting out of the light and closing in of the darkness that still enslaves with fear. But Jesus has conquered death. Here again, our limited vision can hardly see far enough; death is a thick and impenetrable veil. Here again, our mind can hardly begin to comprehend what life beyond death means. But here again, the gospel of Jesus' death and resurrection can, still work its power to feed faith and inspire hope.

Jesus of yesterday can still be Jesus for today. Even on what we might call the lowest plausible assessment of him, he is still an epochal figure, one of a very small handful of individuals whose life has changed history and provided a beacon and an icon for countless millions. Even on that level, his teaching alone can hardly fail to command respect. And when we add in the evaluation of his significance by his first followers, of his life, his death, and of what happened thereafter, the claims are mind blowing and worthy of the most serious attention. Christian preachers and apologists need not be embarrassed by the amazing character of these claims; they attest the significance of Jesus. And even if we cannot comprehend them fully ourselves, they pose a fascinating challenge to any serious enquirer after truth: Who was this Jesus of Nazareth and what was it he did that caused such claims to be made of him?

Not least important here is the way the three points of significance reviewed above hang together. For a Jesus who was merely a great teacher would probably not have been crucified. And there is no obvious reason why a Jesus who was simply a great hero would have been thought to have conquered death as no other hero before him had. Or again, a Jesus who incarnates God's Wisdom but who also is subjected to one of the most horrific of human executions (crucifixion) presumably still embodies that wisdom in his death as well as his life. The Christianity at whose heart lies this Jesus can be reduced neither to a philosophy or an ethical system, nor to a triumphalism or strategy for success. The one who came to bring good news to the poor and to call the sinner is also the one in whom God was reconciling the world to himself through the cross. This Jesus is still for today.