

## Jesus' Vision & PFG's

It is common to hear a person say to themselves or to someone else "That wasn't very Christian!" Normally this comment means something they did or said 'wasn't very nice.' We often equate being like Jesus with being polite, not disturbing the peace, etc. There used to be talk of Jesus being 'little Jesus meek and mild!'. What does it mean to 'be like Jesus'? We could include some criteria from Jesus' own challenge: 'Love your enemies', 'turn the other cheek', 'welcome the stranger', 'forgive seventy times seven'. Jesus saw God present in the 'little' people, those who were marginalised and called us to do the same. So what does it really mean to say "that wasn't very Christian?"

When Jesus appears in John's gospel the first question he asks is 'What do you want?' This is in response to his finding two disciples of John the Baptist following him. When he finds Temple priests and other officials in Gethsemane about to arrest him, he asked them 'Who you looking for?' When he appears after his resurrection he asks this question again, 'Who are you looking for?' The progression of questions and their meaning is significant, and is an invitation to us, to search not for 'something' but for Jesus.

Jesus grew up on the edge of an international city with people of different cultures and languages. Sepphoris was only an hour's walk from Nazareth. Because it was being rebuilt, it would have attracted tradesmen from a variety of places. Joseph and Jesus would have found plenty of opportunity to find carpentry work there. We note in the gospel that Peter is identified as being from Galilee because of his distinctive accent which was influenced by Greek speakers. Jesus would have spoken Aramaic, some Hebrew law and scripture, and probably a lot of Greek. At least some of his disciples (such as Simon, Andrew and Philip) would have been 'Greek speakers'.

Jesus was baptised by and became an assistant to, John. After John the Baptist was arrested, Jesus left the desert, gave up baptising and started a new ministry of preaching and healing, in Galilee. He focused on the poor, the sinners, the sick; 'the lost sheep' of Israel. This was the result of contemplation and reading the signs of the times. Things were different from John's time. Possibly Jesus had not preached in Galilee before because it was his own territory ("prophets are not accepted"). It is clear from Matthew 11 that Jesus was not doing what John had expected of him. Jesus began to criticise the law and associate with tax collectors and sinners, such as people with forbidden trades. This was bad enough, but to say that such people were good in God's eyes went totally against Jewish teaching.

Jesus refers to himself being derided as a 'drunkard and glutton' (Mt 11:19). This was a technical term used in Deut 21:21. It means rebellious and disobedient. Such a person was to be taken outside the city and put to death by stoning! Jesus was not a priest or scribe, but a peasant layman who took on the role of prophet.

The global Roman Empire and Greek culture influenced the rich and powerful, and many of them lived lives of luxury and decadence. Carpenters and fishermen were poor and they were exploited and oppressed by the Romans, by the Jewish leaders and by rich landowners. Their increasing debt led to a spiral of violence as they sought unsuccessfully to overcome their oppression

Owners had to contribute labour and provide seed, food, and fodder and for next year's crop. He needed reserve money for births, death and marriage parties, for the purchase of new farm equipment and he had to pay taxes which were sometimes 40% and 60%. If he had a bad harvest and was forced off his land, sometimes he had no choice but turn to trades that were forbidden to Jews.

A Jew was not as helpful an employee as others because he was forbidden to work on the Sabbath. Many were forced to disobey this law in order to gain employment. These people were victims, not criminals, and that's how Jesus accepted them. By doing so, he was in opposition to the law. John had been calling people back to 'authentic Jewish life'. Jesus saw a deeper need. Jesus knew the people's basic goodness and the burdens they were under. He was moved with compassion for them, He knew his Father God was too.

The priests controlled temple worship. They insisted on animals being sacrificed. People had to purchase these animals to fulfil their legal obligations, so the Temple was a place of flourishing trade from which the priests benefited. Jesus challenged the corruption of the priests. He was more impressed by a poor widow putting a small coin in the treasury box than with the magnificent Temple in Jerusalem.

Jesus became proactive. He chose synagogues and the Sabbath day, to publicly challenge the teaching of the elders. In a synagogue he called out a man with the withered arm. Jewish law permitted an action to save life on the Sabbath, but only if necessary. Jesus said 'No'. There is no waiting with God. God heals every day.

For him, personal virtue, social position or possessions didn't matter. Faith mattered. He didn't ask people to change and then follow; He just said 'Follow me'. People of religion were scandalized by his free mixing with sinners, his apparent disregard of the seriousness of sin, his permissiveness towards tradition and his free and easy way of treating God. He did not make authority his truth, he made truth his authority. He was driven by a profound experience of compassion and he developed a solidarity with people from every walk of life. Even his enemies admitted about him, "we know that the rank of a person means nothing to you".

In Jesus' world, a Samaritan and a shepherd could be good; a shepherd could even leave 99 sheep to look for 1 that was lost; a father could make himself stupid by partying on the return of a worthless son. Precious seed could be thrown carelessly among thorns, on rocky ground and on pathways. It went against everything the elders believed, and it sounded foolish - but that is what Jesus implied God was like.

Jesus was passionate that all humans are equal in dignity and worth. He treated beggars, the lame and crippled, with as much respect as those given high rank or status. He ignored the custom that considered women and children as inferior. He encouraged people to voluntarily 'go down the ladder' by seeking the lowest place, and advised his disciples to be like a child who has no rank or status.

Jesus spoke of a justice born of generosity. He told the story of the vineyard workers who received a generous day's pay despite many of them working entirely different hours. While the pay was generous, some are envious that others received greater generosity.

The late workers had been unable to find employment and presumably their family needs would have been greater. In the same way, the elder brother in the prodigal son story could not be generous. He would have preferred to see his brother punished than to be forgiven. This attitude does not reflect God's way of loving.

Jesus spoke of turning the other cheek instead of seeking revenge, of loving one's enemies, of doing good to those who hate you, blessing those who curse you, and forgiving others seventy times seven. More challenging were his words about the rich and poor. He proclaimed the opposite to popular belief. "Blessed are the poor", he said. How fortunate they were, not to be among the rich and wealthy. The rich will find it hard to live in the kingdom where everything will be shared.

They will be like camels trying to get through the eye of a needle. The poor will share gladly, they already do! He allowed God to break out of the captivity of tradition and institution. He said God isn't impressed by personal virtue or status, nor put off by your sins. All God wants is faith and then God can act! If you ask you will receive, if you seek you will find and if you knock, the door will be opened for you. Being anxious about yourself blinds you to the abundance that the kingdom offers. Faith leads to truth, and truth sets you free.

He used his meals with people to speak of the future in terms of the joy of a great banquet to which all are invited, all made welcome and no one felt excluded. In Judaism sinners were outsiders and forbidden to share meals with faithful Jews. For Jesus there were no outsiders. The feeding of the 5000 is a reminder that God can feed all of his people. This was Jesus dream; the kingdom when it has arrived.

He recognised that His Father makes the sun shine and the rain fall on the just and unjust, so he learned to love the just and unjust, including his enemies and those who persecuted him. Jesus' experience of his 'abba' included the awareness that God was a loving 'abba' to every human being. 'Abba' expresses intimacy. It is a warm, unconditional and totally dependable love with which God loves and forgives all men, women and children.

Jesus saw God's reign as that of a loving father who forgives his prodigal son unconditionally. There is no retribution or punishment, no concern to hear what his son has done. He simply wants to celebrate with his family which has been reunited. Jesus' image of God's kingdom was a happy loving household, not a conquering empire.

For this kingdom to emerge, it needs to begin from below, with the poor, sinners, lost and outcast. They can become brothers and sisters who care for and share with one another. To be a member of this family, Jesus challenged, one has to give up preference of one's own particular family. An exclusive love for one's family is a form of group selfishness. The new community will be made up of those who love one another. Not everyone will respond, but they are always invited. This kingdom is a present reality, not something we sit back and wait for. It has arrived among us. It is a mustard seed that will grow into something bigger.

Jesus was considered a failure, but his willingness to fail revolutionised the spirituality of the time, because his failure became a triumph.

He taught 'anyone who saves/his her life will lose it, and anyone who loses his/her life, will save it'. If we are unwilling to give up our lives for others, we are already dead. When we give up our lives for others, we are alive.

It is obvious why Jesus could be considered a failure. He had been rejected by his neighbours, and his family thought he had gone mad. His disciples never seemed to understand his message. To those who were devout he was irreligious; to the learned he was untrained; to the revolutionary zealots he was too idealistic and not anti-Roman.

To the priests he was an interfering layman who threatened their authority; to the Romans he was a cause of unrest. In the world of that time, (not so different from the Middle East today) full of faction and intrigues, he eventually disappointed every group. He promised a great deal but he could not fulfil it. He had shown a glimpse of living another way, but it was finished. He was betrayed, abandoned, condemned, humiliated and defeated. He suffered the horrible death of crucifixion. Throughout it all he virtually remained silent. He had said all there was to be said! His followers gathered in fear & remembered what Jesus had said and done. They could only be consoled by the fact that his dream could never have worked anyway. They talked of their former lives. Peter said "I'm going fishing". He was going back to his old life.

What happened then ? We can never know, but whatever it was, it transformed them. They knew that Jesus lived - that His promise was true. He was alive and his executioners were dead. They could never return to fishing. There was a new call. "follow me". Jesus trusted God without hesitation or reserve and he therefore challenge others to trust God too. In this way he encouraged and liberated people to believe the impossible could happen. To the crippled he commanded 'stand up and walk'. Each of us needs to hear this command.

Who is Jesus for us today ? Anyone today who hears Jesus' voice, really hears him, hears the same invitation as those early disciples. It is a call to 'Follow Me'. Our question is not 'What are we looking for, but whom?' Like Peter, once you believe in that call, you can never return to what you were doing before! For many people this has been their experience since belonging to a Passionist Family Group. They can never belong to the church in the same way they did before

Passionist Family Groups fit in clearly with Jesus' vision. He dreamed of people belonging together, of there being no outsiders. His vision was that God was the parent of a 'Family for All'. This is not just about monthly outings. It is about who we are and everything we do. It includes issues such as climate change. We have a responsibility to take care of others and that includes 'their' planet. We have an opportunity to 'make a difference' and we have to think broadly about the implication of Jesus' vision of a 'family for all'.

Matthew's gospel sums up Jesus' teaching of love of God and neighbour with a drama much like a courtroom. The criterion of judgement for those who appear is how they have treated their fellow human beings. There are no questions asked about their attitude to God, their faithfulness to Sabbath laws or any other laws or customs. They are asked 'did you feed the hungry', 'welcome the stranger', 'visit the lonely', 'care for the sick', 'visit those in prison'? This is how a person proves that they love their neighbour.

The love of neighbour is seen to be the same in practice as love of God, even if the person is not aware of it! When a person has done these things... fed the hungry, welcomed the stranger, visited the lonely, nursed the sick, visited those in prison, clothed the naked, Jesus said "you did to God". He doesn't say "it's like you did it to God". When a person has neglected to do these things, they have neglected to do them to God! St Paul was later to experience this when, in the midst of his persecution of early Christians he heard the voice 'Saul. Saul, why are you persecuting **Me**'?

In the courtroom drama, the judge identifies with the victims who are helped or not helped. 'Whatever you do to the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you do to me!' Jesus invites us to take on the identity of the great self of the human race. God is one with every human being and we are one with each other, whether we are aware of it or not. Members of an extended family may feel this solidarity of kinship. Jesus extended this kinship beyond any limits. "You have heard that you must love your neighbour it said 'hate your enemy, but I say..."

We are one family, sharing one planet. Our ancestry is common. We belong together. When we look at people in this way, we can see them as Jesus did, brothers and sisters to whom we belong. Jesus promoted the spirit of sharing by forming small groups of communities who shared what they had in common. Judas held the common purse of Jesus community with 'the twelve'. The rich young man was invited into this community, but he was not prepared to share his wealth. The early Christian community get the ideas they had about sharing, but from Jesus..

*'All those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he/she possessed was their own, but they had everything in common. There were no needy persons among them, for from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet; and distribution was made to each as any had need.'* (Acts 4:32-35).

We need one another. We need to help meet each other's basic needs of belonging, love and friendship. If there is no one to share with and no one to help me, my growth will be stunted. That is why Jesus gathered people into family like communities as seeds of the emerging kingdom. It was in these communities that his followers discovered their oneness and solidarity with one another.

We will only come to know what it is to be treated as persons and to treat others in the same way in small family communities. Then we can reach out more broadly in solidarity and love. It may seem that what we are doing in Passionist Family Groups is small, and some people can't see we are doing anything significant at all. But we are building the kingdom, and the kingdom is like a mustard seed!

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