

“DO THIS IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME”:

A REAL JESUS

Would it be a ridiculous comment to make if I say that we are in the middle of a Jesus-phenomenon? I suppose we always are, but consider the following list. Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*, which gave both Jews and religious liberals no end of agita. The Book of Daniel, a new television show about an Episcopal priest who regularly talks with Jesus. The cable show *Rescue Me*, whose fireman-hero Dennis Leary, also regularly argues with him. The ubiquitous rubber wrist bands inscribed with WWJW or What Would Jesus Do. The bestseller *The DaVinci Code* relies for its plot on a question relating to the Catholic Church’s dealings, or avoiding to deal, with Jesus and his relationships with women. Four teens in New Jersey were recently arrested for

having stolen 27 baby Jesus statues from various Nativity displays with the intention of burning them. Last year, Israeli authorities arrested an antiquities dealer for having forged the inscription “James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus” on an authentic ossuary from the 1st century CE, probably with the intent to sell it as an original. An Italian court is currently considering the question whether or not Jesus existed as part of a lawsuit. Athletes regularly point to the sky and invoke Jesus as the reason they made a spectacular catch or ran 45 yards or sank a 6 foot putt, and J Lo’s mom credited him for her having won \$2.4 million at an Atlantic City casino. Ashton Kutcher was photographed last year wearing a “Jesus is My Homeboy” t-shirt, and Kanye West had a recent number one hit with “Jesus Walks.” Whatever the findings of the Italian court, it seems that Jesus, at least as iconography, does exist.

Whether this embarrassment of appearances in pop culture is rewarding or not depends, I suspect, on one’s view of Jesus as icon or as savior. In his movie *Dogma*, American Catholic filmmaker Kevin Smith creates the ultimate Jesus icon in his new image for the Church: Buddy Christ, a winking, broadly smiling Jesus pointing to the viewer and giving him a big thumbs-up. This image was completely in keeping with the message of *Dogma* itself, in which Smith suggested that Christianity had become a happy-face, good-feeling repository of moneymaking and canons and rules to the detriment of the sheer joy we ought to feel at being alive. My aunt Myrtle, a Bible-thumping, god-fearing woman of the old school, who objected to card playing as the Devil’s playground, and whose youngest son became a fire and brimstone preacher in her image, refused to have depictions of Jesus in her home. I remember staying with her one summer when I was about 9, and her railing against the Bible I’d been given to bring out

to the farm to take with me to her church. My mother had given it to me, thinking it would show her sister that her own branch of the family hadn't completely given up on religion—even if my parents had become Seventh-Day Adventists, their generation's version of a Moonies—but the offending object had illustrations, and illustrations of Jesus moreover, and everyone knows illustrations are a form of idolatry, and when illustrations are combined with depictions of god or Christ or the saints, then you've got heresy. And my aunt Myrtle certainly wasn't going to allow heretics in her house. The next thing you knew, we might start dancing. I kept the Bible in a box out on the porch for the duration of my visit, and used one of hers when we attended her thrice weekly services.

But what my aunt Myrtle and Kevin Smith have in common is that they both see Christ as a real, if supernatural, being. That's lovely, but I think what's lost in this, and indeed lost among the depictions of Jesus in both secular popular culture as well as in religious culture, is the reality of Jesus not as the Christ, as the Savior or the Messiah or the Redeemer, but as a teacher. Small “t” teacher, like me, and like many of us here.

That there was a real Jesus is posited by many historians, and not just Biblical historians. Until the unveiling of the so-called James ossuary as a forgery, it was looked upon as the first tangible, physical relic relating to Jesus as a person living in time. But even without physical evidence, we do have written evidence of Jesus' existence. Both Tacitus and Suetonius in their histories relate stories told third and fourth hand accounts of a teacher called Jesus whose followers had proclaimed him the Christ. (This, by the way, is in marked contrast to the Bible as history. The Bible never refers to anything going on outside its immediate area of concern—for instance, on the construction of the

Pyramids and the Sphinx in Egypt, right next door geographically and within the same time frame as the earliest books. An omnipresent god might have mentioned this big thing going on, although to be fair, there are theories that the Tower of Babel is a reference to it.) Now of course Jesus was a very popular name at that time, sort of the Near Eastern equivalent of “Bob,” and you couldn’t walk down a street without tripping over someone claiming to be the Messiah. But like Erik Reece points out, “Somebody, after all, spoke the Sermon on the Mount, or on the plain, or wherever it was spoken, and somebody told fascinating parables that explained nothing and left everything up to ‘he who has ears.’” The Jewish writer Josephus mentions him frequently, as does the Roman administrator Pliny the Elder. None of these writers, of course, had themselves seen him, as all had been born long after Jesus’ putative death; but Biblical scholars speculate, based on linguistic evidence, that the Gospel of John, which is the oldest of the Four Gospels, was written, if not by John himself, then by a contemporary of Jesus, who was familiar with the day to day lives of people at that time and the terminology of the working-people who were Jesus’ followers. For instance, the author tells the story of miracle of the loaves and fishes using the word *opsarion* rather than *ichthus*—“pickled fish,” suggesting a vat of them, rather than “single fish”—a detail that ruins the miracle aspect but makes the story itself more probable.

On the point of the miracles, I’ve been asking myself and several others this question: Is it necessary to believe in a supernatural Jesus to be a Christian? I support that it does, but my reason is more etymological than theological. The word from which *Christian* comes, *Christ*, is a Greek word meaning *Messiah*, *Anointed One*. I quote here from Anthony O’Hear and Judy Groves: “Luke (7:37-50) tells of a repentant woman

sinner, who comes to wash Jesus' feet with tears, wipe them with her hair, kiss them and anoint them with oil... This episode suggests the anointing of a king—and possibly a super-human one... For the Jews, the ritual anointing of a king with oil was a sign of God's choice of that king. By the time of Jesus, the title of Messiah had come to be applied to the future individual who would initiate God's kingdom. Some Jews... expected the Messiah to be sent from heaven, from a previous existence by the side of God. This figure was known by the title customarily rendered in English as 'the Son of Man.' This title is used by Jesus in the Gospels over sixty times, far more often than that of Messiah, to which Jesus answers directly and unambiguously only in Mark's account of his trial... [Throughout] the Gospels, Jesus renounces direct political ambitions. It is not just that his kingdom is not of this world, but... that the kingdom he is interested in will bring about the end of all earthly kingdoms, probably in the not too distant future."

Hence, to call Jesus the Christ is to seem at least to reference his divinity from the outset, which is to say one accepts that, however much he may have taken on flesh—and there's considerable debate among theologians and among Christians, which after all is hardly a monolithic religion, not only as to what that means but to what extent "taking on flesh" requires we accept a mortal Jesus—Jesus was a supernatural being. I can't go along with that myself, and maybe it's a failing in me or in my belief system, but that such a teacher was outside the human suggests that his teachings were themselves inhuman, if not in application then in origin. I don't want to accept that Jesus' teaching requires a divine imagination. It seems natural that our better selves would act this way. Besides, if we accept a Jesus who was divine, then he had nothing at stake. The betrayal,

the humiliation, the mockery and the crucifixion—these would have no more lasting effect on him than a broken leg would for one of us. It hurts at the time, but we'll get over it eventually. The author James Salter points out, "heroes are the ones who have something at stake." For Jesus to be a hero, and I submit he is, he has to really have something at stake.

Twenty-some years ago, when I was a young would-be priest at seminary, one of my Jesuit teachers, a right bald jolly old elf with blazing eyes and hair that came out of his ears like puffs of smoke, gripped his lectern and gave what is, for me, the definitive definition of the humanity of Jesus: "If you do not believe in a Christ who defecated and urinated, who had wet dreams and scabby knees, who got sick so the snot ran out of his nose like a river, who puked his first time drinking too much wine, then you don't believe in a Christ made flesh. You believe in a Christ made pretty."

So I propose he's human. This will require a new term for someone who follows his teachings but won't go so far as to accept divinity or resurrection. I propose Rabbinicism, both to celebrate his Judaism—Jesus though of himself as a Jew first and foremost, and often said his teachings were only for the Jews, which is a teaching probably not very popular with contemporary Christians—and his existence as a teacher.

In Christian theological terms this is a heresy called *ebionism*, the notion that Jesus is just one in a line of prophets and teachers whose number includes Buddha, Mohammed, Gandhi and Nelson Mandela. When Jonathon Wilson, in his treatise *God So Loved the World*, wants to make light of this idea he notes that ebionists would place Jesus on about the same level, perhaps a little higher, than Sun Myung Moon, Jim Jones, and L. Ron Hubbard. Nonetheless, the notion of Jesus as an inspired human is appealing,

and in his article in the current *Harper's* magazine discussing both Thomas Jefferson's *The Life of Jesus* and the apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas*, Erik Reece condenses Jesus' teachings to a short list:

- Be just; justice comes from virtue, which comes from the heart.
- Treat people the way we want them to treat us.
- Always work for peaceful resolutions, even to the point of returning violence with compassion.
- Consider valuable the things that have no material value.
- Do not judge others.
- Do not bear grudges.
- Be modest and unpretentious.
- Give out of true generosity, not because we expect to be repaid.

Even three of the Gospel writers note that Jesus' message can be condensed. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke we read something similar to the following: A lawyer was listening to Jesus teaching and stood up, saying, "Rabbi, what's the Great Commandment?" Now this was supposed to be a trick to show Jesus' ignorance or his self-aggrandizement, although what the lawyer was expecting to hear isn't said. And Jesus answered, "Love the lord your god with all your heart and all your soul and with all your mind. And love your neighbor as yourself. Everything the law says and everything the prophets said hangs on these two commandments."

This is a remarkably appealing set of criteria, and perhaps if this were all he'd taught, I might be a Christian. My wife has often said of me that I'd make a terrific Christian if it weren't for all the Christ stuff. That's probably true—I'm very resistant to

the idea of a divine Jesus, or, at the risk of self-aggrandizement, a Jesus who can lay greater claim to divinity than I can. After all, if we are playing on entirely different fields, how can we be said to be playing in the same game?

To be honest, I think it's much easier to believe in a supernatural Jesus, a Christ, a Redeemer and Messiah, because it effectively lets us off the hook. I mean, of course Jesus could believe these things and act in this way. He was the Son of God, after all. That suggests that, not bearing divine lineage ourselves, we don't have to aim for the same bar. [I should note that in choosing this topic, and you may have already seen the problem I'm going to mention, I bit off more than I can chew. This is a remarkably tough topic and I have about exhausted my library of books on the subject, and still feel I've failed to cover it enough. The teachings of Jesus are necessarily enormous and enormously complex. As with almost every sermon, but more so with this one, my difficulty has been not what to say but what to leave out. But leaving it out, I end up shorting important and valuable arguments. As a result I look now on this sermon and feel that at best I've only scratched the surface.

Be that as it may, I go on.]

Reece goes on: "In all his teachings, the Jesus that Jefferson recovers has one overarching theme—the world's values are all upside down in relation to the kingdom of god. Material riches do not constitute real wealth; those whom we think of as the most powerful, the first in the nation-state, are actually the last in the kingdom of God; being true to one's self is more important than being loyal to one's family; the Sabbath is for men, men are not for the Sabbath; those who think they know the most are the most

ignorant; the natural economy followed by birds and lilies is superior to the economy based on Caesar's coinage or bankers who charge interest."

Again, tremendously appealing. You probably recognize this recapitulation of the Sermon on the Mount. Of course, it leaves out some of the other things, the prohibitions against divorce—well, right there I'm damned—against lust—damned again—or against laying aside fruits for tomorrow—I used to do that and if I continued I'd still be living in a van down by the river.

Some of you are old enough to remember sermons from other Christian churches that were popular in the past titled "Jesus, Our Contemporary," and there's a recent book by Thomas Alitzer also called *Our Contemporary, Jesus*. Jesus is certainly not our contemporary. Some of his teachings—that a man who has lusted in his heart has already committed adultery (that the thought is equal to the action), that to marry a divorced woman is to commit adultery, or that one should turn one's cheek to someone who has already buffeted one once—these are not lessons that have modern applicability, or at least not applicability to the world in which we find ourselves today—and I'd speculate not so much to the world Jesus found himself in—and would make contemporary life difficult and perhaps, in the case of the last one of these, short. And what are we to do with not the story but the act of a hungry Jesus who, finding a spent fig tree, curses it to eternal fruitlessness. Is this somehow the tree's fault? Or should it rather be the fault of the local villagers who have already harvested the poor thing? And are they even to blame, since presumably they were also hungry and, living there, certainly had better claim on the fruits of their cultivation. This is a particularly vexing Jesus, acting like a spoiled kid, more a Bastard Christ than a Buddy Christ. There is some evidence that

some of the parables and sayings, particularly as relating to the more legal aspects of things like divorce or property, were not included in the original gospels but were added later by priests and logistic-minded redactors. Be that as it may: Jesus is not our contemporary.

But there's a lot to be learned from him. If he isn't our savior and he isn't our contemporary and he isn't, dare I say it, *contra* George W. Bush, a political philosopher—that “turn the other cheek” stuff pretty much makes a hash of foreign policy—then what is he? My answer: teacher. And like so many of our own teachers, some of what he teaches is adaptable to our lives and some not so much.

Jesus has great wisdom to share. Enjoy being alive. Treat everyone the way you'd like to be treated. Don't put up with wickedness. If something needs doing, do it, even if it's not your job or you aren't the best equipped for it or even if you might get hurt. I have my own variation of one of Jesus' teachings: A man's is walking along the road one day and isn't looking where he's going and drops down into a hole. The sides are too slick for him to climb out and there's nothing in the hole for him to stand on. He looks up and notices a theologian walk by. He yells, “Hey, buddy, can you help me out of this hole?” And the theologian looks down at him and says, “You obviously didn't get put there so you must have done it yourself, so there really isn't anything I can do. You'll have to find your own way out.” And he scurries off. A little bit later a senator walks by and the man yells, “Hey, buddy, be a pal and get me out of this hole will you?” And the senator looks down at him and says, “This will obviously cost money. I've only got so much expenditure and it's already earmarked for various road-fixing projects. This one will just have to wait for the next upturn in the economy.” And he scurries off.

The man is really despondent now. He looks up and notices a teacher walking by and he gives it another try. He yells, “Hey, buddy, can you help me out of this hole?” And the teacher says, “Sure,” and jumps down into the hole with him. The guy is apoplectic. “What are you doing? I asked you to help me get out of here and here you jump in. Now we’re both stuck in this hole.” And the teacher says, “Yeah, but I’ve been here before and I know the way out.”

Just as no teacher is ever always right, but whose mistakes and his learning from them make him the better teacher, perhaps Jesus’ human fallibility is his most important lesson.