

Meeting Jesus for the First Time

April 4, 2009
Rev. Martha Niebanck
First Parish in Brookline

Reading: “*Distinguishing Between the Pre-Easter Jesus and the Post-Easter Jesus*”

Marcus Borg

The pre-Easter Jesus is the historical Jesus. This Jesus is a figure of the past, a finite mortal human being born around the year 4 B.C.E. In his early thirties, after one to three years of public activity, he was executed by Roman authority. That Jesus, the flesh-and-blood Galilean Jewish peasant of the first century, is no more. What can be said about the historical Jesus? A response involves historical reconstruction. Constructing an image of the pre-Easter Jesus involves separating the gospel traditions into early and later layers and then answer the question: What gestalt of Jesus—what overall sketch—best accounts for what we find in the earliest layers of the developing gospel tradition? (Here is my (Borg’s) sketch): Jesus was a peasant—which tells us about his social class. His use of language was remarkable and poetic, filled with images and stories. He had a metaphoric mind. He was not an ascetic but world-affirming, with a zest for life. Like a Gandhi or a Martin Luther King, Jr., he challenged the domination system of his day. He was a religious ecstatic—a Jewish mystic, if you will—for whom God was an experiential reality. As such, he was also a healer. And there seems to have been a spiritual presence around him, like that reported of Saint Francis or the Dalai Lama. And I suggest as a figure of history, he was an ambiguous figure—you could experience him as insane, eccentric, or as a dangerous threat—or you could conclude that he was filled with the Spirit of God.

Meditation: “*A Voice Through The Door*”

Jelalluden Rumi

Sometimes you hear a voice through the door calling you, as fish out of water hear the waves, or a hunting falcon hears the drum's come back. This turning toward what you deeply love saves you. Children fill their shirts with rocks and carry them around. We're not children anymore. Read the book of your life which has been given you. A voice comes to

your soul saying, Lift your foot cross over; move into emptiness of question and answer and question.

Sermon

When I got to seminary I was required to take classes in the New Testament and sat next to a birthright UU, Clyde Grubbs. On a break we introduced ourselves and I mentioned that as a UU, I felt uncomfortable because I was not a believing Christian. He looked at me with kind blue eyes and said, “Why not take this opportunity to meet Jesus as a companion?” Clyde’s invitation was shocking. I was not ready for Jesus to be a companion but now I had a UU companion who walked with me as I jumped into the work of meeting Jesus again for the first time.

I learned that there is a “massive consensus” among scholars “that the words and deeds attributed to Jesus in our New Testament gospels fall into (three) mayor layers: \ The *original layer*, which consists of the actual early words and actions of Jesus in the first century, agreed upon by consensus of a large number of scholars. Second, the *traditional layer*, coming from the adaptation and adoption and creation of collections of Jesus’ sayings and actions in the 30s, 40s, or later; and, finally, as the *evangelical layer* in the gospels we now possess from the 70s through the 90s.

This “good news” layer describes the dynamic conversation between the collected sayings of Jesus of the traditional layer with the political and cultural ground of the years following Jesus’ execution. I came to know and appreciate over time that this motion of conversation between past exemplars of wisdom and present conditions is the stuff of a living tradition.

Bible Scholar John Dominic Crossan has helped me to make a useful distinction between the *Jesus of History* and the *Christ of Faith*: He calls the historical, pre-Easter Jesus “the One as yet unknown.” He calls the historical the post-Easter Jesus , the Christ of Faith, the “One who did not go away.”

Believers and non-believers have been in search the first Jesus, “the one as yet unknown.” Each seeker has sifted through layers of history and text to create what Borg describes as a “gestalt” of the human being Jesus. Let me visit some of those seekers:

The White House, Washington, D.C. 1804

Thomas Jefferson was frustrated. It was not the burdens of office that bothered him. It was his Bible.

Jefferson was convinced that the authentic words of Jesus written in the New Testament had been contaminated. Early Christians, overly eager to make their religion appealing to the pagans, had obscured the words of Jesus with the philosophy of the ancient Greeks and the teachings of Plato. These "Platonists" had thoroughly muddled Jesus' original message. Jefferson assured his friend and rival, John Adams, that the authentic words of Jesus were still there. The task, as he put it, was one of abstracting what is really his from the rubbish in which it is buried, easily distinguished by its luster from the dross of his biographers, and as separate from that as the diamond from the dung hill.

With the confidence and optimistic energy characteristic of the Enlightenment, Jefferson proceeded to dig out the diamonds. Jefferson omitted the words that he thought were inauthentic and retained those he believed were original. The miracles and mythic stories of birth and the death followed by resurrection were removed. The resulting work is commonly known as the "Jefferson Bible."

Who was the Jesus that Jefferson found? Jefferson discovered a Jesus who was a great Teacher of Common Sense. His message was the morality of absolute love and service. Its authenticity was not dependent upon the dogma of the Trinity or even the claim that Jesus was uniquely inspired by God. Jefferson saw Jesus as a man, of illegitimate birth, of a benevolent heart, (and an) enthusiastic mind, who set out without pretensions of divinity, ended in believing them, and was punished capitally for sedition by being gibbeted according to the Roman law. In short, Mr. Jefferson's Jesus, modeled on the

ideals of the Enlightenment thinkers of his day, bore a striking resemblance to Jefferson himself. (Frontline, "From Jesus to Christ," Marilyn Mellowes)

Stephen Mitchell's office: 1990

Stephen Mitchell sits at his desk surrounded by his icons. Thomas Jefferson looks down over his desk, his longish, once-red hair almost completely gray, fur collar draped softly around his neck like a sleeping cat, his features poised in an expression of serenity, amusement, and concern. There is a hint of a smile, the left eyebrow raised a fraction of an inch.

Beside this icon are more icons: the beautiful, Jewish, halo-free face of Jesus by Rembrandt; a portrait of another great Jewish teacher, Spinoza; a Ming dynasty watercolor of a delighted bird-watching Taoist who could easily be Lao-tzu himself; a photograph, glowing with love, of the modern Indian sage Ramana Maharishi; and underneath it, surrounded by dried rose petals, a small Burmese statue of Buddha, perched on a three-foot tall packing crate stenciled with Chue Lung Soy Sauce, 22 LBS. (Stephen Mitchell, "The Gospel According to Jesus")

Stephen Mitchell faces his computer pushing the delete key with some regularity. He keeps what he calls, "the largehearted passages" and removes to cyber hell those passages that strike him as "bitter or badgering" in tone. He erases belief in devils, flashy miracles, and the resurrection. He observes: "Once the sectarian passages are left out, we can recognize that Jesus speaks in harmony with the supreme teachings of all the great religions: the Upanishads, the Tao Te Ching, the Buddhist sutras, the Zen and Sufi and Hasidic masters. I don't mean that all these teachings say exactly the same thing. There are many different resonances, emphases, skillful means. But when words arise from the deepest kind of spiritual experience, from a heart pure of doctrines and beliefs, they transcend religious boundaries, and can speak to all people, male and female, bond and free, Greek and Jew."

Mr. Mitchell's Jesus, modeled on the spiritual enlightened thinkers of *his* day, bears a striking resemblance to Mitchell himself.

General Assembly: An Auditorium in Rochester, New York, 1998

John Dominic Crossan speaks to a several hundred Unitarian Universalists who gather at their annual General Assembly. They listen with appreciation to the portrait of Jesus that this former Catholic priest paints with radical strokes. We hear his Irish brogue tell us of the oppression of the farmers by imperial Rome. We hear of the bravery of a radical peasant who stood up to institutional and systemic oppression. We hear of the radical Jesus who ate with outcasts and had women followers. Crossan reads the Gospels and observes the conflict over power and authority, especially over gender roles, within the early Christian community. The Jesus we meet bears a striking resemblance to John Dominic Crossan, with an Irish understanding of imperialism and a former priest's understanding of gender oppression.

Germany, 1910

Albert Schweitzer concludes that every biographical Jesus resembles the author of such biographies. He observes that writing a biography of Jesus was in some ways the same as the scholar having written an autobiography. Schweitzer, as if to prove his point, assembles a biography of Jesus as well. Schweitzer's Jesus is a man who believed that the world was about to end and that a new world order was about to begin. And so Schweitzer's Jesus has no interest in improving the society or its moral and ethical life. This Jesus lives in an end time when the only apocalypse of total destruction would change human nature.

Shortly after writing this book, Schweitzer quits his post as an academic theologian and radically alters his whole life by going to Africa. He quits the academic world absolutely. He quits trying to reform it from within and simply walks away from it, making a 180-degree turn in the direction and intentions he brought to his living. Dr. Schweitzer's Jesus bears a remarkable resemblance to Dr. Schweitzer.

I've grown, with Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan's help, to believe that learning more and more of the social political context of the first century and allowing an inner conversation between that time and my own brings me closer to facing the "one as yet unknown"—the highest and best human being I might become. The results of the conversation force me to face, in my time, the sorts of choices I have before me.

Today on Palm Sunday, reflecting on the man who arrived in Jerusalem, I wonder about every choice I make that collaborates with the imperial western culture of our time. I reflect on the sort of courage it takes to opt out of that cultural trance. A story unfolds in my mind about this Jesus I have barely met: "He looks like a beggar, yet his eyes lack the proper cringe, his voice the proper whine, his walk the proper shuffle. He is blind to the distinctions of gender, social location, and clan. He freely chooses his destiny which is the off hand brutality of crucifixion and most likely the indifference of a mass grave." (from Crossan "Jesus a Revolutionary Biography")

As this Jesus knocks at my door I wonder what fate invites me over a threshold of risk?

My help and comfort, my backbone and courage come from resting in living traditions of heretics and martyrs.

Perhaps I am ready to make Jesus my companion—but only if I plan to live into the mirror he is holding before me.

Perhaps in our singing we can listen to the voices of heretics and martyrs sounding across the ages and find companions that give us courage.

In a world without end, Amen