

# DECOLONISING JESUS



Keith Matthee SC

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Keith Matthee obtained his BA LLB at the University of Natal. He was admitted as an advocate in 1979. He left law in 1979 for eight years to work for the Student Christian Association and then for the Methodist Church. During this period he worked on various university campuses in South Africa. From 1981 to 1982 he was based at St Aldates, Oxford. In 1987 he obtained a Bachelor of Divinity degree from Rhodes University, majoring in New Testament Studies and Hellenistic Greek.

He returned to the bar in Grahamstown as an advocate in 1987. Since 1991 he has served in an adjudicating role in different forums, including serving as an arbitrator, a presiding officer in the Industrial Court, an assessor in the Labour Appeal Court, and on a number of occasions as an Acting Judge in the High Courts of Port Elizabeth, Grahamstown, East London, Mthatha, Cape Town and Gauteng.

He has appeared in all the courts of South Africa, including the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Court of Appeal. In 2002 he was appointed as Senior Counsel by President Mbeki. In 2007 he relocated from the Eastern Cape to Cape Town and for a number of years was a member of the Cape Town Bar.

He is the author of *The Resurrection – a lawyer’s view*, *The Emperor Has No Clothing* and *Whose Way?* He also has done extensive research on whether or not the Bill of Rights contains “an objective normative value system.”

The results of this research are available on his website.

He married Roslyn Dorrington in 1980. They have two sons, three daughters and five grandchildren. He stays fit by running, marathon horse rides and hoping that the Sharks rugby team will win more finals! He and his wife now live in Greyton. Keith may be contacted at [keith@mattd.co.za](mailto:keith@mattd.co.za) and [www.keithmathee.com](http://www.keithmathee.com)

# DECOLONISING JESUS

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Dedicated to Talitha, Naomi Joy, Katie Dinah, Bea, Peter,  
and any further grandchildren to come!

*“And who do **you** say that I am?”*

Luke 9 verse 20

*“So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce  
all that he has cannot be my disciple.”*

Luke 14 verse 33

*“You don’t have to like the truth for it to be the truth.”*

Fargo detective

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I would like to thank Jessie Still for giving me the idea for the title of this book. When I was asked to address students at the University of Cape Town in 2018 I contacted Jessie, at the time a philosophy student at the university, for possible topics. She came up with “Decolonising Jesus”, capitalising on the debate amongst South African students about the need to decolonise university education.

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And then of course, as has been the case for these past 40 years, there is my wife, Roslyn Stewart. I would not know where to start to thank her for her belief in me. And for never letting me doubt that come what may, she has my back!

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# CHAPTER 1

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*“And who do you say I am?”*

My wife, Roslyn Stewart, enjoys watching royal weddings. This is a good excuse for me as a staunch anti-royalist on occasion to spend a few hours watching the pomp and splendour attached to such weddings!

Central to all these weddings is a magnificent cathedral and careful seating arrangements based on rank and importance of the people attending. At the recent televised funeral of the late president of the USA, Mr Bush, the invitations and seating likewise were carefully orchestrated.

The commentators during these televised extravaganzas go to great lengths to educate the viewers as to the hierarchy of importance in the seating arrangements and who made the cut when it came to the invites.

As we were watching one, it struck me – the Jesus of the Gospels would not even have made the cut when it came to an invitation, let alone featuring prominently in the seating arrangements! And yet His name was liberally used in the order of service and it was happening in a building dedicated to Him.

As I looked at the adornments worn by the priests at these services, and the obvious hierarchy of importance and power of

the various people officiating at and attending the service, I also found myself wondering how as a church and a society we had moved from the almost naked footwashing Jesus, the almost naked, broken and bloodstained Jesus on the cross, to these adornments and this hierarchy.

The only rational explanation for this was that somehow we had created an image of Jesus far removed from the Jesus of the Gospels and the rest of Scripture, to serve our purposes.

This is not a new phenomenon. It is as old as Adam and Eve, who allowed themselves at the Fall to be conned into a picture of God different to the one we see in Genesis 1 and 2. And so the colonising of God began, always with an agenda of what best serves us. As we read in Genesis 3, Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit so that they might be like God.

Jesus was alert to this. In John's Gospel when the people want to come and make Jesus their King, no doubt with all the trappings and hierarchy attached to that, we read: "Perceiving then that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by Himself." <sup>1</sup>

This is at the core of colonising someone, their life, their teaching. The person is used to achieve one's own purposes, usually for economic benefits and power, and often as trivial as wanting to win an argument; and fundamental to this is to rewrite their history, their life, their teaching.

1            John 6 verse 15.

We have many examples in history. An obvious one today is how various political parties and economic and cultural interest groups are doing this to the late Mr Nelson Mandela.

The stand out one over the past two thousand years is Jesus. And this colonisation of Jesus continues in different forms, guises and contexts, unabated; and so wars are purportedly fought and violence justified in His name; and economic theories; and political strategies; and cultural agendas; and nationalistic fervour; and oppressive social structures; and modes of dress; and lavish personal lifestyles; and unhealthy sexual practices; and hierarchical structures in the church. The list is endless.

As Philip Yancey writes: “Two words one could never think of applying to the Jesus of the Gospels: boring and predictable. How is it, then, that the church has tamed such a character – has, in Dorothy Sayers’ words, ‘very efficiently pared the claws of the Lion of Judah, certified Him as a fitting household pet for pale curates and pious old ladies’.”

Or as GK Chesterton, nearly 100 years earlier in his own brand of English, wrote of Jesus: “Instead of looking at books and pictures about the New Testament I looked at the New Testament. There I found an account, not in the least of a person with his hair parted in the middle or his hands clasped in appeal, but of an extraordinary being with lips of thunder and acts of lurid decision, flinging down tables, casting out devils, passing with the wild secrecy of the wind from mountain isolation to a sort of dreadful demagoguery; a being who often acted like an angry god – and always like god. Christ had even a literary style of his own.

The diction used about Christ has been ... sweet and submissive. But the diction used by Christ is quite curiously gigantesque; it is full of camels leaping through needles and mountains hurled into the sea. Morally it is equally terrific ... ”

The aim of this book is to decolonise Jesus. To go where Scripture leads, no matter how uncomfortable. **It is not my aim to enter the fray about whether Jesus’s example and teaching is practical, realistic or achievable.** Other than an occasional and brief foray into this dimension, that must be the subject matter of another book.

My invitation to the reader is to join me on this trip, in effect a trip back to Genesis 1 and 2 before the colonisation began, with a mind open to what we will find, no matter how uncomfortable the trip. After all the most important question any person will have to answer in their lives is Jesus’s question to Peter and His other disciples: “And who do you say I am?”<sup>2</sup>

As Albert Schweitzer, doctor and surgeon, concert organist, doctor in divinity and recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, speaking in effect of the attitude required on such a trip, wrote: “He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: ‘Follow thou me!’ and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfil for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass

2 Luke 9 verse 20.

through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience who He is.”

Of course, as will become very apparent in the chapters to come, Jesus was Himself a decoloniser. As He made known in word and deed the very nature of God<sup>3</sup>, what He revealed was in stark contrast to what the various groupings in 1 AD were peddling to serve their own agendas.

## CHAPTER 2

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### *Context*

To make sense of the life and teaching of Jesus, this decolonisation of God by Jesus, we need to have some idea of the religious, political, cultural and economic context of the world He was born into, lived in and died in.

Other than the New Testament, I have relied primarily, albeit not exclusively, on Josephus<sup>4</sup>. (Some of the context set out below will be my summaries from the writings of Josephus.) He is regarded by most historians as the most reliable source for the period 63 BC to 70 AD.

A brief look at the life of Josephus already tells us something of the context of the life of Jesus. I say this as the first 60 or so years of the first century AD was in effect a dress rehearsal for the eventual destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 AD.

He was born in 37 AD. His father was a Jewish priest. Part of his background included living for a number of years in the wilderness as a follower of a person who belonged to the Essenes, a group which will be referred to hereafter.

As a young man he visited Rome. He was very impressed by its grandeur and power. On his return to Judea he joined the

<sup>4</sup> I also have relied on a number of websites for some of the detail contained on pages 15 – 21. The main websites are cited in “Sources Consulted”.

rebellion against Rome and was given a leadership position in Galilee. After a siege of 47 days, his chosen base, Jotapata, fell to the Romans. Josephus and his men hid in a cave. Rather than submit to the Romans, they all killed one another except for Josephus and one other person who surrendered. Brought before Vespasian he escaped execution when he predicted that Vespasian would become Emperor. On becoming Emperor, Vespasian not only freed Josephus but included him as a member of his family and used him as an aide and friend.

Josephus, to no avail, tried to persuade the Jews to surrender in the face of the overwhelming Roman army. He hereafter made Rome his home.

He wrote *Jewish Antiquities* and *The Jewish War*. He died in about 100 AD. Rome honoured him with a statue. Because of what happened in Jotapata and his subsequent association with Rome, Josephus has been vilified as a coward and traitor by many Jewish people, past and present.

### ***Political, military, economic, cultural and religious power in Palestine - 63 BC – 70 AD***

The successful revolt led by Judas Maccabeus against the Assyrian king, Antiochus Epiphanes, about 164 BC, inaugurated a period of freedom and greatness in Jewish history. Until 63 BC the Jews were ruled by their priest-kings. There can be no doubt that central to the stories Jesus grew up with involved recollections concerning this period and a deep yearning to have them back.

The Romans under Pompey took possession of Jerusalem in 63 BC. They ruled Palestine with an iron rod until the final destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 AD. As will be seen hereafter, this period was characterised by cruel oppression.

The Romans allowed the Jews a measure of self-rule. However, they made sure that the Jews had no doubt about who ruled them. Roman soldiers were present in the streets at all times.

### *The Herodians and Pontius Pilate*

Central to this self-rule was the party of the Herodians. Herod the Great (about 37 BC – 4 AD, from whom they took their name), was the first Herodian to be granted this power by Rome and to be acknowledged as King of the Jews by Rome.

The type of person he was can be gleaned from the slaughter of the innocents when he heard of the birth of Jesus – he would not tolerate any possible threat to his position – the burning of many of his opponents and the execution of, amongst others, one of his wives and three of his own sons. Josephus tells us that on his deathbed Herod assembled the men of distinction from all parts of the nation and ordered them shut inside the Hippodrome. He then instructed his sister that as soon as he died all these men were to be killed so that there would be grief throughout the country rather than joy.

During his reign he built a temple in Caesarea to the Roman Emperor at the time, Augustus. He also built theatres and amphitheatres where games were held in honour of the Emperor. The naked competitors greatly offended the Jews. Over the gate of

the temple in Jerusalem, Herod placed a golden eagle - the symbol of Roman dominion. This all was an anathema to the Jews.

Herod the Great and his sons, whilst being of non-Jewish ancestry, were raised as Jews. Nevertheless they were regarded by the Jews as puppets – as collaborators of Roman oppression.

After Herod the Great's death, Rome assumed more direct control over Palestine by the appointment of Procurators. However the Herodians retained some power with various areas allocated to his sons. One of these sons had a measure of power in Galilee, where Jesus grew up and worked as a carpenter. It is for this reason that in Luke 23 verse 7 Pilate tries to avoid responsibility for the final decision about Jesus by referring Him to Herod.

The main Procurator we meet in the New Testament is Pontius Pilate who ruled from 26 AD to 36 AD, under Emperor Tiberius. To the Jews he was a deeply offensive tyrant. He used temple funds for his own purposes and in the rioting that followed, several citizens were killed. He introduced military standards bearing the Emperor's image into Jerusalem, which deeply offended Jewish religious beliefs. He met all opposition with unbridled violence.

Of the some 25 000 Jews crucified by Rome many were murdered in this way during the rule of Pilate. As Jesus grew up and worked in Galilee, He often must have seen men hanging on crosses. Crucifixion was reserved primarily for men whom the Romans believed constituted a threat to their rule.

Given their vested economic and political interests, the Herodians were eager defenders of how things were under Roman rule. They only followed Jewish religious beliefs and practices when it suited their own political and economic purposes. As they did not want Rome to take their power away, they strongly resisted challengers to Roman sovereignty, such as the Zealots, John the Baptist, Jesus, and the apostles<sup>5</sup>.

They joined forces with other parties in the plot to eliminate Jesus<sup>6</sup>.

Another body granted some power by the Romans was the **Sanhedrin**. It was a council consisting of seventy Jewish men. The head of it was the High Priest, who was appointed by Rome. It was allowed by Rome to control religious affairs, provided of course Roman sovereignty was not compromised. It also was used by Rome to administer government and law and order under the authority of the Roman Procurator. It however did not have the right to enforce capital punishment, which is why Jesus had to be crucified by Pilate.

Primarily the Sanhedrin was made up of the Herodians, the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

### *The Pharisees*

The Pharisees were mostly middle-class businessmen, very involved in the day to day affairs of Jewish society. They could rely on the support and goodwill of the general community far more so than the Sadducees. Thus although they were a minority in the Sanhedrin, they were the kingmakers in it.

5 Acts 12.

6 Matthew 22; Mark 3 and 12.

They accepted the written Word as inspired by God. At the time of Christ's earthly ministry, this would have been what is now described by Christians as the Old Testament. But they also gave equal authority to oral tradition and attempted to defend this position by saying it went all the way back to Moses. Evolving over the centuries, these traditions added to God's Word<sup>7</sup>, and the Pharisees sought strictly to obey these traditions along with the Old Testament. The Gospels abound with examples of the Pharisees treating these traditions as equal to God's Word<sup>8</sup>. In contrast to the Sadducees, amongst other things, they believed in the resurrection of the dead<sup>9</sup>, and believed that the coming kingdom would be a literal fulfillment of the promise to David for a King to reign over Israel forever. The Scribes belonged to the party of Pharisees.

### *The Sadducees*

The Sadducees were usually wealthy. Chief Priests and the High Priest generally came from amongst the Sadducees. They were in the majority in the Sanhedrin. As with the Herodians, they had a vested interest in not antagonising Rome. As a consequence of this and their wealth, they were unpopular amongst ordinary Jews. It is for this reason that despite their majority in the Sanhedrin, they more often than not had to abide by the decisions of the Pharisees in that body.

7 Deuteronomy 4 verse 2.

8 Matthew 9 and 15; Mark 7.

9 Acts 23.

### *Tax Collectors*

A hated aspect of Roman rule was the heavy taxation. The provinces were expected to bear most of the cost of administering the empire, which included financing their own oppression. In addition to general income tax there were also export and import taxes, taxes levied on crops, purchase taxes, taxes payable on the transfer of property, and emergency taxes, to name some.

Rome appointed censors to collect tax. These censors often sold this right to local men, who then collected tax on behalf of the censors. These Tax Collectors made their money by extracting more tax than was due and then keeping the difference. In addition, historians suggest that the rich paid bribes to them to avoid tax, the consequence of this being further oppression of the poor who then had to bear an even greater share of Roman taxation. It is thus not difficult to understand why Tax Collectors were so hated in Jewish society.

At least one of the disciples chosen by Jesus, Matthew, was a tax collector.

### *The Zealots*

They were ardent nationalists who were driven by the desire to overthrow Roman rule. They resisted paying Roman and temple tax. One particular tax revolt against Rome, led by Judas the Galilean (6 AD), resulted in Galilee being seen by Rome as a breeding ground for revolutionaries. They were at the heart of the war against Rome in 66 - 70 AD, which led to the total destruction of Jerusalem.

They supported the Pharisees in their commitment to Jewish Law. They militantly opposed the Herodians and the Sadducees. They were intolerant of the Essenes and later the Christians, for their support of nonviolence.

As has been alluded to, Galilee, where Jesus grew up and worked, was a stronghold of the Zealots. Given the daily reality of Roman oppression in Galilee, there must have been few days in the life of Jesus where He did not witness such oppression and engage with fellow Jews about it, not least of all Jews belonging to the party of the Zealots. Most of the crucifixions by the Romans occurred here. Two Zealots recruited by Jesus were Judas Iscariot and Simon the Canaanite. As a party their influence effectively ended with the mass suicide at Masada.

### *The Essenes*

They were a group who thrived for some two hundred years until the Jewish-Roman war in 66–70 AD. Unlike the Pharisees, they were separated from society, withdrawing into monastic communities like Qumran, where the Dead Sea scrolls were found. They lived in societies that held property in common.

The KJV Study Bible describes them as follows: “(They were) known for celibacy, pacifism, opposition to slavery, caring for their own sick and elderly, trading only within their own group, simplicity in meals and dress, and the rejection of all ostentatious display. They paid more attention to ceremonial purity than did even the Pharisees, and carefully guarded the Sabbath.”

History suggests that they influenced John The Baptist and the early Christian Church

In the time of Jesus the Jews dreamt of restoring the glorious Maccabean period and hungered after a Messiah who would lead them to such a promised land. Hence in John 6 verses 14 – 15, previously referred to, we read: “When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, ‘This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!’ Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.”

It is a period of history filled with ruthlessness, politicking, resistance, oppression and cruelty. Perhaps the best way to get a feel of the intensity, cruelty and passion of the context into which Jesus was born, grew up in and was murdered by, is to read a few extracts from Josephus where he describes what happened during the period 66 AD – 70 AD and thereafter at Masada, which was the final culmination of the Jewish resistance to Roman power. These extracts also give us a glimpse of the ruthless nature of Roman rule.

One historian gives us a wider historical setting for these extracts: “The greatest blow felt by the Jews was to their national pride. They believed that God had chosen them to be his special people. They looked forward to the day when the nations of the world would come to worship God in Jerusalem. Instead, the Romans and their puppet rulers desecrated their holy places, and insulted their laws and customs.”

### *“The Excruciating Famine*

In the meantime, countless thousands of Jews died of hunger. In every house where there was the least morsel of food, relatives fought over it. Gaping with hunger, the outlaws prowled around like mad dogs,... and then there was the incredible horror of Mary of Bethzuba.

Distinguished in family and fortune, Mary had fled to Jerusalem from Perea, but her property had been plundered by the tyrants during the siege, and her food by the daily raids of their followers. Maddened by hunger, she seized the infant at her breast and said, ‘Poor baby, why should I preserve you for war, famine, and rebellion? Come, be my food – vengeance against the rebels, and the climax of Jewish tragedy against the world.’ With that, she killed her infant son, roasted his body, and devoured half of it, hiding the remainder.”

### *“Burning of the Temple*

... Titus was resting in his tent when a messenger rushed in with the news. Jumping up just as he was, he ran to the temple to stop the flames. But there was such noise and confusion that the (Roman) soldiers either could not or would not hear the commands of their general, or obey the waving of his hand. Nothing could hinder the fury of the troops, and many were trampled by their own comrades at the entrances. Falling among the burning ruins, they shared the fate of their enemies.

Mad with rage and pretending not to hear the orders of their general, the soldiers rushed on, hurling their torches into the sanctuary. The rebels (Jews) now were helpless and made no

attempt at defense, for on every side was slaughter and flight, civilians being butchered the most. Around the altar were heaps of corpses, while streams of blood flowed down the steps of the sanctuary. ...

While the temple was in flames, the victors stole everything they could lay their hands on, and slaughtered all who were caught. No pity was shown to age or rank, old men or children, the laity or the priests – all were massacred. As the flames roared up, and since the temple stood on a hill, it seemed as if the whole city were ablaze. The noise was deafening, with war cries of the legions, howls of the rebels surrounded by fire and sword, and the shrieks of the people. The ground was hidden by corpses, and the soldiers had to climb over heaps of bodies in pursuit of the fugitives.”<sup>10</sup>

The Romans finally burned Jerusalem to the ground. Josephus says the number killed in this revolt was one million one hundred thousand, and the number of prisoners ninety-seven thousand. Of those who survived he writes: “... all above seventeen years old were sent to Egypt to work in the mines, or distributed among the provinces to be exhibited as gladiators in the public theatres and in the combats against wild beasts.”

### ***Masada***

After Jerusalem was destroyed, the surviving Zealots fled to the fortress of Masada, near the Dead Sea. Here they remained for 3 years.

10 Cf Luke 19 verses 41 – 44.

Rome knew the role the Zealots at Masada had played in the Jewish insurrection, successors to those who had started the resistance in 6 AD already. No doubt for this reason the Romans were determined to exterminate them, albeit that only a small group still remained.

Once it became apparent that the Tenth Legion's battering rams and catapults would soon succeed in breaching Masada's walls, Eleazar, the Zealots' leader, decided that all the Jewish defenders should commit suicide.

According to Josephus, two women and five children managed to hide themselves during the mass suicide, and it was from one of these women that he heard an account of Eleazar's final words. Josephus records Eleazar's speech as follows:

“Long ago we decided to serve neither Roman nor anyone else except God and now the time has come to verify that resolution by action. We, who were the very first that revolted against Rome, and are the last in arms against the Romans, must not disgrace ourselves by letting our wives die dishonoured and our children enslaved. We still have the free choice of a noble death with those we hold dear ... (and after we have slain them) let us render a generous service to each other. But first we must destroy our property and the fortress by fire, sparing only our provisions, so that the Romans will know it was not hunger that subdued us, but that we preferred death to slavery.”

After this oration, the men killed their wives and children, and then each other. There were 960 victims.

## *Conspiracy to kill Jesus*

It is also instructive for the purposes of this book in broad terms to look at the conspiracy to kill Jesus.

If we look at John 11 verse 45 – 12 verse 5, we see all these groupings, other than the Essenes, represented and conspiring in Jesus's execution. As we have seen, on the Sanhedrin would have been Herodians, Pharisees and Sadducees. We also have seen that the High Priest would have been appointed by the Romans. If the Zealots were not directly represented on the Sanhedrin, and the indications are that in effect they would have been partially represented through some of the sympathetic Pharisees, in this passage in John there also is reference to the Zealot Judas Iscariot with his agenda becoming clear. As already stated, the only major grouping which did not actively conspire in Jesus's murder were the Essenes.

### *The obvious question is, why?*

If one has regard to the context in 33 AD, one of the striking things is that the groups who actively conspired in the murder of Jesus, were ideologically, religiously, economically and politically at war with one another, and had been so for at least 30 years, and were going to continue to be at war with one another until the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 AD.

Furthermore, the Romans were contemptuous of what they saw as the idolatry of the Jews (only one God!) and ruthlessly and astutely exploited the many conflicts which existed within the Jewish "nation". As conquering empires through the ages have

done, and continue to do, they very effectively divided and ruled their victims. They would have been loathe to provide the Jews with an event which could unify them. Furthermore they were only interested in any action or person who constituted a threat to Roman rule and authority.

### *Apparent character of Jesus*

Describing Jesus, Josephus, who as we have seen was a lover and great admirer of Rome, and also whenever he was able to placed his people, the Jews, into as favourable a light as possible, and thus no apologist for Jesus, writes:

“At this time there was a wise man called Jesus, and his conduct was good, and he was known to be virtuous.”

In the Gospels we read that Jesus taught that the greatest commandment was to love God and our neighbour as ourselves. When asked about paying taxes He said that His listeners should render unto Caesar what was Caesar’s – thus on the surface compliant with what Rome required, the payment of taxes. He taught children to respect their parents and parents to deal fairly with their children. He made time to talk with children.

He reinforced the importance of marriage. When his close friend died he sobbed uncontrollably. He healed the sick and fed the poor. Talking about the law to which the Pharisees, Zealots, and to an extent the Sadducees and Herodians, were committed He said, “Do not think that I have come to do away with the Law of Moses and the teachings of the prophets. . . . Remember that as long as

heaven and earth last, not the least point nor the smallest detail of the Law will be done away with – not until the end of all things.”

His inner circle, and most of His followers, were a mixed bag of humble men and women with no economic, political or religious power. By the end of His three years of ministry He had no political, economic or religious power grouping to call on to implement His teachings. Ample evidence of this is that He had to be buried in another man’s tomb at the behest of a man who was too scared publicly to follow Jesus. Thus outwardly and on the surface, He was no threat to the Romans nor to the other centres of power in Palestine at the time.

With this in mind I go back to the question – Why then did these deeply divided groupings unite to kill such a man? On the surface it simply does not make sense.

Some years ago an author by the name of Jim Wallis was asked by a reporter if Jesus was a politician. He answered as follows:

“His confrontation that he provoked in Jerusalem was with the religious and the political leaders. They saw him as a political threat. If they saw him just as a private pietist, why would they worry? If he was helping people get their lives together, helping their marriages, making them better parents and making them go to less Roman orgies and drunken parties, why would that have been a threat to the ruling powers? They regarded him as a threat. I remember I was at Wheaton College once and I asked this class, “Why was Jesus killed?” and they had no idea. They just couldn’t comprehend the question. And then one young student said,

“Well, to save us from our sins.” And I said, “So you think Pontius Pilate was sitting there thinking, ‘How am I going to save these American evangelicals from their sins? I’m gonna kill this guy and that will do it.’ ”

As we decolonise Jesus in the chapters which follow, or perhaps more accurately, as we discover how Jesus decolonised God, we will see why people as diverse as the groupings described above conspired together to kill Jesus. And as we do this, words of a past social commentator will strike a true cord, “Power elites destroy people they cannot control.”

To be more accurate in the present case, perhaps that should read, “Power elites always try to destroy people and ideas they cannot control!” One of the most telling quotes in this regard is by Pliny in one of his reports to Emperor Trajan towards the end of the first century AD. Writing of how he is attempting to stop the spread of the “depraved and excessive superstition” of the Good News of Jesus he writes:

“... For this contagious superstition is not confined to the cities only, but has spread through the villages and rural districts; **it seems possible, however, to check and cure it**” (my emphasis).<sup>11</sup>

11 Book X. xcvi in Letters by Pliny.

## CHAPTER 3

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### *“A white woman with a beard!”*

How a person is physically portrayed is often central to how we want to use or control that person. A recent example is when I was asked the question, “Was Jesus really a Jew?!”

On one of my marathon horse rides some time back, my riding “pardner”, Shawn Warren, made the observation that in many artistic portrayals of Jesus, He looks like a white woman with a beard!

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Let us turn to the circumstantial evidence. (Something of what went to make up His psychological frame of mind, can also be gleaned from circumstantial evidence. I deal with that in the next chapter.)

It is true that we have no photos or paintings of Jesus, but there is much material we can use to construct a “picture” of Him. A picture which would be wholly inconsistent with a white woman with a beard!

He was a Jew, born in the heart of the Middle East. There is nothing to suggest that He looked any different to other men in the region. He thus certainly would not have been white, nor indeed black. He would have been somewhere in between.

Given His trade as a carpenter at a time when He would have had to source His own wood out in the open in a very hot climate, His brown complexion would have been deepened by the sun. This exposure to the Middle East sun and everything which goes with that would have started at least as early as when He was 2 years old and his parents had to flee with Him from Bethlehem to Egypt to escape Herod's slaughter of the innocents.

Given the Jewish custom of boys coming of age at 13 years old, He would have started His work as a carpenter more or less at that age. Thus before he started His public ministry at 30 years old, He would have worked as a carpenter for some 17 years. In the absence of electricity at the time, all this work, including cutting trees to obtain wood, must have involved hard physical labour.

Bearing this in mind, in effect His ministry years were preceded by a 17 year workout! A period during which He often would have been exposed to the elements. This must have had an effect on His general physical condition and appearance. His hands also must have been calloused hands.

Therefore, although there is no description of Him in the New Testament, what we can know with certainty is that He could not have looked like "a white woman with a beard!"

Further circumstantial evidence which supports this conclusion includes His driving the people out of the temple - that He could single-handedly drive the merchants and their hangers on from the temple clearly suggests at the very least an extraordinary physical presence.

Likewise, Jesus being able to survive a severe beating and the other cruel physical abuse prior to the cross (other crucifixions were not usually accompanied by such savage treatment), speaks of a physical toughness consistent with His work as a carpenter and 3 years of hard physical living as He on foot traversed Palestine to share His Good News with all and sundry.

Pausing for a moment on this treatment, when we are presented with an accurate portrayal of Roman brutality spurred on by the Jewish vested interests of the day, such as was portrayed in Mel Gibson's "The Passion", we balk at it and try and discard it as fundamentalist exaggeration. But the circumstantial evidence supports the savagery portrayed in "The Passion", as we have already seen with the brutality and cruelty of the Romans and the Herodians in chapter 2 of this book.

Some 700 years before the crucifixion of Jesus, the prophet Isaiah prophesied the death of Jesus. Telling in the prophecy are the references to His physical appearance. So in Isaiah 53 we read that when He grew up He had "no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him." Certainly not a woman with a beard, nor anything like the handsome men almost invariably chosen to play Jesus in films!

What goes in tandem with this distortion of the appearance of Jesus, is the lie that somehow the community He gave birth to was rooted in Europe, with Africa only coming into the picture in the seventeenth century. Let us have a quick look at the facts.

When Jesus was still very young it was an African country which gave Him and His parents refuge from oppression<sup>12</sup>. The man who helped Him carry His cross was an African<sup>13</sup>. The first identified non Jewish convert was an African<sup>14</sup>.

But perhaps the most telling is who is on the list of early Christian theologians, the ones who helped give the community of Christ an intellectual foundation and intellectual respectability. Athanasius, Origen, Antony, Tertullian, Cyprian and not least of all Augustine. These intellectual giants of the early church were all Africans, a fact which is simply glossed over today.

The colonisation of Jesus by “Europeanising” Him is, quite simply, a monstrous lie. It is a lie which serves the self-interest of two opposing groups. Those from Europe who sought to exploit Africa, and those resisting this exploitation.

The former group used it to rationalise and justify their exploitation of Africa – after all, they were bringing “christian (I use lower casing purposefully) civilisation” to Africa, which allowed them to cover a multitude of sins.

The latter group because they then could avoid the far reaching implications of the life and teaching of Jesus in their dealings with their oppressors and their own oppressive cultures. Alternatively they colonised Jesus by “Africanising” Him, which simply was a new form of colonising Jesus for their own agenda. A good illustration of this is found in the chapter on Jesus and violence.

12        Matthew 2.

13        Luke 23.

14        Acts 8.

At the heart of these machinations is in what or whom we find our identity. I will return to this in chapter 5.

## CHAPTER 4

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### *“Lost in translation”*

As the gap in years widen between the original word, decision or concept used and our lived experience today, often much is “lost in translation”.

An example of this, with tragic consequences, is the reason for the Founding Fathers of modern America entrenching the right to bear arms and its application in modern day America.

When it comes to Jesus, examples abound. In fact, perhaps that is what much of this book is about.

Thus for example, the reason for John juxtaposing the Greek word anthropos, when referring to John the Baptist, with sarx when referring to Jesus<sup>15</sup>, is lost on the modern-day reader. In fact when one reads some modern translations, there is nothing to indicate that different words were even used by John.

Anthropos was the Greek word for a human being. It distinguished people from animals and plants.

In broad terms sarx is the Greek reference to the flesh of both people and animals. It was thus a demeaning description of a human being which John chose to make a very specific and telling point.

15      John 1 verses 6 and 14.

What makes the use of the word sarx even more startling, is that a few verses earlier John in effect writes that the one who became sarx was there before the “Big Bang”, and that without Him “was not anything made that was made.”<sup>16</sup>

Every other major faith in the 1st century and indeed in the 21st century, not only will find this claim outrageous, it will also find it deeply offensive. As an illustration it would be inconceivable for any Muslim to use the word sarx to describe the Prophet, let alone Allah.

Indeed when Jesus wanted to wash the feet of Peter, an act wholly consistent with the kind of Christ who became sarx, Peter answered, “You shall never wash my feet.” Jesus’s response to Peter is uncompromising: “If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.”

Earlier, responding to Peter’s objection to Jesus saying He would suffer many things, be rejected by the religious leaders and be killed, Jesus rebukes Peter: “Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”<sup>17</sup>

Peter, like us, simply could not cope with the full implications of the Christ becoming merely sarx.

This struggle of Peter’s, and indeed the rest of humankind over the ages, lies at the heart of the colonisation of Jesus. Some are well-intentioned. Others are usually driven by a desire for economic, political and cultural dominance. The remaining chapters of this book will deal with specific examples.

16 John 1 verses 1-3.

17 Mark 8.

Likewise the life experience of Jesus leading up to His public ministry, is lost on the modern day reader of the Gospels. Deep in His subconscious must have been the struggles, both physical and emotional, His mother and father no doubt went through in the early stages of His life. What with Mary's pregnancy outside of wedlock in a deeply conservative society – when the woman caught in adultery was brought to Him to be stoned<sup>18</sup>, the emotional suffering His own mother must have gone through at the hands of her neighbours must have been uppermost in His mind.

Then there was the trauma of two arduous trips for Mary and Joseph, first to Bethlehem for His birth and then two years later to Egypt to escape the murderous henchmen of Herod.

No doubt His mother and father often spoke of both trips. The first one with His mother heavily pregnant, climaxing in them being forced to share a stable with animals for His birth. Those of us who have had the privilege of being present at the birth of our children in a well run hospital, need no imagination to visualise what Jesus's birth must have been like for Mary and Joseph. And we need to remember that for the birth, being new arrivals in Bethlehem, they would not have had the customary support of some local women of their usual community. It would have been Mary, about 16 years old at the time, and Joseph, no one else. Far, far removed from the sanitised version dished up for us every Christmas by those exploiting it for their own ends.

The second trip is largely forgotten in the 21st century. Perhaps this is because remembering it would disturb our comfortable lifestyles as thousands of refugees, once again from the Middle East, turn to the wealthy for help. So we blot out or spiritualise Jesus's words in Matthew 25: "For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me... Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me".

We also forget that the last time Joseph is mentioned is when Jesus was 12 years old; that He was the eldest of 5 brothers and at least 2 sisters<sup>19</sup>; that He was thus from an early age responsible for His mother and at least 6 siblings, and everything that goes with such responsibility. Not least of all He must have experienced a deep understanding of vulnerability, conflict and its resolution, anxiety, exhaustion, loyalty, perseverance and everything else that caring for a big family involves. It is thus no surprise when His family on hearing what He was teaching and doing in His public ministry, and the hostile response to this from the powers that be, "went out to seize him, for the people were saying, 'He is out of his mind.'"<sup>20</sup> And so in our sanitising of Him, we simply ignore this side of Him and, for example, forget or blot out that prior to His resurrection His own family thought He was mad.

Much of His teaching and chosen lifestyle during His public ministry also cannot be understood apart from His own economic circumstances as He grew up. A handful of families, led by the Herodians, would have controlled most of the wealth.

19 Mark 6 verse 3.

20 Mark 3 verse 21.

The majority of the people would have been peasants who faced a daily struggle simply to feed themselves and their families. (Thus “Give us today our daily bread” in the prayer He taught, cannot simply be interpreted as containing spiritual truths!) This would have been compounded by the ever increasing burden of taxation placed on them by the Romans. Being forced to finance their own oppression at the hands of the Romans and their puppets, the Herodians, goes a long way to explain why the Zealots had such strong support in Galilee.

It is instructive to note the negative impression the people of His village had of Jesus when He started His public ministry – and so in Mark 6 verse 3 we read: “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James, and Joses, and of Juda, and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us? And they were offended at him”. In effect they are saying that He was a mere carpenter, of humble origin and lifestyle.

The precarious financial position of Jesus would have been compounded by the size of his family. Corroborating evidence of this is that when Joseph and Mary presented Jesus for purification in Jerusalem, some 40 days after His birth, their sacrifice was “a pair of turtledoves”<sup>21</sup>, as opposed to a lamb – a dispensation we read of in Leviticus 12 verse 8 for parents who could not afford a lamb. Another piece of evidence in this regard is that He needed the material support of women for His public ministry<sup>22</sup>.

All the above helps us understand much of Jesus’s teaching about the poor, the need to focus on daily needs, His scathing

21 Luke 2 verse 24.

22 Luke 8 verses 2-3.

commentary on the abuse of power, His using a whip to clear the temple precincts, His choice of disciples, the make-up of His followers.

What is also lost to the modern reader are the political realities of Galilee in 1 AD. As we have already seen, of the some 25 000 Jews crucified by Rome, many were killed in Galilee, a hotbed of armed resistance to Rome led by the Zealots. We also have seen that as Jesus grew up and worked in Galilee, there most probably would not have been a day when He did not see men hanging on crosses - sometimes it took days before the men died. Men and women taken as slaves also would have, on a very regular basis, passed through Galilee - so movingly portrayed in the classic "Ben Hur", where Jesus, obviously still working as a carpenter, defies the Roman soldiers and gives the enslaved Ben Hur some water as he passes through the village of Jesus.

No doubt Jesus would have known some of these men who were crucified, possibly even have been childhood friends with some of them. Perhaps it was partially this memory which led to His sobbing uncontrollably (the original Greek suggests a sobbing convulsively by Jesus) at the death of his friend Lazarus<sup>23</sup>. Even if this is not the case, this picture of a sobbing Jesus revealing to us the very nature of God, would be an anathema to all other faiths and their picture of God. It also counterbalances the picture of Jesus making a whip to drive the people out of the temple, dealt with in the chapter on Jesus and justice.

23            John 11 verse 35.

As I deal with specific issues in this book the importance of context when decolonising Jesus will become clear; that without context much will be lost in translation and Jesus will remain no more than a useful pawn in the hands of the various power elites of this world.

## CHAPTER 5

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*“I have become comfortably numb.”*

When I saw Larry Norman<sup>24</sup> sing “The Outlaw” in 1973, my world was turned upside down.

There were the words about Jesus:

“Some say a politician, who spoke of being free  
He was followed by the masses on the shores of Galilee  
He spoke out against corruption and he bowed to no decree  
And they feared his strength and power so they nailed him to a tree”

There was Larry Norman’s long blonde hair, almost down to his hips.

Nothing I saw or heard that evening tied in with the picture of Jesus I had grown up with. Only the year before I had spent a year in the defence force, sporting a brush cut, being trained to help defend white christian nationalism against communism. Norman’s portrayal of Jesus and Norman’s own appearance despite being a disciple of Jesus, forced me back to the Gospels. Forced me to reassess everything I had ever been taught about Jesus and His disciples.

24 Larry Norman can rightly be described as the father of Christian rock music. He was involved in over 100 albums. The standout one was Only Visiting This Planet. He received many awards and commendations. He was very critical of superficial and poor lyrics, the commercialization of Christian music and of Christian artists who refused to perform in secular environments. He wrote in September 2007, “I love God and I follow Jesus but I just don’t have much affinity for the organized folderol of the churches in the Western World.” He died in 2008.

In many ways the starting point I was forced back to, and some 46 years later continue to grapple with, was where, as a disciple of Christ, my identity should come from.

The obvious way to find the answer to that question, was to examine how Jesus dealt with all those things which gave people their identity.

In a nutshell, He had scant regard for any of these things.

When it came to the Jewish religious practices and beliefs of the day, if substance required it, He simply ignored them. In fact, when substance required it He had no problem outraging the religious hierarchy by saying that He would tear down the much revered temple in 3 days and rebuild it. (At the risk of outraging many “modern” readers, I strongly suspect He likewise is far more concerned about the poor and oppressed in Paris, than the fire damaged Notre Dame Cathedral.) Likewise, if love required, He healed on the Sabbath, which further incurred the wrath of the Pharisees.

He touched “unclean” lepers, and publicly engaged with and then healed an “unclean” menstruating woman who had intentionally touched Him. He also simply ignored the prescribed rituals to make Him clean again after these encounters. The examples are endless.

And, as I have already stated, it is striking that after committing acts which made him “unclean”, there is absolutely no indication of Him attempting to undergo the various prescribed purification rituals.

This happened in a context where the Pharisees had hundreds of “laws” regulating every small detail of peoples’ lives. So, for example, they had devised 39 categories of activity in relation to the Sabbath, and what could be done and what not.

As regards what could be done, they prescribed the finer details of what was allowed. These categories included activities such as writing, burning, carrying, erasing, cooking, washing, sewing, plowing, reaping, grinding, kneading, combing, dying, building, demolishing and slaughtering. Likewise there were endless causes/sources for being made unclean and detailed rituals to be followed to purify oneself thereafter.

At one stage, in a typically graphic way which we tend to forget with our sanitised picture of Jesus, when confronted about the unclean food He was eating, He told the Pharisees that all that happens to food is it enters on one side and exits on the other side! And that it is that which comes from the heart which makes one unclean.

Jewish nationalism simply did not feature on His radar. In fact He ate with collaborators of the Roman oppressors. His choice of disciples included a tax collector, chief among such collaborators. He was even handed in this respect as His choice of disciples also included a zealot, as we have already seen a group committed to the violent destruction of Roman oppression. I guess a good clue of His view of nationalism was when He told His disciples that His kingdom was not of this world! It is thus grammatically correct to speak of christian nationalism, using lower casing for christian!

Likewise He was indifferent to status, class and social niceties. He more often than not made “outsiders”, such as Samaritans, widows, tax collectors, prostitutes and the poor the heroes in His spoken and enacted parables.

Whilst eating in the home of a “respectable” Pharisee He allows a woman of ill repute to shed tears on His feet, wipe His feet with her long untied hair, such untied hair in itself scandalous in respectable Jewish society, and then lets her caress His feet with kisses. (Before we get too self righteous about the response of the host to this incident, can one imagine what would happen at a “respectable” dinner today if that were to happen during the dinner!) Likewise He openly at midday engages in a conversation with an adulterous woman, who is a Samaritan to boot (John 4) – much to the disapproval of His disciples. This woman was not even a “proper” Jew. By doing this He broke a host of social taboos in Jewish society. Indeed, a clue as to where He spent a considerable amount of time during His public ministry were some of the allegations brought against Him during this period – drunkard, whoremonger and glutton.

At the same time He did not hesitate openly to socialise with and minister to Tax Collectors, Roman Centurions and people working for the Herodians, all deeply despised by the Jewish people. Succinctly put, He was a respecter of no person or group and was only constrained by His desire to love all people and to be obedient to His Father.

In a time when women had no public role to play in religious matters, He made them pivotal to His ministry. This started from

relying on the material support of women during His public ministry, and ended at the cross, where other than John, the only people who remained loyal to Him were women. And of course it is a woman with a suspect psychological profile who first sees the risen Christ – and we must remember, Jesus could have chosen anyone He wanted for this privilege.

Solid circumstantial evidence of this being no respecter of persons approach of Jesus is found in the following extract from a letter, referred to in chapter 2, by Pliny to the Roman Emperor Trajan, towards the end of the first century. He writes of the Christian church: “I judged it so much the more necessary to extract the real truth, with the assistance of torture, from two female slaves, who were styled deaconesses: but I could discover nothing more than depraved and excessive superstition. I therefore adjourned the proceedings, and betook myself at once to your counsel. For the matter seemed to me well worth referring to you, – especially considering the numbers endangered. Persons of all ranks and ages, and of both sexes are, and will be, involved in the prosecution.

For this contagious superstition is not confined to the cities only, but has spread through the villages and rural districts; it seems possible, however, to check and cure it.”

This description of the make-up of the early church highlights the crossing of almost every imaginable barrier in the society of the day. Women, let alone women slaves, were in positions of leadership – this in itself cuts right across a multitude of economic, social, political and gender barriers of the day.

This picture of the early church described by Pliny is wholly consistent with what we see of Jesus in the Gospels. All the old and existing barriers were simply destroyed. As Pliny writes: “Persons of **all ranks and ages, and of both sexes** are, and will be, involved in the prosecution. For this contagious superstition **is not confined to the cities only, but has spread through the villages and rural districts.**”

Even earlier than Pliny, not long after the resurrection of Jesus and when many folk who would have seen and heard Him were still alive, in Galatians 3 Paul wrote: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” The traditional sources of identity simply did not feature.

To repeat Philip Yancey: “Two words one could never think of applying to the Jesus of the Gospels: boring and predictable. How is it, then, that the church has tamed such a character – has, in Dorothy Sayers’ words, ‘very efficiently pared the claws of the Lion of Judah, certified Him as a fitting household pet for pale curates and pious old ladies.’”

Reflecting on these thoughts of Yancey, and indeed on an interview I saw where John Cleese unsuccessfully tries to defend Monty Python’s “Life Of Brian” in the face of a withering attack by the late Malcolm Muggeridge, brought to mind Pink Floyd’s song “Comfortably numb”. At one point it goes:

“My hands felt just like two balloons  
Now I’ve got that feeling once again  
I can’t explain, you would not understand  
This is not how I am  
**I have become comfortably numb.”**

In the song it is drugs which have made him comfortably numb. In my case, as indeed in John Cleese’s case, the underlying cause of the numbness was a combination of indoctrination and a fear of moving away from our comfortable picture of Jesus; for me a safe and respectable Jesus, for John Cleese a caricatured Jesus far removed from the Gospels – the effect of the numbness being the same. No meaningful consequences on our daily lifestyles, which were comfortably numb.

Perhaps the *coup de grace* for me is the response of Jesus to those telling Him that His mother, brothers and sisters were waiting outside to take Him home. As we have already seen in the encounter in Mark 3, His family were concerned about Him and his mental stability. Furthermore as the eldest male in their family this made them very vulnerable, not only materially but also socially. What could not have helped no doubt were the lingering stories of Jesus being conceived out of wedlock.

The response of Jesus at a surface level is shocking. In one sentence He destroys any argument for a disciple of His to find their identity in anything else other than being His disciple. “Who are my mother, my brothers, my sisters?”, He asks. He promptly answers His own question: “For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother.”

As we also will see in the chapters to come when I deal with His views on various issues, His teaching on where we should find our identity is simple. But because of our human natures we complicate it to water down the radical consequences of His teaching on identity. This applies across the spectrum. Be it the right, the left, black or white nationalism, capitalism, socialism, Marxism, feminism, chauvinism, the rich, the poor – all without fail will try and find justifications or rationalisations to defend the need for their particular personal or group identity.

The teaching and life of Jesus simply does not permit such an option for a disciple of His. This obviously is a profound challenge to how the world works today, particularly to the various power groupings in society. It is for this very reason that the power groupings of the day who usually hated one another joined forces to kill Him. The same is true today, particularly with the explosion of identity politics, be that nationalism, colour, gender, sexual orientation, etc etc.

And so we justify killing Him again and again, whether that is by domesticating Him, distorting Him, or making a caricature of Him. And we **remain comfortably numb**.

## CHAPTER 6

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*“But let justice roll down like water...”*

When I heard Larry Norman’s *“The Great American Novel”*<sup>25</sup> in the 70s, for the first time I began to understand something else I had read: “Jesus is either Lord of all or not Lord at all.”

As I reread the Gospels the scales almost literally fell from my eyes. Norman was right – Jesus was deeply concerned about inequality; about the poor; about objectifying people; about using national interest and pride to exploit people; about wars; about hypocrisy; about the use of court rooms for oppression; about racism; about purportedly killing for peace; about the divide between rich and poor. In a nutshell, He was deeply concerned about justice.

An instructive illustration is Jesus cleansing the Temple<sup>26</sup>. To understand what is happening in this incident, once again context is crucial.

At the time, indeed as in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Jews were spread throughout the known world, referred to as the diaspora. The temple was at the heart of the existence of all Jews. It is here that they could seek the favour of Yahweh by amongst other things bringing their animal sacrifices to Yahweh – as we have already seen, for the wealthy a lamb, for the poor, a dove. All Jews in the

25 See Appendix for the lyrics.

26 John 2 verses 14-17 and Luke 19 verses 45-46.

diaspora moved heaven and earth to try and get to Jerusalem annually for the Passover festival. For most of these Jews the cost of this trip would have caused material hardship.

In addition to the animal sacrifices, the religious leaders had also introduced a temple tax, a more than useful income for them! The real sting in this setup was the ruling that any animal sacrificed had to be without blemish and that the temple tax could only be paid in temple currency. It was the religious leaders who determined whether an animal was without blemish. It was the dominant economic grouping who determined the exchange rate and the price of the sacrificial animals. In this monopolistic arrangement the financial interests of the religious leaders and the economically powerful, were inextricably intertwined. And as still happens today with monopolistic arrangements, exploitation followed.

Another dimension to this arrangement was a significant group of people throughout the known world, who were called “God-fearers”. To them making such sacrifices at the temple was also crucial. However, being non-Jews they were not allowed in the Temple. The religious leaders ruled that they could bring their sacrifices to an area immediately outside the temple. This would have been the area where the “unblemished” animals would be sold and the money exchanged for Temple currency.

In the various accounts in the Gospels describing the response of Jesus, a number of things become apparent. One could say almost uncharacteristically Jesus with intention makes a whip to use in the situation. To Jesus what was happening was no different from robbery. Thus His words as He drives them out, “You have made

this place a den of thieves”. He also says as He drives them out that they have made His Father’s house a place to make money.

### *Why the anger?*

As we have seen before, Jesus knew what physical and material hardship was. He saw the hearts of these God-fearers and Jews from the diaspora, who at great cost and hardship had come to Jerusalem in their earnest desire to be set right with His Father. He saw the power of the religious leaders being used, along with the connivance of the financial elite, not to help these people, but to further burden them. And in the case of the God-fearers, physically making it very difficult for them to focus on God in the midst of a market of money changing and bartering for animals for sacrifice.

In this scene He saw exploitation. He saw leaders with power using ordinary people as no more than a means of making money, so placing things before people. He saw the powerful abuse their power at the expense of ordinary God fearing people who found themselves vulnerable and totally at the mercy of these people with power.

The fact that Jesus intentionally went to make a whip, speaks volumes for the rage He felt as He witnessed this gross abuse of power. In “respectable” society we either simply ignore this Jesus or sanitise the incident by spiritualising it. And so we focus merely on their making the Temple a hub of commercial activity as the reason for Jesus’s anger, which no doubt was part of His reason. We ignore Jesus’s description of what was going on as “a den of

thieves”, that Jesus in effect also was outraged by an exploitative economic arrangement. At the very least His rage is directed at this system. And if we remember that the groupings that would benefit from this system included of the main power groupings of the day, Sadducees, Pharisees, Herodians and of course the Romans, who needed such systems to bolster their tax income, we can start to understand why they all united in the murder of Jesus.

When He cleansed the Temple, perhaps that was the final nail in Jesus’s coffin.

As we reflect on this incident, so other actions and teachings of Jesus become clearer, for example His choice of Scripture in Luke 4 when He opens His public ministry. Before the scales fell from my eyes, I spiritualised those words. But now I saw that the poor He speaks of include the materially poor. That the oppressed He speaks of include those oppressed by economic, social, political and cultural systems and ideologies<sup>27</sup>.

Jesus’s full frontal and ruthless verbal assault on the Pharisees and the Scribes in Luke 11, simply leaves one with no option but to embrace these words of Jesus, not only figuratively but also literally. Thus, for example, He specifically is contemptuous of the

27 Perhaps the greatest oppression in the name of an ideology today, is the largely unrestrained killing of unborn children, and the abandonment of their mothers by society. I deal at length with this issue in a South African context, where on average 500 such unborn children are killed every day, in “The Emperor Has No Clothing”. Central to the book is the Constitutional Court’s recent ruling which in effect gives its blessing to the description of unborn children as no more than “the contents of a woman’s uterus.” (This book is available as an eBook or in a hard copy at no cost – write to keith@matt.co.za)

tithes of the Pharisees because “they neglect justice and the love of God.” There are many other examples in the Gospels.

I also started reading the Old Testament, the book that Jesus would have been immersed in as He grew up in Nazareth, with new eyes. Indeed, part of Jesus’s attack on the religious powers of the day was that they rejected and stoned the Prophets. He thus embraced the Prophets and their teaching. And the need for justice permeates all of the Prophets.

So we read in Micah 6 verse 8: “And what does the Lord require of you, But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God?” And if there was still any doubt in my mind about the centrality of justice in the mind of Jesus, the Prophet Amos shattered any such doubt. The prophet’s attack on personal and institutionalised injustice, be it economic, political, legal or religious, is unrelenting, vivid and at times, ruthless.

In Amos 4 we read: “Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, .... Who oppress the poor, Who crush the needy, Who say to your husbands, Bring wine, let us drink! The Lord God has sworn by His holiness: Behold, the days shall come upon you When He will take you away with fishhooks, ... .”

Or again in chapter 5, Amos pronounces that “God hates and despises the Jewish feast days, the sacred assemblies, the burnt offerings, the grain offerings, the fattened peace offerings, the noise of the Jews singing to God and the accompanying stringed instruments.” That what God requires in the face of such personal and institutionalised injustice, was: “But let justice roll down like

water, And righteousness like a mighty stream.” And what really struck me in the solar plexus was that much of Amos is aimed at Israel herself, not her pagan neighbours! Surely then much of Amos is aimed at the church in South Africa, I concluded.

In a recent film I saw, a line struck me: “Rules are made by those who have the most to lose.” The various disparate power groupings in the time of Jesus cynically made and agreed to certain rules to maximise the benefit to themselves. These benefits differed from group to group, but fed off one another, always at the expense of the poor, the marginalised, the outsider.

When Jesus came along and in word and deed challenged the very building blocks of these rules, the result was inevitable. When Jesus entered Jerusalem after his 3 years of public ministry, He knew exactly what the end game was going to be. The choice before Him was how He was going to respond when these power groupings made their move against Him, which was in effect at the heart of His three-fold temptation at the beginning of His ministry<sup>28</sup>.

## CHAPTER 7

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### *Jesus and violence*

At his 1964 trial Nelson Mandela set out the reasons for why his political movement, the African National Congress (the ANC), decided to use violence to fight the violence of apartheid.

At a similar time to this statement by Mandela, Martin Luther King wrote:

“... Violence creates many more social problems than it solves.... Violence often brings about momentary results.... violence never brings permanent peace. It solves no social problems; it merely creates new and more complicated ones... .”

In our present politically correct climate, one simply is not permitted to cast King and Mandela as ideological adversaries. And so there are many vain attempts to reconcile their irreconcilable positions on the use of violence.

This is not possible. Their positions are mutually destructive of one another<sup>29</sup>.

For purposes of this book, the question is: Who of the two men saw with the eyes of Jesus?

29 I deal with this at greater length in an article for “The Conversation” with the title: “Justifying the use of violence to fight social injustice is a recipe for disaster”. It is available on line under “Keith Matthee SC – The Conversation”.

We have seen that Jesus lived in and was faced with a violent and a ruthlessly oppressive system. No less so than Mandela and King were.

From the outset His options seemed to be limited to either fighting violence with violence or simply accepting things as they were, and possibly even seeing how He could use the system to benefit Himself. As one writer has put it, either fight or flight, the latter also including allowing oneself to be co-opted. As we have seen, in essence these were the options chosen by the Zealots, the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Herodians, the groups which united to kill Jesus.

This united action against Jesus tells us quite clearly that He chose neither of these options. If He had, when the crunch came He would have had the protection of at least one of these groups. Furthermore, their response to His choice, banding together to have Him crucified, tells us that His choice not only deeply offended all these groupings, it also constituted a grave threat to the foundations of all these groupings. Likewise the Romans must have perceived Him as a threat for them to go along with His murder.

A closer look at two encounters and one of His teachings is helpful.

During the apartheid era the mantra of the state, and sadly many within the church, was that it was our Christian duty to obey the state. As proof of this we were told that Jesus taught that we must render unto Caesar what is Caesar's<sup>30</sup>. Post the coming of democracy in 1994, nothing has changed. And so South African

Constitutional Court justice, Albie Sachs, hauls out this teaching as part of his justification for why the Constitutional Court is able to tell Christian parents how their children should be disciplined<sup>31</sup>.

This is a superficial take on what Jesus was actually saying. If this is all He was saying and propagating, rationally why would the Romans allow themselves to be used to kill Him? The same question applies to the Sadducees and the Herodians, who as we have seen benefitted materially from the status quo, central to which was the payment of tax.

This superficial take simply ignores the ever present and overarching question Jesus always asked before He acted. What did His heavenly Father require of Him? This is central to His threefold temptation at the beginning of His ministry. And it remains central up until the end when in the Garden of Gethsemane He pleads for “this cup to pass from me”, but qualifies that with “but let Your will be done.”

Trying to impose a sort of dualism on Jesus, that as a subject of Rome He would act in one way and as a subject of His heavenly Father He would act in another way, quite simply is a nonsense. In everything He did and said, for Him the only question always was, what did His heavenly Father require of Him. Thus in all things rendering unto Caesar was subject to rendering to His heavenly Father.

31 Christian Education South Africa v Minister Of Education 2000 (4) SA 757 (CC).

He was asked this question to trick Him. As we have seen, Roman taxation was hated by most Jews. On the other hand central to the colonization of Israel by Rome, was the collection of taxes to pay for its Empire.

At a surface level Jesus's answer totally outmanoeuvred the Pharisees who asked the question. The Romans could not fault His answer, neither could the other groupings, for in theory they shared the view of Jesus that all things belonged to the Father. They would thus have grasped this nuanced answer of Jesus and realized that they also could not use this answer against Him.

Of course the perceptive in all the groupings must have grasped the underlying seditious nature of Jesus's answer – that where Caesar's demand conflicted with His heavenly Father's call, then it must always be, “not my will but Thy will be done.” This was echoed in Peter's response to the authorities in Acts ...: “Must we then obey man rather than God?” The end result was these disparate groups uniting to kill Jesus because they grasped the seditious nature of the actions and teachings of Jesus – seditious not only to Roman authority, but also to their respective vested interests. **In effect He was making them, their laws and their respective vested interests all subject to His heavenly Father's rule.**

One can then ask, whilst it makes sense that the Romans, Pharisees, Sadducees and Herodians banded together as they, all in different ways, had a vested interest in the status quo remaining as is, why the Zealots?

There were fundamental divides between Jesus and the Zealots. I highlight two. The Zealots were fighting for a nationalistic identity and state, and as we have seen Jesus's view on identity went way beyond that. And then of course there was the issue of the use of violence.

These two issues are inextricably linked. Before Jesus washes the feet of His disciples, we see that central to Him being free to perform an act which no free circumcised Jew would normally do is where and in whom He found His identity: "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him."<sup>32</sup>

This action of Jesus is partially a response to the dispute we read about in Luke between the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest in the kingdom of God. Like the Zealots, the disciples had in mind a political kingdom.

The use of violence to establish such a political kingdom, where at the end of the day might, force and coercion are always right, makes sense. But what about a kingdom where identity is only found in obedience to the heavenly Father, who is the Father of all people? Where greatness and obedience to Yahweh is measured not in wealth, political power, intellectual and athletic ability, physical appearance, gender, and the like, but in how many feet

one washes. Using violence to establish such a kingdom is simply a nonsense, a contradiction in terms.

One cannot serve people, wash their feet, by killing them. Furthermore the Gospels are replete with Jesus treating the outcasts, the marginalized, the oppressors, as individuals knitted together by Him in their mothers' wombs<sup>33</sup>, as individuals for whom He was soon going to die.

This all would have been an anathema to the Zealots, but more than that, a fundamental challenge to their vision of a political kingdom and of the means they had chosen to achieve that vision.

The last thing they wanted was someone of influence to question either of these choices by them – getting as many Jews as possible to rise up and buy into their vision and methods was crucial to their eventual success.

The separation between means and ends, so prevalent today and perfected as a rationalization by capitalists and communists at the cost of huge human suffering, simply did not feature in the thinking and actions of Jesus. His teaching and actions were completely integrated. As Martin Luther King in effect said of this integration of means and ends by Jesus, “the means is the end in the making”.

With this in mind let us now turn to another incident and His specific teaching on the use of violence.

Soon after His washing the feet of His disciples Jesus is arrested by the powers that be.

This is a turning point for Jesus. After His three-fold temptation at the beginning of His ministry, central to which was how He was going to use His power to achieve His mission, we read that satan “departed from Him until an opportune time.”<sup>34</sup>

His arrest was certainly an opportune time. There is no doubt that His disciples cried out for Him to use all the powers at His disposal to destroy those who had come to arrest Him, especially after the rapturous welcome He had received a few days earlier when He had entered Jerusalem. And in typical fashion Peter promptly uses his sword and cuts off the ear of one of the arresting party. Jesus immediately rebukes him and heals the man. He also explicitly states that “... all who take the sword will perish by the sword.” Lest we try to rationalize this away by saying that in those particular circumstances armed resistance was foolhardy, Jesus immediately thereafter states: “Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and He will at once send more than 12 legions of angels?”<sup>35</sup>

At this critical juncture of His ministry the choice of violence was open to Jesus. All the requirements of the so-called just war theory<sup>36</sup> were present, not least of all that justice cried out for

34 Luke 4 verse 13.

35 Matthew 26 verses 52-53.

36 We find the first origins of the just war theory in Augustine (354-430) and then Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). The basic requirements include that there must be a just cause, it must be the last resort and it must have a reasonable chance of success. Another requirement is that the end and means must be proportional to one another. As we have seen above, the latter is in stark contrast to King’s view on the teaching of Jesus, that the means is the end in the making.

it and that He had the necessary power to ensure that violence would bring an end to Roman injustice. He chose the way of washing the feet of all people, the way of the cross.

And of course He had this choice in the ensuing horrific hours up until His excruciating death on the cross; during His brutal beating; His humiliating treatment at the hands of the High Priest and the rest of the Council and by the Roman soldiers. On the cross itself when He was mocked - “you saved others, why not save yourself if you are the Christ?”

*At every point He had a choice.*

Lest we have any doubt about who we are dealing with at this juncture, let us remind ourselves of John’s prologue: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him and without Him was not anything made that was made.” Let us once again remember His words only a few hours earlier: “Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and He will at once send more than 12 legions of angels?”

And His response right at the end? **“Father forgive them for they know not what they do.”**

It is inconceivable how we have moved from this unambiguous teaching and example of Jesus, in the face of extreme provocation, humiliation and brutality, to allowing ourselves to be co-opted by the thinking of the world when it comes to the use of violence.

And if there is any doubt about Jesus and violence, His teaching in the Sermon on the Mount is unequivocal.

There we read: “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.... You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For He makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have ... You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

It takes much more than verbal gymnastics for the church to justify the use of violence against enemies in the light of these words of Jesus. Central to these verbal gymnastics is saying that the issue is complicated. These words of Jesus are extremely hard and challenging, **but not complicated**. We are to love our enemies, not kill them.

Clear circumstantial evidence of the unambiguous teaching of Jesus on the use of violence is the life and witness of the church in the first century. There is not one single reference in Christian, Jewish or Roman records of Christians using violence to achieve a “just” end.

Lest we are seduced to adapt the clear teaching of Jesus on violence by the reasoning and justification for the use of violence

by Mr Mandela, because of the suffering of the oppressed in South Africa at the time and the intractable nature of the government of the day, the following extract from Book XV of Tacitus's *The Annals*, in the aftermath of the devastating fire in Rome, is instructive:

“But neither human help ... nor all the modes of placating Heaven, could stifle scandal or dispel the belief that the fire had taken place by (Nero's) order. Therefore, to scotch the rumour, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled Christians. Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate, and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judaea, the home of the disease, but in the capital (Rome) itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue. First, then, the confessed members of the sect were arrested; next, on their disclosures, vast numbers were convicted, not so much on the count of arson as for hatred of the human race. And derision accompanied their end: they were covered with wild beast's skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and, when daylight failed were burned to serve as lamps by night. Nero had offered his Gardens for the spectacle, and gave an exhibition in his Circus, mixing with the crowd in the habit of a charioteer, or mounted on his car. Hence, in spite of a guilt, which had earned the most exemplary punishment, there arose a sentiment of pity, due to the impression that they were being sacrificed not for the welfare of the state but to the ferocity of a single man.”

This brutality notwithstanding, there is not a single reference in any literature of the Christians responding by using violence to defend themselves or to resist the evil of Rome. Indeed as the first martyr, Stephen, is murdered, like Jesus as he is dying he prays that His murderers will be forgiven.

The only logical explanation for this witness and conduct of the Christians in the first century is that they acted in that way because their Lord, Jesus, was unambiguous about the use of violence. And many of these early Christians would have heard and seen Him in person, and especially seen how He responded after his arrest. And we need to remember that after Pentecost these Christians had no doubt that they had the power of the Holy Spirit at their disposal, so also could call on divine intervention to slay those who were treating them with such brutality.

And this also is the overwhelming witness of the Christians until the conversion of the Roman emperor, Constantine, in the fourth century.

Two extracts by leading church leaders in the second and third century is clear evidence of this.

Justin Martyr of Caesarea, who was martyred for his faith, writing in about 150 AD states: “We refrain from making war on our enemies, and we cannot bear to see a man killed, even if killed justly.”<sup>37</sup> He also believed that we had come to the time set out in Isaiah where “... they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,

37            *Studia Hist. Ecc.* vol.40 n.2 Pretoria Dec. 2014 - *Violence in early Christian writings: Lessons for Christians in independent Zimbabwe.*

and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.”<sup>38</sup>

That great African theologian, Tertullian (160 – 220 AD) strongly opposed violence and military service because he thought it was irreconcilable with the teachings of Jesus. He wrote: “For even if soldiers came to John and received advice on how to act, and even if a centurion became a believer, the Lord, in subsequently disarming Peter, disarmed every soldier.”<sup>39</sup>

Going back to the question at the beginning of this chapter, whilst the approach of the Zealots seems to be a natural fit for Mandela, there is no such natural fit for King, whose position is at odds with not only the Zealots, but also the Pharisees, Sadducees and the Herodians. And we know King would have been totally opposed to the Roman oppression.

Which raises the question, what is the way of Christ when it comes to opposing injustice and defending the weak? As stated before, the world generally sees the options as either “fight or flight”. And so the inevitable question comes, what should Christians have done to oppose Hitler, apartheid, the Klu Klux Klan, etc etc?

This is the subject matter for another book<sup>40</sup>, (as is the defending of individuals at a personal level). Suffice to say that since

38 Isaiah 2:4.

39 Treatise on Idolatry 19, Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 3:99-100.

40 My article for The Conversation gives a glimpse into a practical application of the way of Jesus in a recent crisis in SA where Mandela's choice is juxtaposed with King's choice.

Constantine this is perhaps where the teaching and example of Jesus has been most obscenely twisted. It is in this area where Jesus and his teaching and example desperately and urgently needs to be decolonized.

Political, economic and cultural vested interests have ruthlessly created a Jesus in an image which best serves their particular political, economic, nationalistic, narcissistic and identity agendas – perhaps the most evil of all being those who profit from war.

However, in seeking to answer this hard question of how Christians must oppose injustice of all forms, it simply is dishonest to twist the extremely hard and costly teaching and example of Jesus.

Yes the example and teaching of Jesus is hard. The late Professor Dawid Bosch wrote that reconciliation happens when two opposing forces meet and someone gets crushed in between! My wife always speaks of the way of Christ being to intentionally absorb the blows, whatever those blows might be, so that the violence of the blows does not get passed on to other people. That could be literal or figurative blows.

And in this sense the way of Christ is neither fight nor flight, it is a “third way”<sup>41</sup>. Martin Luther King’s militant non-violent civil disobedience would be an example of such a third way.

41 Os Guinness in *The Dust of Death* (1973) wrote: “How often in the contemporary discussion a sensitive modern man knows that he cannot accept either of the polarised alternatives offered to him!... In Christianity, however, there can be a Third Way, a true middle ground which has a basis, is never compromise and is far from silent.”

Although it is not for us to adapt the teaching of Jesus if we feel it is impractical, the theologian Hays asks an interesting question in response to the argument that this “idealized” way of Christ is not practical and for example would not have helped fight Hitler’s madness. What if all German Christians simply refused to fight for Hitler, or indeed to use their expertise to develop the war machinery which enabled Hitler to declare war on all and sundry? No doubt it would have been at great personal cost to them, but the reality is that Hitler would not have been able to perpetrate his violence against the world in the same way in which he did.

I ask the same question of the struggle in South Africa – what if in 1960 all the Christians in the ANC, the Pan African Congress, and the other movements of the day decided to persist with militant non-violent civil disobedience? Would the oppressors not have been shamed far earlier when they saw folk like the late Chief Albert Luthuli, the first South African to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, and thousands of others being shot, beaten and imprisoned? Furthermore, would the South African society today not have been less violent? At a similar time across the ocean, when Americans saw men and women like King being beaten, bitten by dogs, imprisoned, and even killed, it shamed enough Americans to enable President Johnson to legislate major civil rights legislation.

However, as I have written above, this is the subject matter for another book. For present purposes my goal is to look at the Gospels and see where they take us when it comes to Jesus and His example and teaching. The fact that this more often than not will lead to extreme discomfort and hardship does not permit

us to adjust it to make it less onerous, it merely leads us to that question posed to Peter by Jesus - “Who do **you** say I am?”

If our answer is Lord, then Jesus once again is clear in what follows - we must then pick up our cross daily and follow Him. And killing for a country, for a specific idea of “civilisation”, for our racial or cultural group, for our possessions, an economic system, simply does not enter the equation of following Him, of helping Him build His kingdom here on earth. For that we must become servants, we must absorb the blows, we must be crushed in between. And as we do that the world in practice will see the third way of Jesus, when it comes to violence.

As Bonhoeffer, martyred by the henchmen of Hitler, wrote:  
“When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”

## CHAPTER 8

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### *“Sex is lekker!”*

A few years ago I was given the privilege of speaking to some 500 testosterone charged teenagers in the Michaelhouse<sup>42</sup> chapel. The topic I was given was “Jesus and sex!”.

My challenge was twofold; how to grab their attention, and how to convince them that I was an expert in the field!

My opening line was, “Sex is lekker!<sup>43</sup>” Judging by their response, I could see that I had grabbed their attention. As to expertise, what I told them of why I was the best qualified in the chapel, except perhaps their chaplain, has been censored by my wife of 40 years standing and counting!

With the help of my co-speaker, Cameron Mackintosh, who gave his very frank views as a medical doctor, we had a robust and at times hilarious session with the boys.

Part of the colonisation of Jesus is sanitising Him to the extent that He has nothing to do with large areas of our day-to-day life. An excellent antidote to this is Richard Foster’s book “Money Sex

42 A church school for boys located in a beautiful rural setting in South Africa.

43 It is difficult to find an English word for this Afrikaans word – one translation would be “nice” but that would be too inane a translation. The word requires the user to have a mischievous twinkle of playful delight in his eye, when he uses the word to describe something he is experiencing.

and Power”. I cannot remember where, but I remember one writer making the observation that often in churches these topics are taboo – his dry response was, what is then left for the church to engage with!

When dealing with marriage Jesus specifically quotes the end of Genesis 2. In a Western liberal setting in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, His teaching is dynamite.

In effect He teaches that marriage is a life-long commitment; a commitment between one man and one woman<sup>44</sup>; that they are to become one; and that central to this becoming one, is sex.

As the one who thought up the idea in the first place, one would have thought He is best qualified to give guidance about how to enjoy sex to its fullest potential. (Far more so than current so called “sexologists” - who obviously at times can be of assistance.)

And as we in effect have seen, for Him the key to good sex is the trust which flows from being in a lifelong monogamous

44        Given the present debate concerning same sex unions, I am mindful of the need to deal with this issue at greater length. I have done this and if any reader is interested I will forward my more in depth thinking concerning this issue to them on request. Suffice to say that for purposes of this book, I draw an in principle distinction between what I term the creation ordinances in Genesis 1 – 2 and certain other parts of Scripture. Thus for example the need to deal with all people as being created in God’s image is not in any way influenced by something like culture. Whereas something like the role of women and men in other parts of Scripture could be culture specific, and obviously a casualty of the Fall set out in Genesis 3. The challenge would be to extract the creation ordinance which underpins such a role distinction from the particular part of Scripture so that it is not in conflict with the creation ordinances in Genesis 1 – 2. The same applies to the essence of marriage as clearly described in Genesis 2 and confirmed by Jesus. I develop on this in the following chapter.

commitment to becoming one flesh in everything which that involves, not least of all sex.

Jesus would have been very aware of the words which follow His quoted extract - “and they were both naked, the man and the woman, and were not ashamed.” Thus there would be a lack of self-consciousness and mutual trust which flows from such a life-long monogamous commitment. This simply underlines the teaching of Jesus that central to good sex is mutual trust and a context of a life-long unconditional commitment to one another. Likewise He would have been aware of other parts of Scripture which leave no doubt that sex is not only something central to ensuring the survival of humanity, but also a sensuous gift from Him to be enjoyed.

There simply is no biblical basis for the argument that when it comes to sex women must just grin and bear it so that they can have children, that sex is somehow dirty and a necessary evil. **It clearly is a gift thought out and created by Jesus, amongst other things for our pleasure.**

Timothy and Kathy Keller write: “God not only allows sex within marriage but strongly commands it. In the book of Proverbs, husbands are encouraged to let their wives’ breasts fill them with delight and be intoxicated by their sexual love. The book Song of Solomon does much barefaced rejoicing in the delights of sexual love in marriage. Old Testament scholar Tremper Longman writes: “The role of the woman throughout the Song of Solomon is truly astounding, especially in light of its ancient origins. It is the woman, not the man, who is the dominant voice throughout the

poems that make up the Song. She is the one who seeks, pursues, initiates. In Song 5:10-16 she boldly exclaims her physical attraction [‘His abdomen is like a polished ivory tusk, decorated with sapphires...’ (14)]... Most English translations hesitate in this verse. The Hebrew is quite erotic, and most translators cannot bring themselves to bring out the obvious meaning... This is a prelude to their love-making. There is no shy, shamed, mechanical movement under the sheets. Rather, the two stand before each other, aroused, feeling no shame, but only joy in each other’s sexuality...’ ”

The colonisation of Jesus as regards sex comes in two forms. On the one hand there are people within the church who struggle with this picture of Jesus not only saying yes to our enjoying the sensuous delights of sex, but in fact being the One who thought up the whole idea in the first place! And so through verbal gymnastics and distortion of Scripture they seek to portray Jesus as saying that sex is no more than a necessary evil for procreation.

On the other hand there are people who unquestioningly buy into this negative picture because it is useful propaganda in their quest to rubbish Jesus and His church. I find it ironic that this latter group, whilst usually claiming to have as its foundation the modern scientific methodology, will simply buy into this picture of Jesus without any independent research of their own.

Of course the teaching of Jesus concerning sex goes way beyond it merely being something for personal pleasure. And here we touch on issues concerning the soundness and practicality of Jesus’s teaching, which as I have written before is not the focus of this

book. However, I will briefly highlight the other dimensions of Jesus's teaching, without entering the debate about whether or not it is in line with modern experience and expertise. Nevertheless I will venture some observations and conclusions on the soundness of His teaching given my own experience of marriage these past 40 or so years.

Our consumer society would have us believe that sex is only about pleasure and in effect that we are no different to animals. That it is a natural appetite which has to be satisfied, without any limits. (Another version of this is when spouses get involved in an affair, they say: "I did not choose it, it just happened" – as if we are no different to a dog reacting to a bitch on heat!) In a nutshell our consumer society sees love and sex as synonyms.

Jesus says this is to trivialise a profound gift from Him. As the Keller's argue, this is to miss completely the deep purpose of this gift.

Firstly, Jesus in effect teaches that sex, or "becoming one flesh", is a sign of the marriage union and the means to accomplish it. (This has affected the secular law to the extent that where a marriage cannot be consummated, the marriage can be annulled as opposed to there having to be a divorce.) His teaching is thus diametrically opposed to Kahlil Gibran's oft quoted poem ("On Marriage") at weddings, even in church wedding ceremonies, which amongst other images to make his point, talks of two separate trees strengthening one another but remaining separate from one another. Or the modern trend for husbands and wives to have different surnames. It matters not what name the husband and wife chooses, but in terms of His teaching their sharing a surname is symbolic of their becoming one flesh.

Secondly, the words He quotes teaches that throughout marriage there is an ongoing need regularly to renew our covenant with and renew our commitment to our spouse. Sex between a husband and wife is the unique way to do that. As Keller writes: “Indeed, sex is perhaps the most powerful God-created way to help you give your entire self to another human being. Sex is God’s appointed way for two people to reciprocally say to one another ‘I belong completely, permanently, and exclusively to you.’ You must not use sex to say anything less... So, according to (Jesus), a covenant is necessary for sex. It creates a place of security for vulnerability and intimacy. But though a marriage covenant is necessary for sex, sex is also necessary for the maintenance of the covenant. It is your covenant renewal service.”

As I told the husbands at a marriage course my wife and I led, “Now guys, if that is not good news, what is!”

Thirdly, rooting sex within a covenantal relationship mindset also has a major practical effect on the act of lovemaking. A consumer mindset will be most concerned about how to get sexual pleasure. A covenant mindset will be most concerned about how to give pleasure to the other person. In this regard my own personal experience demonstrates the soundness of Jesus’s teaching. When I am able to give pleasure to my wife in this regard I invariably find that I receive the greatest sexual pleasure.

Central to Jesus’s teaching on sex is a context of complete freedom from all fear - fear of pregnancy, fear of getting caught, fear of venereal disease, fear of guilt, fear of a failure to perform, fear of not satisfying one’s partner, fear of one’s partner not accepting

your body, fear of our bodies being too fat or flabby, or whatever. As one person has put it, Jesus in effect teaches that to enjoy really good sex there has to be a reckless abandonment by the parties.

And of course such an absence from fear is only truly available within the context of a permanent and life long relationship between one man and one woman. And I might add anecdotally from my personal experience as one matures in one's relationship within the marriage so the trust grows, fear subsides and reckless abandonment increases, especially when the children leave the house eventually! (And for the solace of the older folk, over time quality replaces quantity!)

Thus, I concluded my talk to the Michaelhouse boys, "Jesus has not set limits to spoil our fun – those limits are there to enhance our enjoyment of His gift of sex."

## CHAPTER 9

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### *Jesus and women*

In Genesis 3 verse 16 God says to Eve: "... Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you."

These are much abused words. This abuse comes from people and groupings with very different motives, but united by their fundamental mistake of ignoring the context of these words.

The context of these words is that they are part of God setting out the various destructive consequences flowing from Adam and Eve's assertion of self against God. In other words, consequences not to be strived for, but rather to be fought against. And this fight is universal and has been part of human existence since time immemorial. So thousands of years later in Romans 7 Paul writes: "... For the good that I want to do, I do not do; but the evil I do not want to do, that I do.... O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"

Unlike this verse in Genesis 3, in Genesis 2 there is absolutely no hint of a power relationship between Adam and Eve, of the one ruling over the other. The picture we are presented with is of a man and a woman in a partnership where the one complements the other and where the end result is them becoming "one flesh". Thus whereas in Kahlil Gibran's separateness picture of the relationship between a wife and husband, the vying for power to rule will be ever present, logically this cannot happen where we

are dealing with two people who have become “one flesh”. It can only happen where the two parties seek to retain and assert their separate identities.

Central to the purpose of Jesus is to restore all of creation to what we read in Genesis 1 and 2, prior to Adam and Eve’s placing self before God, and indeed before one another. In this case, to restore the relationship between men and women to one of a partnership where power by virtue of sex, and anything else, simply does not feature, and where the word “rule” has no place.

In other words, in Genesis 3, what we have is merely a description of what is, post the Fall. Jesus points us to what can be, indeed must be and in the fullness of time will be. It is thus a simple nonsense to look to Genesis 3 for guidance as to how we ought to act, and what we ought to strive for. Genesis 1 and 2 must be our target<sup>45</sup>.

45 In our striving for this ideal it is not in the scope of this book to answer the question posed by Paul, quoted above. However some thoughts of Martin Luther King are illuminating. In a sermon entitled “The answer to a perplexing question”, wherein he addressed the question of why we cannot remove evil from earth, towards the end of the sermon he said the following:

“But in spite of these new astounding scientific developments, the old evils continue and the age of reason has been transformed into an age of terror. Selfishness and hatred have not vanished with an enlargement of our educational system and the extension of our legislative policies. A once optimistic generation now asks in utter bewilderment, ‘why could we not cast it out?’

The answer is rather simple: Man by his own power can never cast evil from this world. The humanists hope is an illusion, based on too great an optimism concerning the inherent goodness of human nature.

I would be the last to condemn the thousands of sincere and dedicated people outside the churches who have laboured unselfishly through various humanitarian movements to cure the world of social evils, for I would rather a man be a committed humanist than an uncommitted Christian. But so many of these dedicated people, seeking salvation within the human context, have become understandably pessimistic and disillusioned, because their efforts are based on a kind of self delusion which ignores the fundamental facts about our mortal nature.

Nor would I minimize the importance of science and the great contributions which have come in the wake of the Renaissance. These have lifted us from the stagnating valleys of superstition and half-truth to the sunlit mountains of creative analysis and objective appraisal. The unquestioned authority of the church in scientific matters needed to be freed from paralyzing obscurantism, antiquated notions, and shameful inquisitions. But the exalted Renaissance optimism, while attempting to free the mind of man, forgot about man’s capacity to sin.”

Let us now turn to Jesus and His interaction with women, and see if there is any hint of ruling in His relationship with them as a man.

At the outset it must be noted that at the time both within Jewish and Roman society, central to the relationship between women and men was men using their power to rule over women. In other words a Genesis 3 situation was in place.

As we have seen in the previous chapters in other areas, as usual Jesus did exactly the opposite to what the societal norm was.

Daniel-Rops, in *Jesus and His Times*, referring to the attitude to women at the time, writes: “Upon men alone was laid the obligation of celebrating the Passover. Under the pretext that the law required a man to see that his son was educated in its precepts, his daughter, no instruction at all.”

The approach to women in the wider secular society at the time can be seen in the following extract from RW Lee’s chapter on “Testamentary Succession” in his *An Introduction To Roman–Dutch Law*: “5. **Who may witness a Will.** In the Roman Law ‘those persons only can be witnesses who are legally capable of witnessing a testament. Women, persons below the age of puberty, slaves, persons deaf or dumb, lunatics, and those who have been interdicted from the management of their property or whom the law declares worthless and unfitted to perform the office, cannot witness a will.’ ”

Given this social setting, it is striking in the Gospels how often Jesus engages women intellectually. One of the best examples

is the intellectual sparring with the Samaritan woman at the well. We have already seen how, by simply speaking to her in that public setting, He broke many social taboos. By engaging her intellectually He does not merely break a social taboo, He unmasks one of the spurious premises for men ruling over women, intellectual incompetence.

The response of His disciples mirrors that of the society at the time -“Just then his disciples came back. They marvelled that he was talking with a woman, but no one said, ‘What do you seek?’ or, ‘Why are you talking with her?’ “

In the same encounter Jesus also destroys any argument for saying that He uses only men for sharing His Good News. In John’s Gospel she, not only a woman, but a woman of ill repute and a Samaritan to boot, is the first person used to share Jesus with a Samaritan community. The response of the community to her message is overwhelming, resulting in Jesus and His very reluctant disciples spending two unplanned days in a Samaritan village. Our modern minds simply are incapable of fully grasping the radical nature of this act by Jesus. It is also the first time in John’s Gospel that Jesus ministers to non-Jews.

This conduct of Jesus makes a nonsense of any attempt to argue that women are not able or competent to perform any task set before them by Jesus. (This is not to be confused with the world’s emphasis on equality of outcomes, which I will touch on later.) Furthermore, in this exchange between Jesus and the woman, there is no hint of Jesus ruling by virtue of Him being a man. Indeed there is a complete absence of any underlying power

game between them based on the one being a man, the other a woman.

The Genesis 3 mindset struggles with this. It cannot conceptualise any relationship that does not in some way involve a use of power where one person ends up ruling another, literally or figuratively. The figurative aspect would cover assigning a hierarchy of what value to attach to different functions and jobs in society – so for example being a professional would have more value than being a homemaker. And thus both inside and outside of the church there is this fatal flaw in our thinking, even before the debate concerning authority and roles begin.

*Jesus turns this debate on its head by redefining greatness.*

At the Last Supper and after 3 years with Jesus, the disciples still have not grasped this redefinition by Jesus. And so in Luke 22 we find them vying for prime positions of authority and power when Jesus ushers in the kingdom as they see it – a kingdom which involves vying for power, control and being the ruler. This all for the benefit of one's racial, economic, cultural, gender, sexual orientation group, and of course for oneself. And so, for example, the home becomes a place either for ruling over one's wife or husband or negotiating an agreed distribution of power, rule and privilege within the marriage relationship. The same applies to all other relationships in society, not least of all between men and women.

And all this is premised on an understanding of power and authority aimed at control, at ruling.

First in words in Luke 22 and then very dramatically by His footwashing in John 13, already touched on in earlier chapters, Jesus undoes all this Genesis 3 thinking and unequivocally points us back to how things were in Genesis 1 and 2.

To understand what He does in John 13, context is needed. For practical reasons having one's feet washed before a meal was very important. Given the lack of covered shoes, dusty roads and paths, and that people would not have sat on chairs around a table, but reclined around the table placing their feet pretty close to the nose of the person next to them, having them washed before the meal made for a more appetising meal for all!

If a family was wealthy enough a slave would do this work. If not, a woman in the household would do it. The disciples who had arranged the meal had forgotten this one small detail, an oversight compounded by the fact that no self-respecting circumcised Jewish man would perform this function.

It doesn't take much imagination to picture the scene. There they are on a high, after all the crowds had just given Jesus a tumultuous welcome as He entered into Jerusalem as the one whom they hoped was coming to liberate the Jews from Roman oppression. Hence the argument between them as to who was going to get which portfolio in Jesus's cabinet when He established His kingdom. The last thing on their minds no doubt being that perhaps in the absence of a slave or a woman, one of them should wash the dirty feet present.

Jesus answers their fight for privilege and power in the new kingdom in an astonishing way, at least astonishing for the disciples and the rest of us with our Genesis 3 mindsets.

What makes what He does astonishing, as opposed to highly commendable, is who He is. At the beginning of John's Gospel we have seen that nothing that was created was not created through and by Him. In effect, that not only did He create our ever expanding universe, He holds it together.

By His act of stripping Himself of all His clothes, except his loincloth, and washing the feet of His disciples, not only does He redefine greatness, He also turns our Genesis 3 understanding of power and authority on its head.

In a nutshell, He with authority in word and deed, proclaims that the only legitimate purpose of power, authority and rule is to serve His heavenly Father and our neighbour. As it was in Genesis 1 and 2.

When we come with this mindset of Jesus, everything changes. Quite simply, but with revolutionary consequences, Jesus says it is not about our rights as men and women, husbands and wives, it is about serving His Father and our neighbours, irrespective in what role.

And central to Genesis 1 and 2 is that all people, men and women, were created in the image of God and thus of equal and inestimable value to Jesus. The washing of the feet is a clear allusion to the washing which will take place on the cross. The fact that Jesus died for all people further emphasises the equal

value of each person, woman and man, with no distinction. And so Paul writes that in Christ there is “neither male nor female, Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free man, ... .” They are all of equal worth to Him.

Thus any practice, prescript, theology, governmental policy or whatever which is an affront to or demeaning of not only women as being created in the image of God, but of any class of person in society, reflects a fallen Genesis 3 mindset. This is wholly and fundamentally inconsistent with the teaching and life of Jesus.

This does not mean that there are not different roles for men and women.

It is clear from Genesis 1 and 2 that part of the Creation Ordinance we see there, are 2 distinct sexes. And that the purpose for the 2 sexes is that they complement one another, not rule over one another in the way our Genesis 3 mindsets understand the word rule. Thus for example, where men are commanded to lead in the church, the picture we must use is Jesus washing the feet of His disciples, not the Genesis 3 mindset of ruling.

What is clear from the Gospels is that Jesus did draw a distinction between women and men in terms of how He treated them and included them in His ministry. And so on the whole there seems to be more tenderness and gentleness in His dealings with women than with men. He also only chose men as his apostles and gave men the upfront roles. And yet even in this respect, as we have seen with the Samaritan woman, we cannot place Him in a box.

Another example of not being able to place Him in a box when it comes to women, and everything else, can be gleaned from a few verses in Luke's Gospel, previously referred to by me, which do not get much coverage. At chapter 8 verses 1-3 we read:

“...soon afterward he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the 12 were with him, **and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom 7 demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's household manager, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means.**” (The phrase “many others” and the pronoun, “who”, are both feminine in the original Greek.)

The startling implications of these verses are largely lost in translation to the 21<sup>st</sup> century reader.

These verses follow directly after the encounter between Jesus and a woman of ill repute as He ate in the home of a Pharisee. I have already dealt with this incident where this woman wets the feet of Jesus with her tears and then wipes them with her hair whilst caressing and kissing His feet.

As we read the Gospels there are endless other encounters between Jesus and women which defy any neat conclusion.

Perhaps the most startling one is the resurrected Jesus choosing to reveal Himself first to Mary, already referred to in an earlier chapter. In Jewish society at the time the evidence of two

circumcised men was the norm – and so in John’s Gospel, Peter and John witness the empty tomb. However, only after they leave does Jesus reveal Himself to a person, Mary. As Paul wrote, the resurrection is the very foundation of faith in Jesus – nothing is more important. And yet Jesus chooses first to appear to Mary and tells her to tell others what she has seen. One would have thought that is the end of any argument concerning the centrality of women to Jesus and His ministry. Quite simply, as He sees fit, with no human, cultural or societal constraints.

The ongoing challenge for us, in terms of the Creation Ordinance, is what makes a woman a woman and a man a man, and what is simply culturally determined? That is deserving of a book on its own<sup>46</sup>. Suffice to say that where Scripture roots a command in the Creation Ordinance, such as the prohibition contained in 1 Timothy 2 verses 12 and 13, the church must not allow the world to colonise Jesus and His teaching, no matter how unpopular and politically incorrect. Scripture is not ours to make more acceptable to the world, no matter how offensive it might seem. The evidence from the Gospels clearly supports the view that for Jesus equality of outcomes, so important to feminists, is not what it is about. That this Genesis 3 obsession with outcomes begs a far more fundamental question - to what end?

46 There is recent research which suggests that where there is the greatest equality of opportunity there is the greatest disparity of outcomes chosen by men and women – “The Gender-Equality Paradox in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics Education” by Gijsbert Stoet and David Geary, published in Volume 29, Issue 4, 2018 of ‘Psychological Science’ ( <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797617741719> ). In the abstract the researchers write: “... Paradoxically, the sex differences in the magnitude of relative academic strengths and pursuit of STEM degrees rose with increases in national gender equality...” This would seem to support the Genesis 1 and 2 account of two distinct sexes with distinct complementary natures/roles.

Jesus repeatedly taught that serving self was chasing the wind. That to live in a Genesis 1 and 2 way, in other words how He created us to live, requires a dying to self. That we find our true value in serving our neighbour, not by fighting or negotiating for our rights.

Thus for Jesus the real battle for men when it comes to the abuse and exploitation of women, is to use our power to serve women and fight any structure, policy, cultural practice or whatever which in any way diminishes or detracts from the image of God in them. As previously mentioned, a further challenge for us as men is to discern when it comes to roles what it is that makes us men and what is merely culturally determined. In this ongoing wrestle, to simply say that there must be an equality of outcomes, in effect is to concede that as men we are forever prisoners of Genesis 3. That we are such prisoners of the abuse of power, that we cannot manage the reality of 2 sexes with different roles without repeatedly descending into abuse and exploitation as the generally physically more powerful sex.

And so, captive to a fallen Genesis 3 mindset, the convenient and politically correct answer is simply to do away with the differences between men and women, rather than engaging with how best we can serve one another by complementing one another and with the servant mind of Jesus Christ being obedient to the role He has called us to.

For men, a failure to be a servant leader in their marriage and in the church is simply a repeat of Adam's failure to lead Eve in the garden when she was being tempted by satan. The world

has colonised our thinking under the guise that if we do not imbibe its teaching we are no better than misogynist bigots. And we forget that not only was it Adam to whom God gave the command about which tree not to eat from, but that after they ate from the forbidden tree, God first comes to Adam to give account for this disobedience.

In the same vein in Ephesians 5 I am given the frightening responsibility as a husband, not only to love Roslyn as Christ loved the church (by dying to self for her), but in effect also to present her one day “in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.” That was central to Adam’s role in Genesis 1 and 2, and he failed. The challenge to husbands and men in the church today, is whether they also once again are going to allow themselves to be seduced and duped by satan under the guise of being “progressive”, “enlightened”, “liberated”, or whatever other words satan uses, in convincing us to abdicate from our responsibility as husbands and men within the church.

I end off with what satan used with Eve: “But the serpent said to the woman, You will surely not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil. So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, . . . .”

Or as satan would say today, find your truth, follow your heart, be whatever you want to be, realise your full potential and make Scripture relevant. And above all, it is about you.

## CHAPTER 10

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### *Jesus and money*

The outstanding leg of the trilogy of Richard Foster's "Money, Sex and Power", now remains to be covered.

And on no other subject do we rationalise more than on Jesus and money!

One of our favourites is to emphasise that Jesus never condemned acquiring money, but reserved His judgement for the love of money. And superficially this is correct.

However, on closer scrutiny of what He had to say about money, expressly and implicitly, we are left with an extremely uncomfortable and challenging teaching.

He unambiguously taught that we cannot serve God and money. That we cannot serve two masters, for either we will hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other.

In His stories where we find poor and rich people, the poor are always the heroes, the winners. The rich are always the hardhearted, the ones who get their reward in this life, and the ones blind to the truth of Jesus.

It is also mostly in these stories that Jesus at times in graphic ways speaks of judgement.

The two most chilling examples are found in Luke 16 and Matthew 25.

The Luke passage follows on from His teaching that we cannot serve God and money. There we read that in their response to this the Pharisees, “who are lovers of money”, ridiculed Him. Soon thereafter Jesus tells the terrifying story of the rich man and Lazarus.

In a nutshell, when the rich man asks for relief from his anguish after death he is told that in “your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish.”

No doubt contained in this story is a warning against the conspicuous consumption of the rich man in the face of the overwhelming poverty of Lazarus. Roll on the clock to the 21st century and nothing has changed. We still live in a world of conspicuous consumption in a sea of overwhelming poverty. It is clear from the story that to serve God rather than money, is to share what wealth we have with the poor. Faced with overwhelming poverty, in effect a life of conspicuous consumption is clear evidence of serving money, not God.

Likewise, Jesus’s picture of the final judgement in Matthew 25 leaves us in no doubt about how Jesus requires us to use our money, and indeed our other resources such as time, hospitality and expertise.

And so in the final judgement He says to the sheep, "... you are blessed by my Father,... For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me. Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.' " Jesus then says to the goats that judgment would be visited upon them, because by not ministering to "the least of these, you did not do it to me."

Obviously one does not have to be wealthy to attend to people in material need. Likewise, being poor does not mean you are not serving money rather than God.

What Jesus teaches quite clearly for rich and poor is to have hearts of flesh when it comes to using the resources at their disposal. Fundamental to His teaching is to live with open hands and hearts when it comes to money.

Another way of putting it, is that Jesus says we must love people, not things. The logical consequence of this teaching is that no matter how wealthy we might be, if we love God rather than money then in a sea of poverty we are constrained to live simple lives. In other words a life of conspicuous consumption in the 21st century is simply not an option for a Christ follower.

Ronald Sider in his book, “Rich Christians In An Age Of Hunger”, embraces the view, expressed by many other Christians before him, that being obedient to Jesus means we must live more simply in order that others may simply live. One example referred to by Sider is John Wesley who in the 18th century wrote: “If I leave behind me ten pounds, you and all mankind bear witness against me that I lived and died a thief and a robber.”

Nothing perverts the life and teaching of Jesus more than those who colonise Him to justify their indulgent lifestyles. Any portrayal of Jesus as a means to material prosperity simply needs to be stated to be rejected. If the name of Jesus is used by any person financially to benefit herself, to use biblical language, it is an abomination. Jesus was very specific that if you wanted to be His disciple, you should daily pick up your cross and follow Him. Picking up a cross meant one thing only, sacrifice. The very idea of the cross being used for financial gain indeed should be unthinkable.

Given our Genesis 3 mindset, Jesus’s observation that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God, is not so much a teaching as a simple statement of fact describing our daily struggles when it comes to loving God rather than money.

This is a hard teaching of Jesus, but it is not complicated. Quite simply, He teaches that if we love Him we will love our neighbour and this love requires that we use our money to care for him or her.

## CHAPTER 11

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*“He is a problem!”*

In our time at Oxford in the early 80s, I had the privilege of being part of a team led by the late David Watson. Our aim, in effect, was to help decolonise Jesus for Oxford students so that when they made a decision about Him they at least had a clear view of who they were accepting or rejecting.

At one stage I found myself in a philosophical sparring bout with one of the students. It did not take long for me to realise that I was in the company of an intellect far superior to mine. It seemed like that much of the time I was merely trying to minimise my humiliation in front of the other students present!

After about 30 minutes of this agony for me, no doubt in desperation, I asked him, “What about Jesus?” It was as if I had hit him in the solar plexus, and for a moment he was at last silent. During this brief silence I could see him processing this question in his mind. And no doubt consistent with his sharpness, he immediately grasped the conundrum. A few seconds later he answered with a hint of a smile on his face, “Now He is a problem!”

One of the consistent things about Jesus these past two thousand years, is that no matter what the circumstances, or who the grouping or individual engaging with or about Him is, He is always a problem.

So for those who benefit from how things are and have always been, He is a problem. For those hell bent on destroying what is, He is a problem. For those who want to put women in a box, He is a problem. For those who want equality of outcomes for men and women, He is a problem. For those who want to redefine marriage, He is a problem. For those who fail to treat gay people with love, dignity and respect, He is a problem. For those who seek to justify violence, He is a problem. For those who oppose militant non-violent civil disobedience, He is a problem. For those who vilify the gift of sexuality, He is a problem. For those who seek to justify expressing their sexuality in whatever manner they please, He is a problem. For those wanting to live comfortable lives materially, He is a problem. For those wanting to demonise the wealthy, He is a problem. For those wanting to justify fighting for their cultural or language grouping, He is a problem. For those not prepared to meet people in their particular cultural or language setting, He is a problem. For those putting form above substance, He is a problem. For those disrespectful of form, He is a problem.

And no doubt uppermost in the Oxford student's mind, for those who wish to domesticate and control Him by saying He was merely a good man and teacher, He is a problem. As CS Lewis in essence argued, "Jesus, Lunatic, Liar or Lord?" Jesus simply permits no other options. For how could a man who was no more than a man be good if he misleads people into giving their lives for him based on a lie that he was the Son of God? Let alone how could one accept that such a man was sane, unless He is who He claims to be?

Perhaps the exchange which best illustrates the problematic personality of Jesus, is the one already referred to in Luke 9, where He asks His disciples who the people say He is. “Some say that you are John the Baptist; some, Elijah; and others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets”, the disciples answer.

And then comes that question so consistent with the nature of Jesus – “But who do **you** say, I am?”

2000 years later He asks of all of us the same question. He does not allow us the safe or comfortable option of answering that He was a good man, a good teacher. For unlike Muhammad, the Buddha or any other spiritual leader, He did not point away from Himself to the right moral way, the way to find truth and how to receive life in all its fullness. He pointed **ONLY** to Himself and said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”<sup>47</sup>

If He is not who He claimed to be<sup>48</sup>, then He clearly is a liar, or stark raving mad. As CS Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity*, he either would be “on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg - or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with

47 John 14 verses 5 – 11.

48 Central to the claims of Jesus concerning who He is, is whether or not He did rise from the dead. I look at the evidence for His resurrection in “The Resurrection - a lawyer’s view”. It is available as an eBook or as a hard copy, at no cost. Either google “The Resurrection-a lawyer’s view-Antwoord”, or write to keith@mattd.co.za

any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to. . . . Now it seems to me obvious that He was neither a lunatic nor a fiend: and consequently, however strange or terrifying or unlikely it may seem, I have to accept the view that He was and is God.”

Part of the problem with the options of being evil or a lunatic is that the man we are presented with in the Gospels speaks not of dishonesty or lunacy, but of a man of great courage, compassion, wisdom, sense of humour, truth, integrity and intellect. A man totally at peace with himself. A truly selfless man who poured himself out for others. Indeed the type of person we all would long to be.

As we have already seen, even Josephus described Him as “a wise man . . . (whose) conduct was good, and he was known to be virtuous.”

What I have sought to do in this book is to give a clearer picture of who He is calling on us to accept or reject. Jesus Himself made it absolutely clear that before anyone decides to follow Him, they must count the cost. One cannot do this if one does not know what Jesus is actually like<sup>49</sup>.

Striking in this regard is the complete absence of manipulation by Jesus when it comes to our choice of whether or not we will follow

49 The practical day to day consequences flowing from this decolonization of Jesus, of Jesus showing us the true nature of God, must be the subject matter for another book. Suffice to say that the life style consequences are radical and all embracing. A number of books in “Sources Consulted” would be of great assistance in this regard.

Him. On the contrary, His invitation is: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”<sup>50</sup> Later He emphasizes this<sup>51</sup>: “Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.” He then goes on to tell a parable to help his listeners understand the need for men and women carefully to count the cost to themselves before they decide to follow Him. He concludes: “So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.”

As we saw in chapter 2, the cross meant only one thing, a humiliating and painful death. Not exactly the way to sign up followers! But it is essential that we understand this consequence before we make a decision to follow Him.

The obvious question then is why do people still choose to follow Him?

When people tell me they reject Jesus, I invariably ask them to give me their picture of Jesus. Without fail I tell them that I also reject the Jesus they paint, a picture which invariably has been formed without independent and thorough research.

Anyone reading the Gospels will be struck by how He attracted the marginalised, the immoral, the hopeless, those that respectable Jewish and Roman society regarded with contempt. We all know that we simply do not want to spend time with people who judge us, who want to correct us, who want to

50 Luke 9 verse 23.

51 Luke 14 verses 25 – 33.

improve us, who only see us as cannon fodder for their particular agenda or benefit.

The fact that these people flocked to Jesus can only mean that they saw something else in His eyes, not judgement, but **God's grace, love and forgiveness. The Good News of a new beginning, irrespective of their past. That Jesus had the authority and means to deliver on His promises. And that made the cost of following Him pale into insignificance.**

The challenge to Christ followers, are His words: "As the Father has sent me so I send you."<sup>52</sup> When people look into our eyes, our body language, what do they see? Jesus? Or judgment and self-righteousness? Perhaps that is why so many people reject Jesus, because in our eyes they see a colonised Jesus made in our own image, and not the Jesus of the Gospels.

Of course this does not let anyone off the hook of having to answer Christ's question: "Who do **you** say I am?" And of doing the necessary grappling to find out who it is who is asking them this question. **After all, if He is who He claims to be, what could be more important?**

# APPENDIX

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## *The Great American Novel*

I was born and raised an orphan in a land that once was free  
In a land that poured its love out on the moon;  
And I grew up in the shadows of your silos filled with grain,  
But you never helped to fill my empty spoon.  
And when I was ten you murdered law with courtroom politics,  
And you learned to make a lie sound just like truth;  
But I know you better now and I don't fall for all your tricks,  
And you've lost the one advantage of my youth.  
You kill a black man at midnight just for talking to your daughter,  
Then you make his wife your mistress and you leave her without  
water;  
And the sheet you wear upon your face is the sheet your children  
sleep on,  
At every meal you say a prayer; you don't believe but still you keep  
on.  
And your money says in God we trust,  
But it's against the law to pray in school;  
You say we beat the Russians to the moon,  
And I say you starved your children to do it.  
You are far across the ocean but the war is not your own,  
And while you're winning theirs, you're gonna lose the one at  
home;  
Do you really think the only way to bring about the peace  
Is to sacrifice your children and kill all your enemies?  
The politicians all make speeches while the news men all take  
note,

And they exaggerate the issues as they shove them down our  
throats;  
Is it really up to them whether this country sinks or floats?  
Well I wonder who would lead us if none of us would vote.  
Well my phone is tapped and my lips are chapped from  
whispering through the fence,  
You know every move I make, or is that just coincidence?  
Will you try to make my way of life a little less like jail,  
If I promise to make tapes and slides and send them through the  
mail.  
And your money says in God we trust,  
But it's against the law to pray in school;  
You say we beat the Russians to the moon,  
And I say you starved your children to do it.  
You say all men are equal, all men are brothers,  
Then why are the rich more equal than others?  
Don't ask me for the answer, I've only got one:  
That a man leaves his darkness when he follows the Son

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- [www.truebibleteaching.com](http://www.truebibleteaching.com)



In this book the author quotes a verse from a Pink Floyd song “Comfortably numb”. At one point it goes:

*“My hands felt just like two balloons  
Now I’ve got that feeling once again  
I can’t explain, you would not understand  
This is not how I am  
I have become comfortably numb.”*

The challenge of this book is to all people, whether they accept or reject Jesus, whether they are inside or outside of the church. It poses the question to them whether in their picture of and response to Jesus they “*have become comfortably numb*” as a strategy to avoid the radical consequences to their lifestyles of following the Jesus of the Gospels.

Dealing with some practical issues a refrain of the author is, “*This is a hard teaching of Jesus, but it is not complicated.*” This lies at the heart of the challenge of Jesus.

