



**Auckland Unitarian Church**  
*Love beyond belief*

## **Rabbi Jesus the Teacher**

[Dr Paul Tonson](#) © 26 November 2023

### **The path ahead of us**

**JESUS WITHOUT CHRIST** is a possible title for a book that has been germinating in my mind recently. In preparing for today with Ted, I was delighted to find that numbers of this congregation may share the questions that give rise to such a title. This discovery has confirmed our intention over three sessions to look candidly at the ways we may usefully speak of and even emulate Jesus of Nazareth.

The several names and titles of Jesus found in the New Testament provide useful windows for our quest, for three reasons. First, they provide a readymade, objective starting point. Secondly, they encompass a range of viewpoints, some of which I believe remain meaningful today. Thirdly, they enable us to explore our questions beginning within the history of established Christian traditions found in scripture.

Today we focus upon Jesus addressed as Rabbi, Master and Lord. In a second reflection we will turn to Jesus as Messiah and Saviour. The third presentation will explore a tension between the titles Son of Man and son of GOD.

Before we come to today's three titles, I first make explicit three explanatory points that are relevant to all three presentations I am offering.

### **1. Acknowledging subjectivity**

In any discussion such as this, none of us comes without the prejudice of some long-held views. It has been my custom, therefore, to try to acknowledge up front some of my own subjectivity. The key point is that I am not, nor ever have been, indifferent to the story of Jesus, which I absorbed from my earliest years as I heard my father reading scripture each evening after dinner.

From that context and the good experience of Sunday School, I freely made a response of faith in Jesus at the age of 6, at home with my mother. At age 15, I confirmed my childhood response, again in an individual way, when I got baptised and later became a church member.

However, equally key to my role today is the long and sometimes painful journey of relinquishing most of the theology I earlier took for granted. Circumstantially, only yesterday I was on the phone to a Humanist atheist colleague who asked whether I was a theist. I explained how the idea of a GOD of agency in my life, an interventionist GOD, was no longer meaningful, that I am agnostic about the theology of the creeds, and that I prefer to identify not as a Christian but as a follower of the self-giving Way of Jesus. I live in the world on the edge of the church. I hope the personal 'work' and biblical examination I've done on this journey may open doors for others.

## 2. A key distinction

I can elaborate the thought journey I have taken by reference to a distinction between two viewpoints. One is focused upon the **person** of Jesus, the other upon his **practice**; the first emphasises Jesus as **teacher**, the second attends to **the teaching**. For me, this distinction is like the effect of a prism, dividing the red light of what is hot potato orthodoxy from the cool blue of what is meaningful to me today.

The red viewpoint is evident in the Creeds that emerged after three hundred years of early Christianity and eliminated almost entirely the cool blue. They are preoccupied with 'the Person and Work' of Jesus as the Christ. The discourse about the nature of Jesus as Christ is called Christology. The discourse about the saving work of Christ on the Cross is called Soteriology. My work is a critique of both.

The glaring omission from the creeds is any reference to life in the Kingdom of heaven that was the major theme of the teaching of Jesus. The teaching of Rabbi Jesus that has broad universal relevance was made subservient to the particularity of the Christ as uniquely GOD and Man.

Behind the focus on Christology is the unexpected phenomenon of the inordinate attention to theological language that has dogged the church ever since. Despite biblical exhortations to the contrary, words and beliefs became the measure of truth rather than qualities of life, such as integrity, love and forgiveness. This development was counter cultural for Jews raised on the Torah – meaning 'the teaching' about how to live.

The dominance of theological discourse in Christianity represents the impact of speculative Greek theology and categories of thought that moved the Christian faith a long way from where it began with Jesus calling disciples beside the sea of Galilee. Ironically, it seems to me, we will best understand the truth about Jesus by attending to the way he affirmed ethical teaching written in Leviticus 19 and Deuteronomy 10.

## 3. New Testament Sources

The sources for our reflections include three major traditions: the Synoptic Gospels (Mark, Matthew and Luke), the Pauline traditions (found in his letters and in Acts), and the Johannine traditions (in the Gospel and the Letters of John). Separate reference to each of these sources enables them to function in a comparative manner.

Any one of these sources is sufficient on its own to undergird the red viewpoint, a focus on 'The Person and Work of Christ'. On the surface at least, each of the three sources seems to assume that miraculous elements in the life of Jesus, his healing ministry and his resurrection, are the factors that justify others following him. For almost two thousand years Jesus has been presented as SAVIOUR-MESSIAH, a unique mediator between the divine and human, but perhaps this is a false dichotomy?

However, a closer reading shows that none of these sources is entirely beholden to the red viewpoint. Indeed, in often unremarked ways, each source offers rich texts flowing with 'really cool stuff'! – teaching about a Way of life. This means that as a student of Bible I find in it rich wisdom that remains an alternative to the prevailing orthodoxy and its emphasis on belief.

By way of contrast with the term SAVIOUR, in our discussion I have chosen the word EXEMPLAR to refer to the blue element of traditions about Jesus in which his story directs us to a way of life that emulates his. I hope you will share my sense that the EXEMPLAR traditions in each of the New Testament sources are profound and compelling.

## Jesus of Nazareth – 1. Rabbi 2. Master and 3. Lord

This subject for today is the least complex of the presentations. We will have ample time later for conversation. This time will be important for me to better understand the interests of the congregation in order to better shape my later presentations.

We start with these three names since they reflect what ordinary people saw in Jesus and are not encumbered by the theological understanding his followers later introduced.

The titles '**Rabbi**' and '**Master**' (*didaskolos*) are honorific, expressing the respect offered by the speaker. The first literally means 'my great one' and both refer to the teaching authority of Jesus. The Gospel of John three times equates the two terms (the writer in 1:38, Nicodemus in 3:2 and Mary of Magdala in 20:16). Neither term is very common in the gospels.

Turning to the earliest gospel, Mark first employs the word Rabbi in a speech of Peter on the Mount of Transfiguration (9:5). Luke does the same while Matthew prefers 'Lord'. The same difference appears in the accounts of the father of an epileptic boy (9:17) and of blind Bartimaeus (10:51). The term Rabbi is found again in the mouth of Peter (11:21) when he draws Jesus' attention to the withered fig tree. Mark and Matthew both have Judas referring to Jesus as Rabbi in the story of betrayal.

From a time of later perspective the gospel of John makes more frequent use of the term Rabbi to reflect the attitude of those curious about Jesus. These include the disciples of John (1:38, 3:26), Nathanael (1:49) and Nicodemus, himself a scholar (3:2). Jesus' own disciples addressed him as Rabbi when concerned that he was not eating enough (4:31), when he was in danger of his life (11:8) and when asking him whether blindness was a result of sin (9:2). The curious public use the title after finding Jesus on the other side of the Lake (6:25).

The term **Lord** (*kurios*) also carries an honorific sense and signifies authority by right, as an owner or healer. While it appears in each gospel around ten times more often than the term Rabbi, most references are in parables that refer to GOD as the Lord. These reflect the Jewish term Adonai, used instead of the divine name, YHWH.

The way Matthew refers to Jesus as Lord where Mark has Rabbi, shows the similarity between these words. Jesus addressed as **Lord** (Gk: *kurios*) is more common in stories of people in need. These include a Canaanite woman (Mk 7:28) and Peter walking on the water (14:28) and five other examples.

[The father of a sick child (Mk 9:24), a leper (Mat.8:2), a centurion with a sick servant (8:8), the fearful disciples on the stormy sea (8:25), two blind men (9:28).]

We find Jesus called Lord also in stories reflecting his teaching authority. Peter asking how often to forgive (Mat 18:21); the disciples wondering why Jesus uses parables (12:41), and four other examples.

[The disciples asking if Jesus would call down fire on the Samaritans (Lk 9:54), the 70 disciples joyfully reporting back (10:17), asking to be taught to pray (11:1), wondering about the end time (17:37).]

There are also three contrasting examples of the would-be disciple who first wanted to bury his father (Matt. 8:21), Zacchaeus who wanted to immediately make amends (Lk 19:8), and the disciples asking whether to strike the soldiers in the Garden of Gethsemane (22:49), all of whom address Jesus as Lord.

A development in understanding of Jesus appears where the gospel writers themselves, not just their characters, occasionally refer to him as 'the Lord' instead of as Jesus. These texts represent one step towards a unique understanding of the identity of Jesus. However they are not necessarily an affirmation of divinity. For example, Mark as narrator twice refers to Jesus as the Lord at the time of his ascension (Mk 16:19f; Mat 28:6).

'The Lord' is especially frequent in the Gospel of Luke. The Lord appointed disciples (Lk 10:1); They did not find the body of the Lord (Lk 24:3) and six other examples.

[The Lord said to Peter ... (Lk 22:31, 61). The Lord spoke to the Pharisees about the outside of the cup (11:39). The Lord had compassion on the widow of Nain (7:13). The Lord asked his disciples: 'Who is the wise servant...' (Lk 12:42). The disciples asked the Lord to increase their faith (17:5). The Lord said: 'Listen to the unjust judge' (Lk 18:6).]

Of particular interest is one text where Jesus refers to himself as 'the Lord', advising his disciples what to say if someone questions their taking a donkey for Jesus to ride (Mk 11:3). However, this self-reference is carefully qualified in Matthew's reports that Jesus was not impressed by people calling him Lord (7:21, 25:44f).

The various examples from the Gospel of John reflect the two patterns in the Synoptic gospels, both Jesus addressed as Lord and the writer calling him 'the Lord'. Only John reports Jesus referred to as 'my Lord' by Thomas.

However, John surprises us with his report that Jesus saw himself not as Lord over them as if they were servants, but as their friend (15:15). This is an example of the exemplary Jesus presented in a few texts in John that place Jesus on a level playing field with his followers. Indeed, the text stresses the point by asserting that the disciples now know everything Jesus could teach them and are equipped to follow him as exemplar in their later mission work.

In summary, the gospel texts show clearly that in his day, Jesus was primarily recognised as a Rabbi, a teacher of wisdom. This is made explicit in Mark 1 where Jesus taught in Capernaum and astounded the people first by his teaching authority. Mark several times gives priority to his teaching role over his healing role that was also astonishing. At my induction to my second ministry, the speaker challenged me to astound this congregation with the implications of the gospel. Do we still find in it something astounding?

Around these gospel texts we find the question as to how Jesus could be so authoritative (Mark 11:28). This is a segue towards our second discussion about Jesus identified as messiah or as son of GOD. Here is a question for us: does the wisdom of his teaching depend on such claims or is it freely available for anyone to discern?

## **Meditation / Discussion Question**

Putting aside all that others have said to us about Jesus as Christ, Saviour and God, what gospel story of him in his *humanity*, and of his encounters with others, is most compelling to you and your way of life?