



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Jesus without Christ (2)

Dr Paul Tonson Ph D (Deakin)

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From my earliest years I've known about Jesus of Nazareth and in my youth I was especially drawn to him as a charismatic individual. Later I loved the idea of him as a sign of contradiction, a life-long challenge to my easy preconceptions and natural prejudices. Last week a number of you recalled elements of Jesus' surprising behaviour and message, e.g. towards women, towards authorities, and confronting his parents and disciples.

BUT

All this time in the church I've been told that he is uniquely GOD and MAN, the messiah and my saviour, Jesus Christ our Lord. In hindsight, I have never needed that bit! Now I have the tools to show from the NT many strong threads to understand Jesus as an **exemplar** of a life we can all enter into.

Jesus as an exemplary figure lives out a path of purpose and empowerment that others can emulate. This understanding of him offers a gospel that is egalitarian and universalist. This is the direction of my three addresses.

Jesus of Nazareth as 4. the Messiah and 5. Son of God

Here we have two names that most determined the Christology of the creeds and preaching ever since. The term Messiah appears as 'Christ' at the very beginning of both Mark and Matthew. Mark also has the Son of God there: "Beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, son of the God." Matthew reads: "An account of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham." Both focus on sonship to legitimize the place of Jesus within Jewish tradition, but one is a human sonship, one divine.

However, these interpretative prefaces were written after the gospel writers had assembled and edited their narratives. A different understanding arises when we let these narratives speak for themselves?

Messiah - Mark followed his mentor Paul, in placing Jesus within the messianic expectations of Judaism. His most explicit reference appears at the crux of the gospel (8:29), where the story turns towards the passion narrative. Here we read Peter's affirmation: 'You are the Christ.' All but one of Mark's references to Christ use the definite article, taking for granted that Jesus is uniquely the messiah of the Jews.

However, the New Testament idea of Jesus as 'the messiah' is a long way from the original idea in the Older Testament. The noun Messiah comes from the verb to anoint (with oil). A priest, a prophet or a king, or anyone with a leadership role could be anointed to symbolise a divine approval, e.g. Samuel anointed Saul and later David.

Messiah is not a personal title or status. Rather 'the anointed' is a metaphor for a role.

Most telling are two oracles in the prophet Isaiah that refer to king Cyrus of Persia, first as 'my shepherd, and second as the Lord's 'anointed' (Isa 44:28; 45:1). He did not need to be a Jew or believer to fulfil the role of returning Hebrew exiles to Israel, nor did he need to see himself as anointed.

In an equally significant messianic text in Isaiah 61, the writer affirms that the Lord has anointed him to preach to Israel the good news of liberation. This is the text attached to Jesus' ministry in Luke 4.

- A. Divine anointing may embrace anyone regardless of their ethnicity.
- B. The identity of the anointed is incidental to the events in which they participate.
- C. An anointed message is as significant as anointed action.

Son of God - Mark's three references to '**son of GOD**' are open to a similar investigation as they appear both with and without the definite article. In 3:11, Mark reports that the evil spirits shouted: 'You are the son of the God'. But in the words of the centurion below the cross we have the indefinite, as also found in Mark's preface: "Truly this man was son of the God" (15:39).

We may not assume that Mark intended to claim a unique divine nature in Jesus. The same may be said of both Matthew and Luke. In the story of the Sanhedrin trial of Jesus, Luke adds in the questions: 'Are you the son of God'. Perhaps he did not consider that a Son of God as a divinity was not what the Jews expected of their messiah. In short, the synoptics use of the term 'son of God' does not carry the freight of divinity. To my mind this means that in these gospels, Jesus may be seen as an exemplary human being.

The plot thickens when we turn to the Gospel of John, and the Letters where we are confronted by seemingly contradictory views. John's much longer preface elevates the figure of Jesus to be the pre-existent divine word and only begotten son of GOD: "No man has seen God at any time; **the only begotten Son**, which is in the bosom of the Father, he has declared him" (1:18). 'God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son...' (3:16).

John reinforces his presentation of Jesus as a revelation of GOD by his unique use of the "I Am" statements e.g. "I am the Bread of life - that came down from heaven" (6:35, 51). These statements hint at the divine revelation in the name YHWH ("I am who I am"; Exod 3:14).

John is responsible for the most exclusive statement in the Bible in the speech of Jesus to Thomas, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me'. BUT:

It is also John who provides the most powerful expressions of Jesus as EXEMPLAR. In so doing he affirms our capacity for unmediated spiritual experience. This democratization of spirituality stands over against the dominant theology of Jesus as an essential mediator between God and Humanity.

1. An understanding that the disciples may enter fully into the spiritual life of Jesus is presented in John 14:16f where Jesus promises the gift of the Spirit which had been the impetus in his own life (Luke 4:1).
2. In the upper room (20:21f) Jesus teaches "if you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any they are retained". As in the Lord's prayer, human beings not GOD are the agents of forgiveness.

3. Much has been made of the text: "I and my Father are one" (John 10:27), not least in the long raging debate whether the creed should read "of one substance with the father" or "of like substance with the father". This ancient nitpicking is totally subverted by the words of the great prayer of Jesus. Four times Jesus asks that the disciples may be one "even as you and I, Father, are one" (17:11, 21f). Jesus envisages his disciples experiencing a relationship to the Father that is no different from his own.

4. Unlike the Synoptics, John's Gospel explicitly affirms the exemplary role of Jesus:

"As the Father has sent me, so send I you" (20:21).

"As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you" (15:9, 12);

"Love one another as I have loved you" (13:34; 15:12).

In these texts John reflects the exemplary role attributed to GOD in the Torah: "I have no favourites: I love the Stranger, and you must love the Stranger" (Deut. 10:17ff).

5. John as evangelist trumps his good news with an even stronger affirmation (14:1-12): "Very truly I say to you, He that believes on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto my Father" i.e. and then the Spiritual anointing of Jesus will come upon the disciples.

6. Within this viewpoint we see that even the terms divine Word and Light in John 1 are as much about Jesus' role as an authoritative and enlightening teacher as about his divine nature. This perspective is echoed in a statement attributed to Jesus by Matthew: "You are the light of the world" (Matt 5:14). The divine light John describes in Jesus is also in his followers.

The stark contrast in the Gospel of John is even more apparent in the First Letter of John (4:7-12):

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

The only path to a resolution of such an apparent dichotomy is not to disregard one side but to interpret each articulation in terms of the other. They imply that the conventional dichotomy between human and divine is untrue. Together these texts present a high view of humanity as spiritually aware and dynamic.

We can at least take the exclusive references to Jesus as affirming that the high view of humanity seen in his life is an essential truth. For us today, this means living and teaching to affirm and empower others; to practice an earthy, embodied spirituality; to live as a sign of contradiction in our culture to every prejudice and sense of entitlement and Othering; and to find the shalom of a 'saved' life through relinquishment of both material burdens and the burden of false thinking about ourselves and the world.

The relevance of this study for contemporary living.

An exemplary understanding of Jesus with an affirmation that one may emulate his life to the full is good news for a contemporary reader in a post-enlightenment world. If discovering Jesus I am inspired by his charisma, his wisdom, his compassion, his dedication and his courage, I will leave my nets and follow his Way of self-giving with the conviction I can attain to the standard he has demonstrated.

This contrasts markedly with conventional teaching that Christians can make it only on the coat tails of Jesus as a mediator and vicarious saviour, that we cannot know God without him, that we are guilty until he forgives, that we are on the way to hell until he ransoms us. There is for me no good news in this.

Rather it means a sad resignation to something far less than the glory of a mature human being.

To identify as people of The Way of Rabbi Jesus of Nazareth is to return to the heart of the Torah, meaning teaching about living with love of the stranger (Deut. 10:17ff; Lev 19:34f). It is to believe with Jeremiah that the Torah can be internalized [written on our hearts] and we can all share the spiritual wisdom we need [knowing the Lord] without another to teach us (Jer 31:31-34).

Following the Way of Jesus we enter into the spiritual endowment and responsibility (anointing) proclaimed in Isaiah 61 and Luke 4. For me this democratization of religion is the enduring and transforming 'power of the gospel' that the Christian tradition holds to share with all.

Jesus' exemplary life and death, not his resurrection, draws me.

Meditation / Discussion time

What experiences have we had of the challenge of questioning prevailing views?

This might be in our home or neighbourhood, within our faith community, within education or employment, or within wider social and political structures.