

VPBC 22nd January 2017

The Jesus we never knew (x04). God in translation. The place of culture and context

Matthew 3:1-12

We continue this morning thinking about the “Jesus we never knew”. The theme for this year. We spend time exploring and getting to know the Jesus of history and of personal experience better. To do some new thinking and discovery that will help us reflect about ourselves but also the message we are passing on and I living more faithfully the Jesus call to discipleship.

In thinking about the place of culture and context it involves us in dialogue, conversation. Understanding. An openness. A willingness to be changed and not simply adopt but adapt. Cultures do not stand still. They change and are influenced by other cultures. But as we take seriously the way God speaks and acts into a particular culture- that of the Jews – it helps us understand now that the Good News can challenge and change our own cultures. At Pentecost, there was wind, fire and the coming of the Spirit. All things that are mentioned in the passage in Matthew that John talked about. Not in a desert but in a city where Jewish people from every country in the world, including converts to Judaism were gathered who heard the great things God had done in their own languages. Where what God had promised had become true before their eyes “ *I will pour out my Spirit on everyone. Your sons and daughters will proclaim my message, your young men will see visions and your old men will have dreams. Yes, even on my servants both men and women.*”

The story of Jesus explained into that moment, that context led to the realisation of a need to a change of mind and a call to respond. To turn away from the past and be immersed in God’s new promised life, breaking in, to embrace forgiveness and mercy and receive the gift of God’s Spirit. The message changed people’s lives within culture and within community that began to create deep changes within that culture. But it took ten years and a new vision revealed by God for the young church to realise from the house of the Roman Centurion Cornelius that God was not simply God of the Jews but God of all. Peter now understood this and that it was now clear (Acts 10;11) in having remembered what the Lord had said “*John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit. It is clear that God gave the gentiles the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Christ, who was I then to stop God!*”,

So by the Council of Jerusalem Peter defends the translation of the gospel across cultures without having to adopt the culture it came from- backed up by James “*that we should not trouble the gentiles who are turning to God.*” That there are, however, simple observable points of common practice to be adopted (not imposed) so that neither will be an offence to the other. As Peter argues (Acts 15;8) “*God who knows the thoughts of everyone shows his approval of the Gentiles by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he had to us. He made no difference between us and them, he forgave their sins because they first believed.*”

This would appear to imply that there is no place for one culture to dominate another. Or require people to be absorbed into another culture but in each culture God speaks and accepts. There are truths that transcend all cultures but these can be embodied, celebrated and revealed in the context of each culture and needs to be.

In the west, we have co-opted and assimilated a version of Jesus that fits into our world view that privileges our view of the world. We have often imposed that version of Jesus on others. There is always the task of translation because the Good News is for all cultures and God loves all ethnicities and cultures equally and in each culture Jesus is to be made known and the call and challenge to follow him made real. This becomes the basis for Jesus transforming culture and we are to find new and faithful ways to translate the good news living both in our own culture and between cultures the story of Jesus.



So in this picture of John the Baptist the 16th century artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1520 – 1569) he translates the relevance of John the Baptist to the Dutch countryside. John the Baptist is virtually lost in the colourful throng of peasants, ripples, gypsies, mischievous children climbing trees. The eyes are then drawn to the river and a distant church before settling on the hair shirted figure of John himself. A man of the people, for the people. Not aloof but connected and caught up with the lives of the common people. Yet this image is produced and caught in the middle of war (the Eighty Years' War) . Of religious power, prestige, clerical control and dominance of a church that wished to crush and destroy such “bottom up” approaches to faith who as ordinary people drew resources and inspiration from the biblical stories and recasts it in their own context.

We can no more understand Jesus, apart from his Jewishness than understanding Martin Luther King apart from his experience as an African American and race in the United States. To get to know anyone else's story we need to learn something of their culture, family life and background. To make this point further here is a clip from [Mottel Baleston](#), part of Ariel ministries, which from a background as a Jewish believer in Messiah Jesus tries to relate his own Jewish heritage to Jesus the Jew and dialogue with other believers in deepening and expanding the faith that we share.

Jesus lived at a time of growing political tension and a “Jews First” movement acting as a backlash against foreign cultures. In this case Greek. He entered into the way of life, language, customs and worship of the Jewish people and spoke into their values and ways of doing things in ways that his fellow Jews would understand- even if they didn’t agree with it or found it difficult.

A pogrom by foreigners was his family’s experience of Herod’s dynasty who was looking to specifically kill Jesus. If Jesus had been alive at the time of the Third Reich, as the German theologian Jurgen Moltmann has pointed out, he would have been a target for the gas chambers. Part of a long story of victimhood, sorrow and fragility of life as refugees and trying to rebuild their lives in the land of others.

After the first century, very few Jews converted to Christianity until recent days .

Rejected and blamed for Jesus death some Jews began a counter campaign of rumour, disinformation and parody. In history Easter and Christmas became time of great fear and vulnerability living in Christian lands for many Jews. Is it possible to read the gospels without reading it with our cultural blinkers on? We read it through church history and the Jews read it with suspicion and are scandalised by its claims. For Muslims, they read it through the lens of the Qur’an as the final revelation of which Judaism and Christianity offer at best background prophets until the final prophet turned up.

So, let’s try from a distance of a lot of history, cultural baggage and the distance of 2,000 years to enter into the world of first century Palestine and see what we find. At the height of the Roman empire peace was achieved at a sword point. Most peoples co-operated – except Palestine. Caesar Augustus was the deity, the restorer of the world, re-uniting the empire after civil war. Peace. Security. Entertainment. Protection. Reliable justice. Good government and trading environment. Greek culture, however, predominated. People dressed in Greek fashion, played Greek sports, spoke Greek, adopted Greek architecture. There was diversity and tolerance of world views and gods if you were willing to accept Roman gods as top gods. The Jews did not. Some resisted Greek culture. Stoking hatreds from history from past Greek dictators who inspired a revolt led by the Maccabees and to a famous victory still celebrated at the feast of Hanukah. This lasted a hundred years before the Romans rolled in and then Herod the Great set up shop. A brutal rule that drained people’s spirit and resources. An earthquake in 31Bc left 30,000 dead and the economy in ruins. Jews called such tragedies the “pangs of the Messiah” looking for a future deliverer. They lived in small hamlets, refugee camps, in the middle of a more modern alien culture. Facing curfews, crackdowns, discrimination, crippling taxation led to radicalisation, valance, factions and fighting. There were 8 million Jews in the empire. 2million lived in Palestine. They were regarded as misfits, suspect and stand offish. Living separate lives from their neighbours but they did have at least, legal status. As long as they cooperated and submitted to government interference and control they were left alone. But if they choose to resist they would face harsh persecution. There were a network of spies to inform on noncompliance. Some favoured collaboration. Others – serration. The main groups included

The Essenes. They are not mentioned in the gospels but they were the real separatists. Pacifist. Purist. Aesthetic. Living simple lives and sharing common goods. They believed that such faithful living would encourage Messiah to come.

Zealots. They were for throwing out the foreigners. They acted as the “morals police” to keep Jews in line. Marrying a foreigner could get you murdered. They also specialised in acts of terrorism against the roman occupation and government.

Then there were those that collaborated. The Jewish council, the Sanhedrin, cooperated and in return received privileges and small powers. They passed on intelligence for signs of insurrection or dealing with it themselves to avoid harsh reprisals.

The Sadducees turned it into an art form. They did not believe in an afterlife or that god intervened on earth. They were humanists, embracing Greek culture. They were wealthy, comfortable, connected. The Establishment.

The Pharisees might be likened to the middle class. Highly educated, living to tough standards of purity and using boycotts and exclusions to non-observant Jews. Yet while believing in the coming Messiah they were sceptical of imposters that bring more disasters. They picked their battles carefully but also bravely using nonviolence and passive resistance and protest at risk to their own lives on red line issues of principle in facing down the roman authorities. They were largely orderly, good citizens.

Jesus, however, managed to confound and alienate all the major groups. Mostly folk wanted to preserve what was distinctly Jewish and build a fence around their culture to save and liberate them from the corrupting influence of other cultures around.

So, when another report started circulating of a long-awaited prophet turning up in the desert of a wild man in a camel skin hopes of the Messiah were rekindled. Although John said very clearly that *“I am not the Messiah“* he raised expectations and hopes even higher by talking about one who would soon appear. These groups followed John and Jesus around, questioning, testing, measuring, sceptical.

Other gospels like Luke give more of a backstory than Matthew. Matthew assumes his readers already know the story. It is written in Greek but to a mainly Jewish readership. So unlike Mark, he doesn't explain Jewish customs and does not use the word “God” to avoid upsetting Jewish sensibilities but uses the phrase “kingdom of heaven.” That said he still adopts a universal outlook for the good news which was upsetting enough.

The Pharisees and the Sadducees only appear twice in Matthew. Here and at 16:1 *“some Pharisees and Sadducees who came to Jesus wanted to trap him, so they asked him to perform a miracle for them, to show that God approved of him.”* His answer (v4) was *“ the only miracle you will be given is the miracle of Jonah.”* They were the two most prestigious groups that came. Jesus summary of them is in John 21:32 *“for John the Baptist came to you showing the right path to take and you would not believe him. But the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. Even when you saw this you did not later change your minds and believe him.”*

There are four themes Prepare!

The desert place of preparation

The baptismal preparation of John

The preparation for the Spirit of God. We don't have time to look at them all in detail

Prepare!

So, the call to prepare for the salvation to come by the arriving Messiah. Roads were normally tracks on hard baked earth. but perhaps Isaiah 40, which John quotes from refers to the causeways Solomon built of black basalt leading up to Jerusalem for pilgrims and his own processions. He built it but the local inhabitants had to make sure it was maintained and ready for use.

The desert place of preparation

The desert plays a big place in Jewish thought. Moses. David. All had desert experiences and of course there was Elijah- popping in and out of the desert to challenge King Ahab. John is acting as the new promised Elijah of Malachi 4:5 *"But before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes I will send my prophet Elijah."* A herald of the Messiah.

The baptismal preparation of John

As part of that getting ready for the impending Messiah was John's baptism that was shockingly new. Originally just for gentiles this was now a once off immersion for Jews. To be the people of God, heritage was not enough. It looked forward to judgement that was coming in a river, as in Ezekiel's vision, full of life. Flowing and bringing mercy, forgiveness and life. But religious rule keeping was not enough but acting from the heart and from the heart enlivened fruit that was in keeping with repentance. Belief and behaviour went together. So, said John be content with your pay. Don't tax more than you legally need to. Don't abuse people and take advantage of them even if it is within your power to do so.

The preparation for the Spirit of God

Then comes the promise of the Spirit. God's indwelling presence in people's lives bringing revelation, hope, cleansing and new power to live different as God changes our heart in the inside. This is about to happen. And with the wind of the Spirit that is coming it is also a wind that sifts, sorts, assesses, judges like wind and fire.

So, John's message is also a severe warning which the legalism and rationalism of the **Pharisees and Sadducees was not enough. Why then call them snakes?** It seems a bit harsh.

Some think that it is what happens as the harvesters harvest the snakes slither out of the field away from the scythes or flee desert fires. Others think it refers to Jeremiah 46:22 where Egypt runs away like a hissing snake as the enemy's army approaches. In this case the Babylonian army. It was escape from exile from the hands of the Babylonians which was the background for their expectation of the coming Messiah in hoping for a repeat performance but in fact they were the ones on the wrong side of history.

But this is not John's job. His task in comparison is too low even for a disciple of a rabbi, to remove shoes. His job is not to be compared to the effective baptism that is

coming in the person of Jesus, yet to be revealed. An overwhelming flood of the Spirit, a drenching. Being plunged and immersed as the Spirit is out poured. A real cleansing, not just by washing but by fire. God's covenant people purified in a spirit of holiness to fulfil Zechariah 13:9 *"I will test them as gold is tested. Then they will pray to me and I will answer hem. I will tell them they are my people and they will confess that I am their God."*

Yet the fire that purifies will also destroy all that is worthless. The winnowing shovel lifting into the wind the grain and allowing the wind to blow away the chaff into a fire that is unquenchable but not everlasting.

So, there is both judgment and salvation at the dawning day of the Messiah.

To finish we have only just started on a journey which will be complicated and difficult but in the end worthwhile. How we, through the help of the Spirit of God sift and discern what is the dross and the nuggets of our culture and context in understanding the Jesus story. What has real and lasting value to be included in God's new creation. To discover in Jesus the Jew how that translates with God's help into our own day in our context to live more faithfully and fully Jesus' call to become and make disciples in our day and generation amongst the culture and peoples of the earth for the healing of the nations.