

What Really Happened with Jesus

Written for Philip by William Loader

People in Galilee where Jesus grew up were not happy. Many families did not have enough to eat. The rich people kept money for themselves and did not share. The very rich people were friends with Antipas, the ruler, and they made people work for them and paid them very low wages. On top of that they made them pay very high taxes.

Some people said: "It's hopeless. No one cares about us. God doesn't even care about us any more like he did in the past when he rescued our people from Egypt and sent Moses as their leader." Others said: "Yes, God does care about us. God wants us to fight Antipas and fight the Roman empire and set up God's kingdom of justice and peace under a king like David of old, an Anointed Messiah, a Christ." Probably they invited Jesus to join their little army of rebels to fight for change. Jesus also wanted change. He also wanted God's kingdom of justice and peace, but he had a new idea of how make it happen.

When he was about 30 and had worked for a while with his dad as a builder, his family probably told him: "Jesus, it's time to get married and have a family." That's what most men did when they were around 30. Instead Jesus chose to do something different. He had learned from his friend, John, called John the Baptist, that there was another way of bringing change. It's by changing people. "Get them to come to me and I will baptise them in the Jordan River. That will be a sign that they want to change and begin a new way of living."

Jesus joined John and of course he let John baptise him, because he wanted to spend his life telling people about this new way of living. So after Jesus was baptised, he started going out to the villages round about and saying: "God cares. God really does care." People who were sad and hungry and angry began to listen to him. He told them to come together and care for each other. He taught them to share. They began to find that when they shared their food, no one was hungry. Things began to change. But much more needed to happen.

He found ways of healing people who were blind or deaf or couldn't walk properly. Now they could walk and they could work and earn money to help themselves. He also met people who had become greedy, especially men who collected taxes for Antipas and kept money for themselves. They used to have parties. Many people hated them and many local religious condemned them as very bad sinners and told them that God hated them, too. Jesus went along to their parties and told them that God did not hate them. God loved *them*, too. God did not hate them. Some of them, like Zacchaeus, were amazed and were changed from being greedy to being generous.

Wherever people were hated or despised because they were sinners or because they were from another race or culture, Jesus came along and said: "No, you matter, too, to God." He even did that once when people wanted to tell parents they should leave their kids at home, because people thought children didn't matter. Some men thought that only men mattered, not women and certainly not children. Jesus challenged those attitudes.

He often talked about his vision for the future. One day, he told people, there will be a great feast and there will be a place there for everyone: women, children, men, the weak and the strong, old people and young people, people of different cultures and races, people who spoke different languages. He also started having little simple meals where everyone was invited and this is where Mass or Holy Communion started, because he had such a meal on the night before his death with his disciples and said: this is the way to remember me whenever you do this. When you do this and eat the bread and drink the wine, I will be there with you, even though you won't be able to see me.

Jesus knew that what he was doing was good news for the poor and hungry, but he also knew that bigger change was necessary and that got him into trouble. He set off from Galilee to Jerusalem at the time when his fellow Jews were celebrating the festival of the Passover, when they remembered how God used Moses to liberate the people from Egypt. Some people, especially the rich people and some of the religious leaders who were their friends did not like what Jesus was doing in Galilee. "What will happen if he goes up to Jerusalem where the temple authorities and Roman rulers are?" they wondered.

Jesus took his message of change through sharing up to Jerusalem. What were the authorities to do? Like the rebels, Jesus wanted God's kingdom of justice and peace to be set up in Jerusalem. The Roman ruler, Pontius Pilate, had already executed such rebels before. Rome did not want change. Jesus had to be stopped. That was how Pilate saw it. That was also how the temple authorities saw it. They were afraid of Pilate. He might get so mad that he would stop worship at the temple.

So the temple authorities and the Romans had Jesus arrested. Judas, one of Jesus' closest inner circle, told them where he was. So a band of temple guards and Roman soldiers found Jesus in Gethsemane, a park with olive trees just outside the city walls, and arrested him. First the temple authorities with the high priest tried to tell him to go away or stop causing a stir by his teaching. Then they handed him over to Pilate.

Either Jesus, himself, or some of his friends, began to claim that Jesus was the one to become the king like David, the Messiah, the Christ to set up the new kingdom of justice and peace. So Pilate interviewed Jesus and finally convicted him of wanting to be "the king of the Jews". For Pilate Jesus was just another troublemaker. He used to release a rebel leader from prison at the festival and offered to release Jesus instead of Barabbas a rebel leader, but the crowd preferred Barabbas. For Pilate it was straightforward: execute Jesus in the usual way by hanging him on a cross near the entry into the city along with two other rebels on either side of him. Pilate used to do this as a warning to people not to commit the same crime. The crime of Jesus: wanting to be "King of the Jews".

To Pilate Jesus was just another troublemaker wanting change. He must have known, however, that Jesus was a bit different from the other rebels because he didn't round up his disciples and kill them too. That was usually what he did, but he probably said to his guards: "Don't bother arresting them. They don't have weapons and if we kill him, they'll run away back to Galilee and that will be the end of it."

That is, in fact what happened. Peter and the disciples ran away back to Galilee. You can imagine how they might have felt. They had believed that Jesus was telling them about how God is and what God wants and now he had been proved wrong. It was a disaster. Peter apparently went back fishing and must have felt terrible.

Until – until he had a very special experience. Like Paul later on the road to Damascus, Peter suddenly saw Jesus, as in a daytime dream. “He is not dead. He is alive! God didn’t give up on him, but instead God raised him up from defeat and death. He is now with God and seeing him like this has convinced me that everything Jesus said was right after all.”

This was a huge turnaround. He told the other disciples. Instead of feeling sad and hopeless, now they were full of hope and joy. So Peter and the disciples headed back as fast as possible to Jerusalem. They rounded up the other disciples and restarted what Jesus had begun all over again. They formed communities of sharing. They celebrated their special mini-meals together, which later became the mass or eucharist.

Some of their members also began telling stories about the tomb where Jesus had been placed, claiming that now it was empty. “Did someone steal his body?” asked some. “No, he must have been transformed into a spiritual body when God took him up to heaven,” others said.

The disciples were very daring when they decided to make these claims about Jesus. Some of them were arrested by the temple authorities and told to stop what they were doing. Peter and the others refused. Some fled from Jerusalem to other cities where there were fellow Jews. And so the message began to spread beyond Jerusalem to cities round about, like Antioch and Damascus in Syria, and eventually it reached Rome itself, the centre of the empire. That could have been really dangerous, but the numbers were so small that the authorities in Roman probably did not notice them at first. About 15 years later we know they heard about disputes about Jesus in the Jewish communities and expelled Jews from Rome, but they soon returned again.

It wasn’t until about 50-60 years later that these Jesus followers were picked up on the radar and seen as dangerous. Mainly it was their refusal to honour the Roman emperor as a god. This led to Christians being killed. All this time more and more people came to believe in the message of Jesus. People who had learned to read and write – there were not many of them – began to collect the sayings and stories about Jesus together, especially because the first disciples had died and they wanted to keep their memories alive. Mark was the first, writing his gospel 40 years after Jesus, followed by Matthew and Luke improving on and expanding Mark with new material they shared or with other special information and finally John, who rewrote the whole story like a play. Letters which Paul wrote, one of the pioneers who helped spread the movement, were collected.

The followers of Jesus were scattered across the whole of the Roman empire and needed to remain connected. That’s how the church came into being. There needed to be people who travelled and kept the various groups connected – no email, no phones, just people and letters which they had to deliver, themselves. Copies of letters and gospels were helpful. They also needed to appoint group leaders and regional leaders. That was how bishops came to be. The bishop of Rome became very important and has been important ever since. We know him as the pope.

Since those days the faith of Jesus has spread throughout the whole world. The message of Jesus, bringing hope to the hungry, forgiveness to all, and a vision of change to make the world a kinder and fairer place, is still the good news and what our world needs. To be a follower of Jesus and go to communion is to say: I want to live the Jesus way.

Over the centuries there have been lots of ways of telling the story of Jesus. Some of them capture what Jesus lived and died for. Some of them seem to miss the point of his message. Easter has become a celebration of new life represented by the Easter egg. The egg is the beginning of new life and new hope. We miss the point of the Easter story if all we think about is: lots of chocolate for me! But we don't miss it if we enjoy the celebration (and the chocolate) because we are glad that the way of Jesus survived and is still the way for us to live today.

In the same way the Christmas stories celebrate who Jesus was. They are not really history, but more like paintings or videos which highlight key things about Jesus. So Luke gives us a picture of Jesus as God's Son and the Messiah, the Christ, lying in an animals' food box and angels sing "Peace on earth". This stands in sharp contrast to what Rome claimed about their emperors. Their emperor called himself Son of God and Saviour, sat on a glorious throne and claimed to bring peace on earth.

Christians retold the story of the death of Jesus in ways that similarly challenged Rome's might. Jesus rode into Jerusalem as king of the Jews not on a wonderful chariot surrounded by an army like the emperors used to do in Rome, but on a donkey! Jesus was crowned? Yes, but with a crown of thorns. Jesus had a throne? Yes, it was a cross! They challenged the idea that the most important person was the one with the most power and glory and instead claimed; the most important person in God's eyes is the person who shows love and is prepared to suffer for it.

As with Easter, so with Christmas, if all you think about is presents, then you miss the point of the story of Jesus. But if you enjoy receiving but also giving presents, then you show that you understand the way of Jesus which was about sharing: giving and receiving gifts. Jesus wanted people to know that God loved them, but also therefore to love others and to love themselves.

There are still people in our world who are hungry and sad. There are also people who just need to find a way to live which brings them joy and brings joy to others. So there is still a need for people to follow the way of Jesus and be part of his ongoing story.