

## Who Do You Say That I Am? By Duncan Appleford

The story of Jesus of Nazareth has provoked much speculation over the centuries. Many writers have tried to fill in the blanks left by the Canonical Gospels. His relationship with Mary Magdalene was intriguing. In one so-called Gnostic gospel she was his number one disciple. I remember when the book The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail was popular. The idea was that Jesus survived somehow, got married to Mary Magdalene and moved to the south of France. (And who wouldn't, given the chance?)

I was intrigued by the idea in The Holy Blood... that a secret society called the Priory of Sion was charged with protecting the bloodline of Jesus and Mary. What if the bloodline was preserved in a matrilineal society like the Iroquois and the descendants were among us today, I wondered. What would the Church do? My attempt at a novel never got off the ground; Dan Brown would exploit similar material with great success.

But are the Gospels mainly fan fiction too, as one cynic recently suggested? According to the Jesus Seminar only 20% of Jesus' sayings was actually said by him. The Gospel writers were not eyewitnesses and wrote long after Jesus was dead. They don't and couldn't quote Jesus' exact words, but rather say what they thought Jesus meant. The Gospels are not primarily history but not fiction either. Creative Nonfiction maybe. Or Literature Plus.

Evelyn and I were discussing this at a dinner party at Ann's, a mutual friend. Evelyn said it didn't matter what Jesus was really like. She was a storyteller, a kind of spiritual entrepreneur. Her specialty was in giving angel workshops, until she ran afoul of a black woman who asked her why angels were always white.

We were sitting in the living room. “The only thing Jesus accomplished was to get himself executed by the Romans so that Paul could establish Christianity. Who cares what he was like?” she repeated.

“I care,” I managed to respond, surprised at my heat. “Jesus of Nazareth matters.” Evelyn smirked. Then we went to dinner .

Was Evelyn right? Jesus of Nazareth was the leader of a small sect probably destined for oblivion when Jerusalem fell. Even Paul seemed to have no interest in what Jesus said but only in his rising from the dead. Jesus of Nazareth today was whoever you wanted him to be. For Evangelicals, he was against abortion, he was for family values. Was he really? Did it matter?

It apparently mattered to me. Years later I found myself filling in for a Lay Reader for two months of Sundays at a Long Term Care Home. I dutifully followed the Lectionary readings in which Jesus exhorted the residents to change their lives and follow him. The residents listened politely but I knew they really wanted comforting words about heaven. Jesus was a relatively young man on a mission: he was interested in the Kingdom of God here and now. If I had it to do again, though, I'd choose the readings on eternal life. An older Jesus would understand.

The Bible is a “difficult and dumb book” according to the Catholic Church. (They meant it needs interpretation!). Apparently it is read only selectively if at all even by Fundamentalists. As a retired teacher, I tried in my small way to buck the trend. Once I was leading a Bible Study in an Anglican Church - we were reading Mark - when I happened to mention that I would be interested in a study of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. The woman next to me reacted violently: “I’ll fight you to prevent that!” I never found out what her problem was but I can guess. The smiting, genocidal God of the Old Testament is a difficult customer.

What I could have said was that the Gospels set out to prove that Jesus was the fulfillment of prophecies in scripture. You can't understand what Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are saying about him unless you are prepared to read the Old Testament, albeit selectively and prophetically. But it wasn't my place. The Priest who rode a motorcycle was pained but noncommittal.

In mainline churches like the Anglican the priest or minister is responsible for interpreting the Bible and I assume many people in the pews prefer it that way. Heresy can be headed off if the Rector is the one interpreting the Bible in the sermon. Better not allow latter-day Marcionites like the woman in my Bible study to express her opinion. Bible study is O.K. in theory but a bit iffy in practice. Leave it to the professionals.

Except that it is hit or miss whether the Bible readings are interpreted at all. At a recent service at the local Anglican Church, the Lectionary Gospel Reading was from Luke: "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple." This was not about Jesus supporting family values! I looked forward to what the Priest, who also rode a motorcycle - an Anglican Priest thing apparently- would say in his sermon. But he mainly ignored the reading and preached about God having a plan for us. My take-away is that the Bible is too important to be left to the clergy to interpret.

Fortunately, there are some guides available for lay people. Peter Gomes in The Good Book tells us to avoid Bibliolatry, Literalism and Culturalism ( using the Bible to support the status quo). Karen Armstrong in The Case for God says to expect mythos, what happens again and again, not logos, what happened once and can be verified historically. This can help explain the discrepancies, like the differences between Luke and Matthew with respect to Jesus's birth -

the Gospel writers may have made up the Shepherds and the Magi, but not Jesus' commitment to the poor and being a light to the gentiles. Their creativity with the facts had limits, though: there were traditional accounts of Jesus and his ministry and likely some very old eyewitnesses to be respected. Jesus of Nazareth was remembered, although the circumstances of his birth likely were not.

What can we say about Jesus with some confidence? He was a Jew. There is no evidence that he or Paul, another Jew, envisioned a New Testament. They were not Christians, a term which was invented much later. The anger toward "the Jews" in say John's Gospel can be accounted for by the fact that followers of Jesus were being excluded from the synagogues when that Gospel was being written. Antisemitic interpretation of the Bible has been repudiated by the Roman Catholic Church and other churches. And yet antisemitism is on the rise here and elsewhere. How you interpret the Bible has consequences.

Who was a proper Jew was a contested designation in his day as it is today. (A Jewish joke: two Jews, three opinions.) Scholars reckon that there were as many as two dozen groups like Jesus's before the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple. Jesus had been a follower of John the Baptist who was much better known. Ironically, it was the aftermath of Jesus' execution by the Romans which led to the expansion of "The People of the Way" group. According to the letters of Paul and the Acts of the Apostles written later, there were hundreds of sightings of Jesus after his death, Paul's conversion experience on the road to Damascus being only the most dramatic. Jesus' death must have been a severe trauma for his followers, and yet he rose soon after in the hearts and imaginations of his followers. Something was going on but did he actually rise from the dead? With the father of the demon-possessed child in the Gospel of

Mark, “I believe, help my unbelief.” Today the struggle between belief and unbelief is becoming fraught. The idea of facts itself is being contested with alarming results.

The interpretation of Jesus’ s horrible death as a manifestation of God’s glory is central to all four Gospels. For Paul who never knew him, the Christ risen is *the* important fact. But thanks to the Gospels we can glimpse the man Jesus of Nazareth behind the exaltation. It was likely he had success as a healer and an exorcist. He taught that God’s Kingdom was immanent; he expected the end of the world. He wanted justice for the poor; he was against exploitation by the collaborating Jewish elite. He taught people to love God by loving their neighbour. He knew the scriptures and preached in the synagogues when he was allowed to. His interpretation that he himself fulfilled the prophecies along with his kicking out the money-changers from the Temple got him in trouble with the authorities.

It is reasonable to assume he had a growing sense of his own importance and destiny. In Mark and Luke Jesus asks his disciples “Who do you say that I am?” The Messiah, Peter answers. Bingo! But in Mark, the earliest Gospel, Jesus ordered the disciples not to tell. He starts to refer to himself in the third person, as “The Son of Man”, echoing the mysterious reference in the Book of Daniel. His understanding was likely evolving. He foresaw his death and accepted it as necessary; his followers remembered his final meal with them as the introduction of the New Covenant. He made a deep and lasting impression on his followers. His life, death and posthumous career are inextricable.

In the end for me it is faith, in the sense of trust, of loyalty to the central story of Jesus that endures. He sacrificed his life for his vision of a better world. Jesus existed, and his followers based a new religion on his vision and example. We carry on the fight by applying his lessons to analogous situations in our time, whether in his name or not.

But “Who do you say that I am,” is a question I am still puzzling over. Why did he ask the question and why did he tell the others to keep the answer secret? Was he unsure of his identity at this point? Were his followers in remembering he asked the question also struggling with the implications of Jesus being the Messiah? We’ll never know. The question of who he was is the key question of the Gospels. In answering it we also have to acknowledge who we are.