

The Challenge of Jesus

Encountering the Founder of Christianity

Rob Yule

The Unexpectedness of Jesus (Luke 7:36-50)

Jesus' personality surprises us, and challenges conventional values.

The Spirituality of Jesus (Mark 1:29-39)

What was the inner secret of Jesus' remarkable public life and impact on human history? This address looks at the hidden factors that shaped Jesus' character and destiny.

The Compassion of Jesus (Matthew 9:9-13, 35-38)

Jesus was a remarkably compassionate and approachable person. This address discusses his concern for the physical, spiritual and social needs of people.

The Healings of Jesus (Mark 1:35-2:12)

Health is something we tend to value only when we have lost it. This message looks at the implications of Jesus' healing ministry.

The Strategy of Jesus (Matthew 4:12-25)

The global spread of the movement he founded, now comprising one third of the world's population, shows that Jesus ranks among history's greatest strategic leaders.

The Politics of Jesus (Luke 6:27-36)

Jesus is often thought of as being irrelevant to politics. In fact, he presents us with a surprisingly radical political option.

The Death of Jesus (Isaiah 53)

Thousands of criminals and slaves were executed by crucifixion in the ancient world. Why, of all these hapless victims of injustice, is only one still remembered? It looks at the significance of Jesus' death.

The Resurrection of Jesus (1 Corinthians 15:1-20)

The resurrection of Jesus is the linchpin of Christianity. If true, it challenges the secularist worldview and can radically transform your life. This is an examination of the evidence for Jesus' resurrection.

The Unexpectedness of Jesus

(Luke 7:36-50)

Jesus' personality surprises us, and challenges conventional values. This message, the first in a series on 'The Challenge of Jesus', was given at an evening service in St. Albans Presbyterian Church, Palmerston North, New Zealand, on 9 February 1997.

1. We don't know what Jesus looked like

The first surprising feature about the person of Jesus is that we have no idea what he looked like. There is no description of him in the Gospels. There are no contemporary drawings of him. For a fashion-conscious television age like ours that is preoccupied with physical appearances, this is a real shock, because it suggests you can influence the world without having a promotional profile or a media image. For the first five centuries the only artistic representations of Jesus make him look like a Greek god, clean-shaven, with short curly hair - not the blue-eyed Scandinavian with long blond hair that we've gotten used to, and certainly not the Semite that he was. Those portraits can't possibly be right, because whoever else Jesus was, he wasn't Greek.

Actually, there is one description of Jesus in the Bible. Eight centuries before Jesus was crucified, Isaiah penned this description of a future suffering Messiah who would die for his people:

There were many who were appalled at him -

his appearance was so disfigured
beyond that of any man
and his form marred beyond human likeness. . . .
He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him . . .
like one from whom men hide their faces,
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.
(Isaiah 52:14, 53:2-3)

Hardly appealing to the fashion-conscious, but a great consolation to those who suffer.

2. Jesus was a first century Jew

No, Jesus wasn't a Greek god. He was a first century Palestinian Jew. This seems so obvious to us today that it's astonishing how the Christian Church, burdened with anti-semitism, could have lost sight of it for nearly nineteen centuries. In the twentieth century, since the Holocaust and the return of Jews to the land of Israel, there has been a rediscovery by Jews of the Jewishness of Jesus. Today there are literally hundreds of books and articles written by Jews about Jesus. An example is Professor David Flusser's *Jesus* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969). What is called the Jerusalem School of Synoptic Studies, a co-operative effort between Orthodox Jewish and Evangelical Christian scholars, is shedding new light on the person of Jesus by seeing him in a Jewish context for the first time since the destruction of the Jewish state in AD70. Jesus wasn't some nebulous religious figure, but a Jewish boy going to *barmitzvah*, a Jewish rabbi teaching in the synagogue, a Jewish prophet lamenting the fate of his nation, a Jewish Messiah dying for his people.

Jesus lived at a time when the Jews were rediscovering their national identity after being submerged by the cultural and political imperialism of the Roman Empire - just as Maoris are reclaiming their culture in New Zealand today. There was an intense debate raging among Jews about what attitude to take towards their own culture and the culture of their oppressor. This debate ranged all the way from the compromisers - the Sadducees - who recommended getting along with the dominant power, to the Zealots and other revolutionary groups who wouldn't have a bar of it and wanted to overthrow the Romans by force. Somewhere in the middle were groups like the Pharisees who wanted to recover Jewish history, cultural independence, and religious purity. We can see from the Gospels that Jesus lived in the thick of these debates and interacted with them.

3. Jesus didn't act like a religious Jew

Jesus was a thoroughly observant first century Jew, but many things he did or said were a direct challenge to contemporary Jewish belief and practice. Jews were intensely monotheistic, believing fervently in one transcendent God. Jesus made himself equal with God, and greater than Abraham the Jewish patriarch, when he said 'before Abraham was, I am' (John 8:58). He pronounced forgiveness of sins - something that only God could do. He claimed to be Lord of the Sabbath, the day of rest which Jews believed to have been instituted by God at creation. He went behind current Rabbinic sophistries allowing men to divorce their wives, and asserted the Creator's original intention for marriage to be a lifelong bond.

The Jews had strict rules to safeguard their racial and religious purity. The very architecture of the temple separated Jewish worshippers from non-Jewish. Like the Exclusive Brethren today, Jews wouldn't even have non-Jews into their homes or to share their meals. But Jesus completely upset the applecart, putting the apples among the pork, so to speak. Where the whole of the Jewish law - all 613 commandments - seemed to say, 'No one who is different is allowed,' Jesus seemed to say exactly the opposite: 'Only those who are different are allowed.'

Jesus went to a woman who had been excluded from the temple for eighteen years because all that time she'd had a menstrual haemorrhage - and he touched her and healed her, making her welcome. He allowed a group of lepers, excluded from society by their contagious disease, to approach him - and he touched them and healed them. He let 'a woman who was a sinner,' probably a prostitute, wash his feet with her tears, and he defended her from criticism and forgave her sins. He told a story about a Samaritan traveller who helped a man who had been mugged, risking contamination from touching the body if it was already dead.

The entire Old Testament system was based on the principle of contamination. If you touched a bleeding woman, or a diseased man, or a dead body, then you would be contaminated. Jesus reversed this whole thousand-year-old system. When he touched a woman who had been haemorrhaging for eighteen years he didn't become unclean - she stopped bleeding. When he touched the lepers, he didn't get sick - they caught health. When a sinful woman touched him he didn't become immoral - she received a moral transformation. When he touched a corpse he didn't become contaminated with death - the corpse was resurrected and sprang to life.

4. Jesus wasn't particularly successful

Like the culture we live in, a lot of modern Christians are preoccupied with success. Older Christians hanker for the good old days when the churches were more respected and had a greater influence in society. Younger Christians long to be successful in terms of the adulation of their peers in the youth or music cultures. In America some conservative Christians are even talking about winning the 'culture war' - the battle for cultural values in society.

Jesus seemed to be blissfully unconcerned with this kind of cultural or political dominance. He lived among a minority people in the large and overwhelmingly pagan Roman Empire, but it's hard to imagine him bothering to advise who should be 'God's man' in the Roman forum. Should it be Nero, or Julius, or Octavius? Or should it be the philosopher Seneca, or a woman, Cleopatra perhaps?

In fact, Jesus' energies went into advising how we should conduct ourselves as a despised and persecuted minority. 'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. . . . Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.' (Matthew 5:5,11). 'Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world - therefore the world hates you.' (John 15:19). 'Make up your minds not to prepare your defence in advance, for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.' (Luke 21:14-15).

Jesus never seemed to envisage a time when Christians would be a majority. He called us the 'salt of the earth' (Matthew 5:13); likening us to a small amount of preservative that would stop a big hunk of meat from decaying, or a small pinch of flavouring that would give tang to a tasteless meal.

5. Jesus wasn't a very good salesman

Jesus wouldn't have made a very good free marketeer. He could do miracles, he could heal people, he actually did heal people. But what did he do when he healed people and crowds gathered in response? At least seven times in Mark's Gospel he told the people he healed to keep it a secret: 'Don't tell anybody.' What a bungled publicity opportunity!

What he could have done was print brochures saying, 'You could be one of those healed if you subscribe to my scroll for 10 drachmas a month.' But he didn't - he sent them away and told them to keep quiet about it.

One time, when things were really on a roll - when he fed a crowd of 5,000 men together with their wives and children on a bread roll and a few sardines - they tried to make Jesus their leader by force. But he offended them by talking about eating his body and drinking his blood, and he slipped away to be by himself.

Malcolm Muggeridge, well-known Christian journalist of two decades ago, said in his book *Christ and the Media* that if Jesus came back today the devil would offer him a fourth temptation: to appear on empire-wide Rome TV to promote his cause - and Jesus would refuse!

We have a phrase 'saviour complex' which we apply to do-gooders who feel the whole future of the world depends on them. But journalist and author Philip Yancey says, 'The only genuine saviour the world ever had didn't have a saviour complex.' ('Jesus, Not the God I Would Predict,' *Reality*, No. 18 [December 1996], p. 10). When there was a crowd of needy people on the shore he would sometimes get in a boat, start the outboard, and cross the lake in the opposite direction. When people flocked to his door he would get up early and go into the Galilean hills to pray, or move on to the next village.

Jesus issued the most unusual invitations. He said, 'Take my yoke.' 'Take a towel and wash each others' feet.' 'Take up your cross.' These are not usual ways to get people to sign on.

'Who does more for a people,' asks Boris Pasternak in *Doctor Zhivago* (Ch. 4, § 12), 'the one who coddles them or the one who forgets all about them and simply draws them after him into universality and deathlessness by the sheer beauty of his actions? -- Well, of course, there can't be any argument about that'

The Unexpectedness of Jesus

Jesus was so unconventional that Philip Yancey in the article I have cited concludes that 'You wouldn't have wanted Jesus at your barbecue.' Yancey says, 'We tend to think of Jesus as a nice, sweet, gentle, "be-nice-to-your-Mummy-and-Daddy" great uncle, but actually that's not what he was like. A lot of the time, people who invited him over for meals seemed to regret it later. He disrupted their party.'

Take the Sermon on the Mount. We are so used to the image of a man on a hillside in a pastel-coloured skirt that we miss the shock and challenge of what he actually said. He said, 'You see those Roman soldiers who just charged into your village and killed one out of every ten babies in reprisal for some terrorist act? Love them. Go up to one of them and ask if you can carry his pack. And if he slaps you on the cheek for being a smart-alec Jew, offer him the other cheek. Be glad if he swears at you. Your reward is coming.'

Jesus' advocated a second mile ethic. 'If someone compels you to go one mile, go two.' This is unexpected behaviour. These are the actions of a truly free person, un beholden to anyone else. This is the lifestyle of Jesus. This is the freedom from self-interest the world so desperately needs.

The Spirituality of Jesus

(Mark 1:29-39)

What was the inner secret of Jesus' remarkable public life and impact on human history? This address, the second in a series on 'The Challenge of Jesus', given at an evening service in St. Albans Presbyterian Church, Palmerston North, New Zealand, on 16 February 1997, looks at the hidden factors that shaped Jesus' character and destiny.

The private life of a public figure is a fascinating subject. How does such a person sustain the tremendous demands of public service or activity? In the case of Jesus this is a particularly interesting subject. How did he handle the demands of a public ministry of preaching and healing that drew great crowds? What was the secret of the great impact that his life and death have had on the history of the world? What spiritual influences shaped his life? What devotional practices nourished his faith? What was Jesus' spirituality?

1. Jewish Upbringing

Jesus was the product of a devout Jewish home. We see glimpses of his home life in the infancy narratives at the beginning of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Socially his parents were poor, as we can tell from the fact that they presented two pigeons rather than the customary lamb on the occasion of Jesus' circumcision and presentation in the temple - the offering of the poor allowed in the Law (Leviticus 12:8, Luke 2:24). His mother Mary's song at his birth - the Magnificat - is both a song in praise of God's justice, bringing down the powerful and exalting the meek, and a canticle rich in biblical imagery showing a piety steeped in the Jewish Scriptures (Luke 1:46-55). Joseph was a man of integrity, a morally upright but sensitive man, inclined to put Mary aside privately, without fuss, until assured by the angel that her child was not the result of infidelity (Matthew 1:19-25).

So Jesus grew up in an atmosphere of Jewish piety, familiar with the Jewish Scriptures, observing the Jewish festivals, steeped in Jewish ways. This is particularly clear in the episode when he visited the Temple as a twelve year old - possibly the Jewish *barmitzvah* ceremony when a Jewish boy was admitted to adulthood and responsibility before the Law (Luke 2:41-51). Here is a scene of Jesus discussing Scripture and theology with the leading rabbis - which at this time may have included the great Jewish scholars Hillel and Shammai. The question and answer method of discussion is characteristically Jewish, and a proven technique for learning with understanding.

Jesus would not only have known and understood the Scriptures - he would also have lived and applied them. He knew his way around the Scriptures. We can see this at the start of his ministry when he unrolled the scroll in the synagogue of his home town Nazareth, looked up (without the aid of modern chapter and verse divisions!) the only prophecy in the Bible about the Messiah written in the first person (Isaiah 61:1-2), read it, and applied it to himself (Luke 4:16-21). We see his familiarity with the Scriptures in his frequent debates with the Pharisees and religious traditionalists of his day, where Jesus always went behind their traditions and interpretations to what the Scriptures actually said. His familiarity with the Jewish Scriptures is evident even in the agony of his crucifixion, when his cries of anguish include quotations from a Messianic psalm: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Psalm 22:1, Mark 15:34).

2. Personal Retreat

Jesus spirituality was not only grounded in the book of Scripture, but also in the book of Nature. We see him withdrawing from the pressure and intensity of his public ministry and the demands placed upon him by crowds of needy people, in order to be alone on the hills of Galilee to pray (Mark 1:32-37). Jesus also made sure that his team of disciples had respite from the pressures of their ministry, taking them across the lake for a retreat away from the crowds (Mark 4:35-36, 6:30-32). Jesus clearly knew the importance of personal retreat and solitude, for personal refreshment and spiritual recreation. He refused to place himself under the continual pressure of external need or self-imposed performance. The bow strings need to be relaxed between performances if the violin is to retain its quality.

These retreats would have been times of aloneness and intimacy with God. They were occasions when Jesus would have delighted in the beauty of the natural world: the wind in the grasses on the Galilean hills, the riotous colours of the wild flowers in spring, the water splashing on the sides of the boat or sparkling on the lake.

This became the source of many rich illustrations in his teaching. 'Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.' (Matthew 6:28-29). 'Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.' (Matthew 6:26). 'You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles?' (Matthew 7:16). Many of Jesus' teaching illustrations were drawn from the natural world. 'I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.' (John 15:5). 'Listen! A sower went out to sow' (Mark 4:3). 'The earth produces of itself, first the stock, then the head, then the full grain in the head.' (Mark 4:28). God's handiwork teaches us much about God's ways.

3. Filial Obedience

A third feature of Jesus' spiritual life was his humble surrender to God's will. So distinctive is this that it is reflected in the term that Jesus uniquely used to address God: the term *Abba*, 'Father.' When one considers the Jewish emphasis on God's transcendence and otherness, this term, used exclusively by Jesus in speaking of God, was a uniquely bold expression of his intimacy with God.

At the beginning of his ministry Jesus steps out of anonymity, and at the lowest point of the earth's surface, is baptized with John's baptism of repentance, humbling himself as the servant of the Lord who came to identify with sinners in order to save us from our sins. At this point of self-humbling Jesus is empowered by God's Holy Spirit and commissioned for his Messianic ministry. God's voice affirms his approval of Jesus' servant attitude: 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well-pleased.' (Luke 3:21-22).

This humble dependence upon the one he called Father was the key to Jesus' healing ministry. The nearest to a hospital that Jesus ever ministered in was the Pool of Bethesda - a kind of spa where the sick and infirm came to be cured. Jesus didn't evacuate the whole hospital, but healed only one man there. The passage which follows explains why: 'The Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does the Son does likewise.' (John 5:19).

The real root of sin is self-reliance, our autonomy. The root of Jesus' spirituality was reliance upon God, what we could call his theonomy. 'I have come in my Father's name,' says Jesus, 'and you do not accept me; if another comes in his own name, you will accept him.' (John 15:43-44).

Jesus was dedicated to doing his Father's will, devoted to seeking his Father's glory - to the very end of his life. We see this supremely in the Garden of Gethsemane, just before his arrest. There, taming his agony with prayer, he prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me: yet not what I want but what you want.' (Matthew 26:39). And again a second time he prayed, 'My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.' (Matthew 26:42).

This resolute surrender to the Father's will - the exact antithesis of modern theories of self fulfilment, self-actualization, or self-realization - was his final act before he died: 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.' (Luke 23:46). In death, Jesus trusted God his Father, and looked for his Father's vindication. He showed a supreme confidence in his Father's goodness, justice and sovereign ability to guard his person and protect his honour - even in the ultimate sacrifice of death. In turn, God honoured that confidence by raising him from the dead - declaring him by the resurrection to be indeed the Son of God (Romans 1:4). Thus Jesus is our inspiration to remain true to God, even when it is personally difficult or costly to do so.

The Compassion of Jesus

(Matthew 9:9-13, 35-38)

Jesus was a remarkably compassionate and approachable person. This address, the sixth in a series on 'The Challenge of Jesus', given at a morning service in St. Albans Presbyterian Church, Palmerston North, New Zealand, on 24 August 1997, discusses his concern for the physical, spiritual and social needs of people.

What is Compassion?

The word 'compassion' comes from two Latin words, 'suffer' and 'with'. To show compassion means to suffer with someone, to enter into a person's situation and become involved in that person's suffering. Compassion is not a theoretical attitude, but a practical involvement. It involves doing, not just thinking or saying. 'A compassionate response to suffering requires that one be moved by the suffering of the other, act to remove the immediate effects of the suffering, and respond at length to correct the structures which may have given rise to the suffering itself.' (*New Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, ed. D. J. Atkinson & D. F. Field [Downers Grove, Illinois, InterVarsity Press], p. 244).

There are two aspects of compassion. We could call them the heart and the hands of compassion. 'Compassion means both the emotion experienced when a person is moved by the suffering of others, and the act of entering into the suffering of another person with the purpose of relieving it.' (*New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, p.244). The first aspect, the *emotion* of compassion, expresses a desire to relieve a person's suffering. But compassion is more than a desire. Emotion must lead to *action*. Compassion is an act of will - a decision to become actively involved in alleviating that person's suffering.

Practical Compassion

We see this practical aspect of compassion supremely in Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 29-37). A traveller was attacked, stripped, beaten and robbed, and left half dead beside the roadside by his assailants. Two professional religious people - a priest and a Levite - happened to be travelling by that same road later in the day. Seeing the injured victim, they refused to get involved and 'passed by on the other side.'

Then a Samaritan traveller - a despised person of mixed-race - came that way. When he saw the wounded man by the side of the road, 'he had compassion on him' and gave practical assistance to help the victim. Risking being attacked himself if the robbers were still lurking nearby, the Samaritan got involved in a series of practical actions. He bandaged the man's wounds, put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, arranged for him to be cared for, and paid the cost of his accommodation.

Jesus' whole point in this parable is to underline the importance of practical compassion. 'Which of these three,' Jesus asked the lawyer to whom he told the parable, 'do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' The lawyer replied, 'The one who showed him mercy.' 'Go and do likewise,' says Jesus.

Jesus' Compassion

Jesus' whole life demonstrated compassion. The Gospel narratives show that he left his parental home in Nazareth to become an itinerant preacher to those he described as 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (Matthew 10:6). Forsaking the comforts of home, having 'nowhere to lay his head' (Matthew 8:20), he became known as the 'friend of publicans and sinners' (Matthew 11:19). As he travelled throughout the towns and villages of Galilee, 'he had compassion' for the crowds of people who flocked to him, 'because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd' (Matthew 9:36). His heart went out to them.

On one occasion, after the execution of John the Baptist, Jesus withdrew by boat across Lake Galilee to a deserted place by himself. But the crowds got to hear of it, and followed on foot around the lake, interrupting his solitude. 'When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.' (Matthew 14:14). Instead of grudging their intrusion into his private life, he cared for them and ministered to their needs. Then, when the disciples would have sent the crowd away so that they could go into the nearby villages to buy food, Jesus showed his concern by feeding them, a vast crowd of 'about five thousand men', not counting

women and children (Matthew 14:15-21). This whole incident illustrates the remark of a Hindu convert to Christianity, Professor Purushotman Krishna, that Jesus 'must have been indeed the most approachable man of all time.' (Quoted E. M. Blaiklock, *Who Was Jesus?* [Chicago, Moody Press, 1974], p. 84).

Compassion and Healing

On a number of occasions Jesus healed sufferers from leprosy, a highly infectious wasting disease that disfigures the flesh, so contagious that its victims were quarantined in lonely places away from human society (Leviticus 13:45-46). Instead of being anxious for his own safety and immunity, we see Jesus being willing to allow them near to him and even to touch them, as he laid hands on them and healed them. Mark describes a desperate solitary leper coming to him, begging him on his knees, 'If you choose, you can make me clean.' 'Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him.' (Mark 1:40-42). The man was not only healed of his dreaded disease; in the process he was loved and affirmed as a person.

Some healing evangelists handle people roughly or insensitively, emphasising God's power rather than God's love. We notice from incidents like this that Jesus' healing ministry was an expression of his compassion. The verb translated 'filled with compassion' or 'moved with pity' (Mark 1:41) literally means 'moved in his intestines', 'deeply stirred' - an inward, gut reaction to this man's plight! I believe that this element of compassion was a key in Jesus' healings. Francis MacNutt, one of the leading practitioners of the Christian healing ministry during the Charismatic Movement in the 1970s, strongly emphasizes the role of compassion in healing:

'Jesus cured not just to prove he was God, but because he was God abounding in love and compassion; sinners and sick came flocking to him because he reached out to touch every one of them. . . . I have seen extraordinary things happen when a climate of love was present. . . . Time after time we find people healed, not only through direct prayer, but simply because of their love for each other. God seems pleased to work in a climate of love. . . .' (*Healing*, Notre Dame, Ave Maria Press, 1974, pp. 150-57).

Jesus seems to have been equally at ease showing kindness to small groups of friends and to vast crowds of strangers. Mark's Gospel shows him in an intimate scene, invited into the house of Simon and Andrew, where he healed Simon Peter's mother-in-law who was in bed with a fever (1:30-31). Sadly, in many families today such compassion for in-laws is conspicuously absent! Immediately after this incident, after sunset, which marked the end of the Jewish sabbath, 'the whole city was gathered around the door.' And Jesus 'cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons' that were oppressing them (1:32-34). Whether a person was with just a few others or part of a large crowd, Jesus treated each one personally, showing concern for each suffering individual.

Delores Winder, herself healed from acute osteoporosis of the spine and the effects of four spinal fusions at a Kathryn Kuhlman meeting (see H. R. Casdorph, *The Miracles* [Plainfield, New Jersey, Logos, 1976], pp. 147-57), has had a tremendous impact in the renewal of Presbyterian churches throughout the United States and New Zealand through her healing services. The thing that has particularly impressed me about her healing ministry is the intensity of her love for each person she is ministering to - as if that person was the only person in all the world.

Compassion for Sinners

Jesus' compassion was not confined to cases of physical need or suffering. He earned the nickname 'friend of sinners' because of his tenderness towards those who were ostracized from respectable society or burdened with moral failure. Matthew, author of the Gospel, owed his conversion to Jesus' personal invitation to follow him, when he was working as a despised tax collector for the Inland Revenue Service, symbol of the hated Roman power occupying Palestine at the time (Matthew 9:9). Matthew held a party to celebrate his conversion, to which he invited Jesus, along with 'many tax collectors and sinners' - his former partners in crime. Criticized by Pharisees of the religious establishment for keeping bad company, Jesus spoke of the priority of compassion for the needy in society:

'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.' (Matthew 9:12-13, quoting Hosea 6:6).

Once the scribes and Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery to Jesus in the temple, challenging him to uphold the law of Moses, which sanctioned stoning to death for this offence (though for both partners, not the woman alone, Leviticus 20:10, Deuteronomy 22:22). Jesus didn't reply, but bent down to write on the ground, humbling himself to be beside the woman in her fear and vulnerability. 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her', he said to the proud men gathered around to condemn her. One by one they slunk away, leaving only Jesus and the woman. Then he straightened up and said, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you? She said, 'No one, sir.' Jesus replied, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.' (John 8:2-11).

Here we see that compassion is not weakness, but associated with courage and authority. It is a life-transforming quality. Love and holiness are closely linked. 'God's righteousness is also his compassion,' says Jewish New Testament scholar David Flusser; 'he espouses especially the cause of the poor and oppressed.' (*Jesus* [New York, Herder & Herder, 1969], p. 65). Jesus' identified with this woman - even to the point of being ready to be stoned with her. Because he had shown mercy to her he had the moral right to say to her as she stood up, unexpectedly relieved from death, 'Go and live a new life, and don't sin again.'

Purposeful Compassion

Jesus didn't limit compassion to personal relationships. He left nothing to chance. His 'Nazareth Declaration', announcing his strategic plan at the very outset of his public ministry, quoted the comprehensive charter of the prophet Isaiah (61:1-2):

'The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the broken hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

Jesus' compassion addressed both the *spiritual roots* and *social consequences* of people's problems. He brought hope, where people had abandoned hope. He declared forgiveness, where people were tormented by guilt. He brought inner release, where people were oppressed by evil spirits. He brought healing, where there was sickness. He fed the hungry, where there was hunger. Compassion is concerned for people's spiritual *and* social problems.

We are challenged by Jesus to be compassionate and merciful, as he was. Indeed, we live in an era of grace, in which we are called to show compassion rather than condemnation. There is a line in the Isaiah prophecy that Jesus did not go on to quote. He stopped by proclaiming 'the year of the Lord's favour'. His ministry of compassion has postponed 'the day of vengeance of our God.' (Isaiah 61:2). Jesus has interposed a time of grace and compassion before the judgement. In Jesus God has shown mercy to us. We should therefore be active in showing compassion to others.

The Healings of Jesus

(Mark 1:35-2:12)

Health is something we tend to value only when we have lost it. This message, the fourth in a series on 'The Challenge of Jesus', preached at a an evening service in St. Albans Presbyterian Church, Palmerston North, New Zealand, on 9 March 1997, looks at the implications of Jesus' healing ministry.

Healing formed a major part of the public ministry of Jesus. He not only taught, as the Rabbi's did. As he travelled around he healed the sick and infirm, and set people free from the oppression of evil spirits. His ministry shows a remarkable integration of aspects that are often separated in the helping professions today. There are a number of principles of healing and lessons about the ministry of healing that we can learn from observing the healing ministry of Jesus.

1. Jesus' Healings were Based on Prayer (Mark 1:35)

In the midst of a demanding schedule of ministry to pressing crowds Jesus took care to secure quality time, early in the day before he could be interrupted, to be alone with God in prayer. Jesus' healing ministry began after the Holy Spirit came on him at his baptism (Mark 1:9-10). Prayer was his means of maintaining the continued presence and power of the Spirit, which was the key to the effectiveness of his healing ministry. God is the source of life and of healing: we must stay 'plugged in' to bring God's life and healing to others. The healing ministry is not a matter of techniques, but of listening to God and being filled with his Spirit.

2. Jesus' Healings were Exercised with Compassion (Mark 1:40-41)

Public healers have sometimes handled people roughly or insensitively, the result of emphasising power rather than love. It is notable that Jesus' healing ministry was an expression of compassion: the verb 'filled with compassion' or 'moved with pity' (*splangchnistheis*, Mark 1:41) literally means 'moved in his guts', 'deeply stirred' - expressing a deep, inner emotion of concern for needy people. Victims of infectious skin diseases in ancient Israel had to keep a distance from society to prevent the spread of contamination (Leviticus 13:45-46), but Jesus allowed this leper to come near to him, and he touched him. Jesus showed compassion equally to friends and individuals (Mark 1:30-31), and to strangers and crowds (Mark 1:32-34).

Among contemporary practitioners of the Christian healing ministry Francis MacNutt most emphasises the importance of love. He says, 'Jesus cured not just to prove he was God, but because he was God abounding in love and compassion; sinners and sick came flocking to him because he reached out to touch every one of them. . . . It is necessary that the minister be free of the need to prove anything, that he be free of any personal desire for achieving results. . . . I am simply the human channel of God's love. . . . I have seen extraordinary things happen when a climate of love was present. . . . Time after time we find people healed, not only through direct prayer, but simply because of their love for each other. God seems pleased to work in a climate of love. . . .' (*Healing*, [Notre Dame, Ave Maria Press, 1974], pp. 150-57).

3. Jesus' Healings were Effective through Faith (Mark 2:5)

Faith can be exercised on behalf of someone ('seeing *their* faith', Mark 2:5), as well as by the sick person (Mark 1:40). In the Gospels faith is often synonymous with desperation: the determination to push through to Jesus despite all obstacles. The leper was so desperate he broke social and hygiene rules to get to Jesus (Mark 1:40). The friends of the paralysed man who broke through the flat roof of the house to bring their friend to Jesus were prepared to risk uproar, loss of self-respect, receiving a bill for damage, or being arrested for vandalism (Mark 2:3-4)! Usually only those who want to be healed are healed. A notable exception to this general rule is Kathryn Kuhlman's story of a deaf sceptic who was miraculously healed in the doorway of the auditorium at one of her healing meetings (*God Can Do It Again*, [New York, Prentice-Hall, 1969]).

4. Jesus' Healings were Discerning of Cause (Mark 2:5-12)

For healing to take place the underlying cause, not just the presenting symptoms, must be dealt with. There are many simplistic approaches to healing today, reducing a human being to the status of a purely physical organism

(as in much prescription-based medicine) or a purely spiritual entity (as in Christian Science). But a human being is a complex psycho-somatic organism, and the causes of illness are correspondingly complex too.

Some sickness is purely physical (like the fever mentioned in Mark 1:30), some is caused by the oppression of evil spirits (Mark 1:32-34), and some is sin-related and has an underlying spiritual cause (as in the case of the paralysed man, Mark 2:5, 10-11). Not all sickness is caused by sin, but Jesus saw that it was in this case. Arthritis is frequently the result of bitterness or unforgiveness; digestive or heart problems are often stress-related; some cancers are caused by traumatic experiences. A striking example is Francis MacNutt's humorous story of meeting a Latin American general, who was suffering from ulcers because he was living in fear of assassination! (*The Power to Heal*, [Notre Dame, Ave Maria Press, 1977], pp.170-2).

5. Jesus' Healings were Verified by Doctors (Mark 1:44)

Some 'hyper-faith' healers teach that the sick shouldn't consult doctors, and should throw away crutches and medicines when prayed for to be healed. Jesus never did this. He sent the leper to the priests, who were the recognised medical authorities in the Jewish society of his day (Leviticus 14:1-32), to have his healing verified (Mark 1:44). Two benefits can come from observing this procedure:

- It helps the sick person know whether and to what extent they have been healed. A doctor can knowledgeably discontinue or adjust medication as appropriate.
- It challenges a sometimes secular medical profession to work cooperatively with Christian healing teams and accept the healing power of God.

An example is the healing of Delores Winder, which took place in the presence of a medical doctor on Kathryn Kuhlman's team, who recognised that only a miracle could have accounted for the restoration of feeling after two spinal cordotomies - a procedure involving the cutting of the spinal cord to eliminate chronic pain in the terminally ill (see Richard Casdorf, *The Miracles*, [Plainfield, N.J., Logos, 1976], pp. 147-57).

6. Jesus' Healings were Glorifying to God (Mark 2:12)

There have been many showmen in the healing ministry who have taken glory for themselves. When Jesus healed the sick people gave the glory to God. In the healing ministry, no less than in other areas of our conduct, charisma must be supported by character, the gifts of the Spirit by the fruit of Spirit.

The Strategy of Jesus

(Matthew 4:12-25)

The global spread of the movement he founded, now comprising one third of the world's population, shows that Jesus ranks among history's greatest strategic leaders. This talk, the fifth in a series on 'The Challenge of Jesus', was given at an evening service in St. Albans Presbyterian Church, Palmerston North, New Zealand, on 16 March 1997.

Jesus' Secret Ambition

The singer Michael W. Smith has a song which speaks of Jesus' 'secret ambition': 'to give his life away.' This was Jesus overriding strategy : to die in Jerusalem, to give his life a sacrifice for the sins of all people.

This long-term objective of Jesus can only be recognized in hindsight. It was not known at first to the general public. I believe that Jesus was committed to this supreme objective from the time of his baptism, at the beginning of his ministry, when John the Baptist prophetically announced, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!' (John 1:29, 36). But Jesus didn't tell even his disciples about this purpose till after they started to understand who he really was. The first prediction of his coming sufferings and death followed Peter's confession of faith in him as Messiah, and occasioned Peter's misguided attempt to turn him from this purpose (Mark 8:27-32).

Jesus' Secondary Ambition

Closely related to Jesus' primary objective, to die for sinners, was his secondary purpose, to train leaders who would continue his movement after he was no longer here. Jesus left nothing to chance. He was a brilliant strategist. It was not enough to die as an individual for sinners. From the start he recognized that he needed to create a movement to take the message of forgiveness achieved by his death to the world. So, from the inception of his ministry, we also see Jesus choosing disciples, and training them to be his successors when he was no longer here.

It is significant that Mark's Gospel locates the call and selection of the first disciples immediately following the first signs of opposition to Jesus. When the first coalition of enemies emerged with the conspiracy of the religious and political leadership - the Pharisees and Herodians - against him (Mark 3:6), Jesus immediately withdrew to a lonely mountain in Galilee and 'called to him those whom he wanted', appointing twelve followers, who he called 'apostles' (Mark 3:13-19).

Jesus heard the sound of distant thunder. He read the warning signs, and realised that this opposition would ultimately mean his elimination, so he began early to select and train successors, to continue his ministry after he had gone. 'Remarkable as it may seem,' says Robert Coleman in his classic study of Jesus' evangelistic methods, 'Jesus started to gather these men before he ever organized an evangelistic campaign or even preached a sermon in public. . . . These few early converts of the Lord were destined to become the leaders of his church that was to go with the Gospel to the whole world. . . .' (*The Master Plan of Evangelism* [Old Tappan, Fleming H. Revell, 1964], pp. 21-22).

Jesus' Training Strategy

We can also see Jesus' strategic thinking in the way in which he trained these successors. He used unique training methods, which were relational rather than intellectual in character. He summoned ordinary working people as his disciples, bringing them into a team relationship with himself and one another, and training them on the job by personal example and practical experience.

Jesus didn't let the demands of ministry to vast crowds prevent the training of his disciples. He concentrated on a few while not neglecting the many. Coleman remarks, 'Jesus was a realist. . . . Though he did what he could to help the multitudes, he had to devote himself primarily to a few men, rather than the masses, in order that the masses could at last be saved. This was the genius of his strategy. . . .' (pp. 33-34). Where many leaders are

mesmerized by numbers and diverted by popularity, Jesus recognized the strategic importance of shaping a few key followers with his personal values and lifestyle.

In what could be called a strategy of association, Jesus' taught disciples through a living interaction with himself. His teaching method was informal, relational, life-related. 'Jesus had no formal school, no seminaries, no outlined course of study, no periodic membership classes in which he enrolled his followers. . . . Knowledge was gained by association before it was understood by explanation.' (Coleman, pp. 38-39). He used a 'Come and see' (John 1:39) or 'Come follow me' (Mark 1:17) method of learning.

Coleman remarks, 'The time which Jesus invested in these few disciples was so much more by comparison to that given to others that it can only be regarded as a deliberate strategy. He actually spent more time with his disciples than with everybody else in the world put together. He ate with them, slept with them, and talked with them for the most part of his entire active ministry. They walked together along the lonely roads; they visited together in the crowded cities; they sailed and fished together in the Sea of Galilee; they prayed together in the deserts and in the mountains; and they worshipped together in the synagogues and in the temple. . . . Even while Jesus was ministering to others, the disciples were always there with him. . . . Without neglecting his regular ministry to those in need, he maintained a constant ministry to his disciples by having them with him.' (pp.42-43).

Keeping Ahead of the Pack

Strategic considerations even controlled Jesus' movements and travel during his ministry. The two overall strategies of Jesus we have so far identified - to die in Jerusalem, and to train successors - seem to have determined even the geographical location of his public ministry.

It is well-known that Jesus avoided Judea and Jerusalem and concentrated on the northern area of Galilee during his popular early public ministry. Less well-known is that his movement around Galilee involved moving from one political jurisdiction to another. His objective seems to have been not just to minister to people from different geographical areas, but seemingly to avoid premature arrest and gain time to fully equip his disciples.

Examination of a map of 1st century Palestine shows that Jesus moved through at least four political jurisdictions as he travelled around and across Lake Galilee (Mark 6-8): Galilee (on the western shores of the lake), the Decapolis (to the southeast of the lake), the Tetrarchy of Philip (the modern Golan Heights, to the east and northeast of the lake), and Tyre and Sidon (Gentile territory to the north west, right outside the territory of biblical Israel altogether). As Jesus criss-crossed the lake he was moving from one political jurisdiction to another, keeping ahead of his opposition and so avoiding premature detention and arrest.

So we see that Jesus left nothing to chance. His greatness as a leader was in having overall strategic objectives which determined all that he did. He kept a supreme mastery of the situations in which he found himself, using them for his overriding purpose, rather than letting himself become the pawn of events. In this way he determined the time he would die, and secured time to minister to the crowds as well as train his followers before going to Jerusalem when the time came for him to die (Mark 10:32-34).

A Strategy of Multiplication

There is a further aspect of Jesus' strategy that we can see as we look back on his impact on world history. From being leader of a small group of a dozen followers in an obscure province on the eastern border of the Roman Empire, the movement Jesus founded now comprises, two millennia later, one third of the world's population (1,995,000,000 out of a total world population of 5,892,000,000 in mid-1997, according to Christian researcher David Barrett's 'Annual Statistical Table on Global Mission: 1997,' *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, January 1997, pp. 24-25).

What was the key to this astonishing success? It was Jesus' personal method of disciple-making. Modern evangelists, like so many modern political leaders or leaders of contemporary popular culture, prefer mass methods, often despising personal or friendship evangelism as slow and inefficient. In fact, Jesus' preferred strategy of discipling a few to reach the many is demonstrably much more effective in the long run. It is the difference between addition and multiplication, as Dr. Howard Hendrix, Professor of Christian Education at Dallas Seminary, and Dr. James Kennedy, founder of Evangelism Explosion, have pointed out by contrasting the two methods:

Method 1: Addition (Mass Evangelism)

Assume that a modern mass evangelist preaches to 100,000 per day, with a 4% rate of conversion (double that of Billy Graham) and works a superhuman 365 days a year. After 1 year there will be 1,460,000 converts, and so on annually until after 16 years there will be 23,360,000 converts (slightly more than the combined population of Australia and New Zealand).

Method 2: Multiplication (Personal Discipling)

By contrast, using Jesus' method of personal discipling, we can modestly assume that 1 person makes 1 disciple each 6 months, and teaches each successive disciple to do same. After 1 year there will be 4 disciples, after 2 years 16, after 5 years over 1 thousand, after 10 years over 1 million, after 15 years over 1 billion, and after about 16½ years the present world population of just under 6 billion would be disciplined. Seen in this light, the famous motto of the Student Volunteer Movement a hundred years' ago, 'The Evangelization of the World in This Generation' is not an idle dream. Jesus' modest, seemingly inefficient, but highly personal method is in the long run powerfully effective and world transforming. No better method has yet been devised for changing the world.

Jesus was the greatest strategist the world has ever seen. The movement he started continues to transform the lives of individuals and impact world history two millennia after he walked the hills of Galilee.

The Politics of Jesus

(Luke 6:27-36)

Jesus is often thought of as being irrelevant to politics. In fact, he presents us with a surprisingly radical political option. This message, the third in a series on 'The Challenge of Jesus', was given at an evening service in St. Albans Presbyterian Church, Palmerston North, New Zealand, on 2 March 1997.

A False Picture of Jesus

'Politics' is defined by the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* as 'the art and science of government.' More broadly, 'politics' is involvement in the leadership or government of the public life, civic affairs, social policy and public institutions of a society or nation.

Many people, Christians and non-Christians alike, have a false image of Jesus. Taking their cue from Jesus' remark, 'My kingdom is not of this world' (John 18:36), they have wrongly assumed that he was only interested in 'spiritual' matters, not in such 'worldly' activities as politics or economics. Holding that Jesus was non-political or a-political in outlook, they have assumed that his teaching is of no relevance to us today in the 'practical' task of how we should conduct our lives in society or give leadership in public life.

Holding this false view of a Jesus uninterested in politics, people then derive their political views from other, secular, sources. Political activists of Left-wing persuasion turn to Marxism for their political analysis and strategies. Political conservatives of the Right seek to preserve or justify the traditions and status quo of society. Neither side realises that there is a specifically Christian approach to politics, one espoused by Jesus himself.

Jesus' Political Manifesto

What we could call Jesus' 'Political Manifesto' is contained in Luke 6:27-38. Here he teaches a radical response to such real life political issues as:

- How should we treat enemies or those who don't agree with us?
- How should we respond to unprovoked violence?
- What should be our attitude to property and possessions?
- What principles should guide our economic life and the distribution of wealth?
- What should we do when our property is forcibly requisitioned or taken from us?

In answer to these intensely practical questions, Jesus gives the following counsel:

- We are to love our enemies, do good to those who hate us or oppose our views, and speak well of and pray for those who abuse us.
- We are to offer the other cheek to those who strike us; that is, we are to overcome violence with love, in this way retaining the initiative by not letting the violent person gain control over us or provoke us into reactive violence.
- We are to give to those who request our assistance, and not ask for our goods back if they are taken from us, thus displaying our confidence in God's justice and provision.
- We are to have a generous attitude towards our property and possessions, lending freely - which the early Church consistently interpreted as meaning without interest - and not expecting anything back in return.

The leading element in this political manifesto of Jesus is the '*surprise factor*' - the concept of acting differently than what is expected of us, of going further than what is commonly viewed as normal or natural in human

relations. It is natural and normal to care for our own. It is unexpected and surprising to love those who are beyond our natural circle of affection, or to do good to those who are disagreeable or hostile toward us.

The other element in Jesus' social teaching is the note of *reliance on God*: a God who is just, fair, generous, and unstinting in his philanthropy towards us. 'Love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.' (Luke 6:35-36). This is not an ethic of retaliation ('You hit me, and I'll hit you'), or even an ethic of reciprocity ('You scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours'); it is an ethic of responsiveness, an ethic of response to God's grace, an ethic of mercy ('God loves the undeserving, so we love the undeserving too').

The Politics of Palestine

We can appreciate how unique and radical Jesus' political manifesto is when we compare it with the different viewpoints in the political spectrum of his day. Palestine was under Roman occupation during the lifetime of Jesus. It was a situation of imperial domination, denying Jews their political, economic, religious and cultural independence. This situation provoked a variety of reactions from different groups, all which can be seen in the Gospels:

1. The Pharisees

The Pharisees were the party of religious and cultural purity. Orthodox Jews, they wanted to preserve distinctive Jewish religious and cultural values. Politically, they were *conservatives*. Religious quietists, they were not actively involved in political life except where matters affected their own self interest.

2. The Sadducees and Herodians

The Sadducees were religious liberals. Like many liberals today they did not believe in a resurrection or a life to come, and consequently put their energies into politics and the affairs of this life, in partnership with the Roman administration. The Herodians were supporters of the Herods, the Jewish puppet kings through whom the Romans ruled Judea. These two groups were *collaborators*, cooperating with the Roman occupation.

3. The Zealots

The Zealots were at the opposite end of the political spectrum. Fanatical Jewish nationalists, they were *crusaders*, freedom fighters, and revolutionaries dedicated to the overthrow of Roman tyranny, if necessary by means of terrorism and violence.

The Politics of Jesus

Against this background we can see how unique Jesus' political viewpoint was. He seems consciously and deliberately to have renounced all three options available to him in the politics of his day.

1. He was not a conservative, defending the traditions of the Law in the manner of the Pharisees. In his debates with the Pharisees he frequently presented an option of radical obedience to God against its weakening in the interpretations of their rabbinical traditions. 'You have heard that it was said, but I say unto you...' (Matthew 5:21-48).

2. He was not a collaborator, supporting the legitimacy of the dominant Roman power. He clearly affirmed that the highest human allegiance was to be given to God not to the state. 'Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.' (Matthew 22:15-22).

3. He was not a crusader, espousing revolutionary violence against the occupying power - though accusations brought against him at his trial tried to suggest that he was (Luke 23:1-2). He uncompromisingly taught nonviolence and love for enemies (Matthew 5:38-48).

John Howard Yoder, in his ground-breaking book *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Eerdmans, 1972, p. 98), sums up Jesus' political stance in relation to the political options of his day as a 'threefold rejection' of 'quietism', 'establishment responsibility', and 'the crusade'. Yoder is an American New Testament scholar and a member of the Mennonite Church - a Christian pacifist denomination that has sought to follow Jesus' example of non-violence since its origin during the Reformation of the 16th century.

The Arrest of Jesus

Luke's account of Jesus' arrest and trial (Luke 22 & 23), has a sequence of events which vividly illustrates the distinctiveness of Jesus' political viewpoint in practice:

- When Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper he showed an awareness that he had come to suffer and give his life as a sacrifice for sin, as the agent of a new covenant. 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.' (22:20). He is conscious of being the instrument of God's coming kingdom. But contrary to current Jewish ideas of a political kingdom, involving the restoration of national sovereignty and independence from the Romans, Jesus seems to have clearly understood that entry into God's kingdom requires a willingness to suffer rather than the exercise of conquering power. 'I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.' (22:16, cf. Luke 24:25-26, 46-47).
- When a dispute about status arose among his disciples Jesus used the occasion to teach about servant leadership - contrasting this with the self-serving, domineering and authoritarian styles of leadership which were so common in his day, as they continue to be today. 'The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. . . . I am among you as one who serves.' (22:25-27).
- The account of the skirmish that took place during Jesus' arrest (22:35-38) makes it clear that his endorsement of sacrificial service should not be misconstrued as social indifference or political quietism. Quite the opposite, in fact. It appears that on this one specific occasion Jesus deliberately arranged for his disciples to be in possession of weapons, so that even though he was not a criminal, he might be arrested as one. 'He let himself be taken as a criminal,' says the *Jerusalem Bible* translation (Luke 22:37). Curiously his intention was not to have the weapons be used to defend him, because a short time later he rebuked Peter for using his sword (22:49-51, cf. John 18:10-11). Rather, it was so that he would be 'numbered with the transgressors', thus fulfilling the Biblical prophecy that his death would be a vicarious sacrifice for sinners (Isaiah 53:12). He who came to bear our sins chose to identify in his death with criminals and the outcasts of society.

The Politics of Redemption

All this has important implications for the person who wishes to follow Jesus' way of radical discipleship today. It means that Christians today, like Jesus in his day, should choose to suffer themselves rather than be the cause of others' suffering. It means we should be willing to 'take up the cross' of unpopularity and nonconformity, not as a non-political cop-out, but as the most profoundly redemptive and effective form of socio-political action there is.

Following Jesus' non-violent alternative to the secular political options of the day, Christians will be misunderstood, marginalised, and often rejected. As Yoder says: 'Representing as he did the divine order now at hand, accessible; renouncing as he did the legitimate use of violence and the accrediting of the existing authorities; renouncing as well the ritual purity of noninvolvement, his people will encounter in ways analogous to his own the hostility of the old order.' (p. 98).

But following the way of Jesus will also mean that Christians will acquire the independence of a radical viewpoint, and find themselves able to relate to a wide range of people regardless of their politics. We will be able to bring Jesus' distinctive non-violent option into situations of political polarisation, social distress or civil violence - precisely where other political options may have failed. Far from espousing political uninvolvedness, Jesus calls us to play our part in a truly redemptive politics, the politics of peacemaking, reconciliation and economic justice.

The Death of Jesus

(Isaiah 53)

Thousands of criminals and slaves were executed by crucifixion in the ancient world. Why, of all these hapless victims of injustice, is only one still remembered? Rob Yule, minister of St Albans Presbyterian Church, gave this message at a combined Good Friday service in Palmerston North, New Zealand, on 14 April 1995. Sixth in a series on 'The Challenge of Jesus', it looks at the significance of Jesus' death.

'Why is the symbol of Christianity a cross, not a bag of stones?' This question was put to me by a storeman at Crown Lynn Potteries, Auckland, where I worked for eight months in 1969, saving to travel overseas to do postgraduate study. Why was Jesus crucified, not stoned to death? At the time I thought this was a tiresome and irrelevant question. 'He simply was, mate,' was my reply. 'That's how it happened.'

Since then, though, I have pondered that conversation. I have realized that this uneducated man had posed an important historical and theological question. Stoning, after all, was the normal Jewish method of execution. Shortly after Jesus' crucifixion a lynch mob stoned Stephen to death - the first of Jesus' followers to be martyred (Acts 7:58-60). But in the case of Jesus' death stoning was not used - even though two earlier attempts had been made to stone him (John 8:59, 10:31-33). Why did it happen this way? Why a cross, not a bag of stones?

The Scandal of the Cross

There were probably two reasons why the Jewish authorities were concerned to have Jesus crucified by the Romans, and why they stirred up the crowd to demand Pilate to 'Crucify him! Crucify him!' (Mark 15:11-15):

1. *To absolve themselves of responsibility for his death*, by involving the Romans in the actual performance of the execution. 'We have no right to execute anyone,' was the Jewish leaders' response to Pilate (John 18:31), when he attempted to get them to try Jesus according to their own law. Even though Jewish law did permit the death penalty for blasphemy and religious apostasy, the Roman imperial power reserved to itself the right to inflict it, so as not to undermine its own authority by sanctioning legal executions of its supporters.

2. *To make him unworthy of a following*. A normal execution would have turned Jesus into a hero, whereas the Jewish leaders of his day wanted to put an end to his cause. They wanted Jesus discredited, as well dead; his legacy stopped, as well as his life. The Mosaic law decreed that 'Anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse' (Deuteronomy 21:22-23). We know that the Jewish leaders were familiar with this passage, because they observed another of its requirements by desiring the removal of Jesus' body from the cross before nightfall (John 19:31). Far from having Jesus accepted as Messiah (as God's 'anointed one'), they wanted Jesus rejected as a Messianic pretender (God's 'accursed one'); a view that has remained the received Orthodox Jewish opinion of Jesus to this day.

Isaiah 53 does not mention the Messiah, and 1st century Judaism accordingly had not linked the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 with the Messiah. The Jews of Jesus' day were looking for a national deliverer to free them from Roman oppression (cf. Luke 24:21). They were not looking for a suffering Messiah, still less a crucified one. In order to understand the crucifixion of Jesus as the execution of their *Messiah*, Jewish Christians would have had to recognise Jesus' death as having overwhelming positive significance. So what was it that caused this repugnant event to be seen in such a positive light by the early Jewish Christians?

The same problem exists with the ancient Greek and Roman evaluation of crucifixion. Crucifixion was widely used by the Romans as a fearsome instrument of political repression - particularly to put down slave revolts. In the famous revolt of Spartacus in 73-71 BC, the Romans crucified 6,000 slaves; so many that they ran out of wood for crosses. Yet, though its use was so widespread, it was such a sadistic and unspeakable a form of execution that it was almost never referred to in respectable Greek and Roman circles. Consequently, few actual descriptions of crucifixion have come down to us from the ancient world.

The exceptions are the Christian Gospels, about one third of whose contents deal with the events surrounding Jesus' death. What was scandalous to their contemporaries, the early Christians gloried in. 'The message of the

cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.' (1 Corinthians 1:18). Why this Christian concentration on the cross, when respectable ancient society avoided it?

The answer to these questions is threefold:

1. Jesus' Resurrection

Jesus' resurrection, three days after his ignominious death, was God's vindication or rubber stamp of approval on his life and death. 'This man . . . you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death' (Acts 2:23-24). Far from being 'accursed of God', the resurrection showed that Jesus was 'approved of God'.

2. Jesus' Divine Sonship

The hardened Roman centurion supervising the crucifixion, when he saw how Jesus' died, exclaimed 'Surely this man was the Son of God' (Mark 15:39). Paul voices the faith of the early church when he says that Jesus 'was declared to be the Son of God with power . . . by his resurrection from the dead' (Romans 1:4).

3. Jesus' Death for Sins

Not as a late development, but from the outset of the Christian movement, Jesus' death was also seen as an atoning sacrifice, God's means of removing our sins. This is implied in the earliest apostolic preaching (Acts 2:38, 3:19,26); it was specifically affirmed in the earliest Pauline epistles (Romans 4:25, 5:6,8, 1 Corinthians 15:3-5, Galatians 2:19-20); and it is later reiterated by the apostle Peter, who specifically quotes Isaiah 53 (1 Peter 2:24). (See Appendix 1).

Martin Hengel believes this interpretation of the death of Jesus goes back to the very words of Jesus himself, who on numerous occasions predicted his own death (see Appendix 2) and understood the manner of his death to be fulfilling the role of the Suffering Servant of the Lord (Isaiah 52:13-53:12). Correcting his disciples' misunderstanding of leadership, Jesus said, 'the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and *to give his life a ransom for many*' (Mark 10:45). At the Last Supper, Jesus took one of the Passover cups and said to his disciples, 'This is my blood of the [new] covenant, *which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins*' (Matthew 26:28).

The prophecy of Isaiah 53 actually contains seven separate statements predicting that a coming Suffering Servant of the Lord would vicariously suffer for the sins of others (see Appendix 3). The application of this prophecy to Jesus clearly had a marked influence on how early Christians understood the significance of Jesus' death.

Later writings in the New Testament, particularly the letter to the Hebrews, develop the theme of Christ's death being a sacrifice for our sins. 'Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins,' says the writer to the Hebrews (9:22). Unlike the daily repeated animal sacrifices in the Jerusalem temple, Jesus has offered himself for sins 'once for all' by his death on the cross (Hebrews 7:27, 9:26-28, 10:10).

A Death for Sins and Sinners

The death of Jesus was therefore much more than a subjective demonstration of God's love for sinners (as the Moral Influence Theory of the Atonement, so favoured by liberal theologians, maintains). Jesus' death was also an objective satisfaction of God's holiness for sins (the Satisfaction Theory of the Atonement). It was a supreme sacrifice of love perfectly adapted to our greatest need, the removal of the sins that otherwise constitute a barrier between ourselves and God. 'God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners, *Christ died for us* (Romans 5:8).

The Scottish theologian James Denney gives a simple illustration of this point. 'If I were sitting on the end of the pier, on a summer day, enjoying the sunshine and the air,' he writes, 'and someone came along and jumped into the water and got drowned "to prove his love for me", I should find it quite unintelligible. I might be much in need of love, but an act in no rational relation to any of my necessities could not prove it. But if I had fallen over the pier and were drowning, and someone sprang into the water, and . . . saved me from death, then I should say,

"Greater love hath no man than this." I should say it intelligibly, because there would be an intelligible relation between the sacrifice which love made and the necessity from which it redeemed.'

Jesus' death on the cross demonstrates God's love for us *sinners*, because it is the solution to our need for the atonement of our *sins*. The ignominy of Jesus' death shows us the enormity of God's love.

Appendix 1
Early Christian References
to the Death of Jesus as a Sacrifice for Sins

"Repent, and be baptized every one of you *in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven*".' (Acts 2:38)

"Repent therefore, and turn to God *so that your sins may be wiped out*. . . . When God raised up his servant [ie. Jesus], he sent him first to you [the Jews], to bless you *by turning each of you from your wicked ways*".' (Acts 3:19,26)

'[Jesus] *was handed over to death for our trespasses*, and was raised for our justification.' (Romans 4:25)

'While we were still weak, at the right time *Christ died for the ungodly*.' (Romans 5:6)

'God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners *Christ died for us*.' (Romans 5:8)

'I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that *Christ died for our sins* in accordance with the Scriptures' (1 Corinthians 15:3-5)

'I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and *gave himself for me*.' (Galatians 2:19-20)

'*He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree*, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; *by his wounds you have been healed*.' (1 Peter 2:24, quoting Isaiah 53:5).

Appendix 2

Jesus' Predictions of his Death

On at least 20 occasions prior to his arrest Jesus spoke of his suffering and death. This table is based on the list in Robert E. Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 2nd. ed. (Old Tappan, Revell, 1964), pp. 53-54, to which I have added items 10, 15 and 20. The earliest references are allusive and metaphorical. Following Peter's affirmation of faith in him as Messiah at Caesarea Philippi Jesus deliberately spoke to his disciples about his coming suffering and death. Finally in his last week Jesus spoke several times of his impending death and instituted the memorial of his death.

Early predictions, veiled and metaphorical

1. Comparison of his body to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple (John 2:19).
2. Reference to the Son of Man being lifted up like the bronze snake in desert (John 3:14, cf. Numbers 21:8-9).
3. Remark concerning the time when he as bridegroom would be taken away (Mark 2:20 & parallels).
4. Analogy of himself as the bread of life to be broken and eaten (John 5:51-58).
5. Reference to the prophet Jonah as a sign (Matthew 16:4)

Clear predictions to his disciples, after Peter's acknowledgment of him as Messiah

6. Prediction at Caesarea Philippi of his rejection by the Jewish leaders, death and resurrection (Mark 8:31 & parallels).
7. Reference to rising from the dead (Mark 9:9), following Moses and Elijah's conversation at his Transfiguration about his impending 'departure' (Luke 9:31).
8. Prediction in Galilee of his betrayal, death and resurrection (Mark 9:30-32 & parallels).
9. Prediction, on the last journey to Jerusalem, of his death at the hands of Gentiles, his sufferings, and his resurrection (Mark 10:33-34 & parallels).
10. Statement that the Son of Man came 'to give his life a ransom for many' (Mark 10:45).
11. Reference to the impossibility of a prophet being killed out of Jerusalem (Luke 13:33).
12. Statement about the Son of Man being rejected by 'this generation' (Luke 17:25).
13. Comparison of himself to a good shepherd who 'lays down his life for the sheep' (John 10:11,18).

Final predictions, during his last week in Jerusalem

14. Comparison of himself to a grain of wheat which must fall into ground and die (John 12:24).
15. Parable of a vineyard and tenants, with the killing of the owner's son (Mark 12:6-8).
16. Prediction that the Son of Man will be 'handed over to be crucified' (Matthew 26:2).
17. Statement that the ointment poured on Jesus was an anointing beforehand for burial (Mark 14:8 & parallels).
18. Statement at the last Passover of impending suffering (Luke 22:15).
19. Breaking of bread and drinking wine initiated as a memorial of his death (Mark 14:22-25 & parallels).
20. Statement in Garden of Gethsemane that his soul was overwhelmed with sorrow 'to the point of death' (Mark 14:34).

Appendix 3
The Sufferings of the Servant of the Lord
as a Sacrifice for Sins
(Isaiah 53)

1. Verse 4 '*Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases,*
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.'

2. Verse 5 '*But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;*
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.'

3. Verse 6 '*All we like sheep have gone astray;*
we have all turned to our own way,
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.'

4. Verse 8 '*For he was cut off from the land of the living,*
stricken for the transgression of my people.'

5. Verse 10 '*When you make his life an offering for sin,*
he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days.'

6. Verse 11 '*The righteous one, my servant,*
shall make many righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.'

7. Verse 12 '*He poured out himself to death*
and was numbered with the transgressors,
yet he bore the sin of many . . .'

The Resurrection of Jesus

(1 Corinthians 15:1-20)

The resurrection of Jesus is the linchpin of Christianity. If true, it challenges the secularist worldview and can radically transform your life. This examination of the evidence for Jesus' resurrection, eighth in a series on 'The Challenge of Jesus', was presented at an evening service in St. Albans Presbyterian Church, Palmerston North, New Zealand, on 18 April 1993.

The resurrection of Jesus is the central basis of the Christian faith. 'If it is true,' says Michael Green, the English evangelist and New Testament scholar, 'then there is a God; the claims of Jesus are vindicated; he has saved us; there is a future for mankind; and death and suffering have to be viewed in a totally new light. If it is not true, Christianity collapses into mythology.'

Paul, writing in the New Testament, also recognized that the truth of Christianity stands or falls with the resurrection of Jesus. 'If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.' (1 Corinthians 15:19-20).

Jesus rose from the dead. So important a claim needs to be substantiated. What evidence is there for it?

1. The Documents are Early

A list of eyewitnesses to Jesus' resurrection is given in 1 Corinthians 15:5-9: '... he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.'

One of the earliest of Paul's letters, 1 Corinthians was written in AD 55, twenty five years after Jesus' death and resurrection. In human memory, twenty five years is a short time. We are well able to check the truthfulness of stories from that time ago. Many Baby Boomers could tell stories of the Hippy Movement and the Counter Culture from that time back in their own past, and we can all say where we were when President Kennedy was assassinated or when Neil Armstrong first walked on the moon. A multitude of witnesses can check the veracity of one another's memories, especially concerning events of importance.

Paul tells us that he 'had received' this information from others (1 Corinthians 15:3). This means that the evidence he records of Jesus' resurrection goes back earlier than when he wrote 1 Corinthians, to about AD 35, around the time when he became a Christian. That is less than five years after Jesus rose from the dead - a very short time in historical memory. The early nature of the evidence is confirmed by the use of Peter's Aramaic name 'Cephas' - Aramaic (or late Hebrew) being the language spoken by Palestinian Jews before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

Radical nineteenth century German scholars like F. C. Baur gave a late first or early second century date for the New Testament, and on that basis questioned its historical accuracy. The foregoing evidence shows that this won't do: it simply doesn't fit the facts. The evidence for Jesus' resurrection is early.

2. The Witnesses are Many

The list of witnesses to Jesus' resurrection given by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 mentions six separate resurrection appearances to a minimum of 525 different individuals:

Peter (Cephas):	1
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The twelve (the technical term for the group of twelve disciples, but omitting Judas Iscariot who had committed suicide after betraying Jesus, and Thomas who was absent):	10
More than five hundred brothers and sisters, some now dead, but most still living. (Implied here is an invitation to the sceptic to check out the truthfulness of the story with these surviving eyewitnesses):	No fewer than 501
James, Jesus' brother:	1
All the apostles (presumably including Thomas, and possibly including Matthias, Judas's replacement):	11 or 12
Paul (a late convert, formerly a persecutor of believers in Jesus):	1

The Gospels record additional appearances:

Women in a garden	2 or more
Walkers on a road	2
Fishermen by a lake	11
Disciples in an upstairs room	11
Crowd on a hilltop	Not known

The sheer number and diversity of the appearances rules out hallucination or imagination. Hallucinations happen to individuals - here are many witnesses. Hallucinations tend to be found in emotionally disturbed people - here is a wide range of personality types and psychologically diverse people. Hallucinations tend to recur - these appearances cease after forty days, except for Paul, whose description acknowledges the special nature of the appearance granted to him. Even in Paul's case, he distinguishes this resurrection appearance from his later vision of Jesus (1 Corinthians 9:1, 2 Corinthians 12:1-4).

The number and variety of the eyewitnesses lends strong credence to the historicity of Jesus' resurrection. Such a large number of people cannot fake it or be responsible for collusion in falsehood.

3. The Tomb was Empty

The supreme evidence that Jesus' tomb was empty was the inability of the enemies of the early Christian movement to produce the body. To disprove the early Christian preaching that Jesus was alive, all the opponents had to do was display the body, and the disciples' message would have been laughed out of town. 'The silence of the Jews,' says Leon Morris, 'is just as significant as the speech of the Christians.'

In fact, Peter's first sermon announcing the resurrection (Acts 2:29-32) gave his hearers opportunity to produce the body. To paraphrase what he said: 'David's tomb - and remains - are near here. The prophecy from Psalm 16 about God's holy one not experiencing corruption can't apply to him. It applies to Jesus, who has just been raised from the dead in this very city.' But the enemies of the Christian movement couldn't produce a body to falsify the message. This was in spite of the fact that they had taken the precaution to place Jesus' body in a sealed and guarded tomb (Matthew 27:65). Roman soldiers would have been court-martialled for dereliction of duty if they had not guarded it securely - and must have been bought off with a handsome bribe to put about the story that it was stolen! (Matthew 28:11-15).

Actually, the tomb was empty except for one thing: *the graveclothes*. Peter and John found 'the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself.' (John 20:6-7). Seeing this brought them to faith - because it was like a chrysalis case after a butterfly has emerged. No grave robber could have left the cloths in their original shape minus a body. Jesus had been transformed into a new dimension of existence and they were awed by it.

4. The Disciples were Happy

Further evidence for the reality of Jesus' resurrection was the profound psychological and motivational change that took place in his disciples. It was a change from fear to faith. From cowering behind locked doors, they had been transformed into bold public witnesses to Jesus' death and resurrection. Peter changed from a coward who denied to a servant girl that he even knew Jesus, to a rock-like figure who became the leader and spokesperson of the early church. The eleven disciples were transformed from a dispirited rabble into an effective missionary organization.

All the apostles - including doubting Thomas - were changed from unbelief to ardent faith. Notable are James and Jude - Jesus' brothers. They didn't believe in Jesus during his lifetime, but they did after his resurrection, and James became the leader of the church in Jerusalem. Paul himself was changed from a militant anti-Christian - rather like the ultra-Orthodox Yad L'Achim in modern Israel - into a great missionary who pioneered the worldwide expansion of the Christian movement.

Personal transformation of people's lives by Jesus continues to this day. Nearly 2 billion people - one third of the world's population - today believe in Jesus as Saviour and Lord. With a normal historical event, its impact and the testimony of witnesses diminishes as the years pass. It is the opposite with Jesus. The Christian movement grows and grows - touching people from all sorts of cultures and races, and of all kinds of backgrounds and abilities.

Jesus is not a dead historical figure, but a living person who can be met today. He was dead, but rose again. He is no longer dead, but alive. Because he is alive, you can meet him, and your life can be transformed by believing in him. You can know him personally as your Saviour and Lord.