

SOME NEW TESTAMENT STORIES ABOUT JESUS, WHICH POINT TO A NEW STYLE OF MINISTRY

Don Carrington

The fully-recorded mature decision that Jesus Himself makes about His style of ministry is when He chooses to be baptised by John in the Jordan. Albert Nolan, in his book *Jesus Before Christianity*, sees this as a deliberate choice from among a number of possible options.¹ Jesus chooses John as the prophet who is making the most sense at that time. And, in identifying Himself with John, Jesus opens up some options, and turns away from other “so-called successful ways of coping”, away from other “programs for transformation in Israel”. From the time of His baptism, Jesus begins to choose the direction He will go, and the methods He will adopt in His ministerial vocation.

With deliberate intent, Jesus begins His public ministry with a public act of solidarity with the people. John’s preaching is typical of the prophets of old, in that he calls upon all of Israel to act. John calls all of the people to repentance, and Jesus decides to go down to the river with the crowds. In the language of some Latin-American theologians, this is Jesus’ first conscious act of identification with those on the “underside” of history.²

¹ Albert Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity*, London UK: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1976, pp. 17ff.

² Right now, in our history, people are being subjected to tremendous pressures, and to systematic cultural genocide, by an aggressively powerful, modernising, dehumanising civilisation, and its representatives. When we approach these people sensitively and gently, we discover that the **עַם הָאָרֶץ** (*am hā’āretz*), the “people of the land”, are again in crisis in today’s world. It is fascinating to discover that scholars, who are doing research in our country, Australia, find the coping styles of the people fit precisely those used by 1st-century Jews, struggling to cope with the Empire. I refer especially to Rolf Gerritsen’s paper of August, 1981, written for the North Australian research unit of the Australian National University, entitled “Thoughts on Camelot: from Herodians and Zealots to the Contemporary Politics of Remote Aboriginal Settlements in the Northern Territory”. What

Jesus goes down into the muddy, dirty waters.
He deliberately joins the mob
solidarity
in repentance and faith
with crowds who are already
moving, confessing, repenting, turning . . .
Jesus goes down into Jordan
in a decisive act
this young man is making a genuine move
an act of repentance (μετάνοια (*metanoia*!))
aware that nothing in His young life
may ever be the same again
aware that in the providence of God
this is a watershed
old things are passing away.

Child of Bethlehem
His is a thoroughgoing washing (Zech. 13:1, Jer. 4:14)
a young life
drowned
radical repentance means
turning from
old ways
from a familiar world
from a world of death. . . .

In real repentance
there is no going back
old values must die. . . .³

In John's baptism of repentance, Jesus' choices are radically open. As a young, "budding" theologian, and as one who is gifted with the first glimpses of an alternative vision, it is to be expected that He might turn away from Galilee. He would not need to rationalise all that much to justify turning His back on the "old country" and its people, and to turn

is significant here, is the way in which a social anthropologist chooses New Testament imagery to describe sociological phenomena.

³ See Don Carrington, "Jesus' Countrymen", *The Bondage of Sinners*, [publication details cannot be identified], August, 1982, p. 66. This is one of my earlier attempts to express these issues in blank verse.

towards Jerusalem as the arena where bigger and better things happen. If it is possible for readers of the gospels to surrender hindsight, enter imaginatively into the decisive moments of His life, and share some of the anticipation of those close to Him, we will realise that He has given precious little indication so far, except that He insisted that John baptise Him, as he did other people.

Looking a little further, we see that it is a matter of historical choice that Jesus has identified Himself with John, and some of the other successful rabbinical schools of the day. This is a second indicator. And having appreciated that this decision has been at some cost to a bright young man's future as a theologian/scribe, we might reasonably expect Him to stay on, and join with John's movement. If we carry our anticipatory line of reasoning further, we would expect that Jesus will now join with John, to strengthen the team, to add his voice to John's cry, and call many others to come out to this special place, and to participate in this special ceremony in the sacred river Jordan. But Jesus is guided in taking other more surprising initiatives.

A dove is the sign of
new beginnings
after the flood.
A new world is possible
and is being realised.
God is pleased
John's prophetic message of justice
is now taken forward
up from the river
into the land
Jesus embodies
a new and living way
truly called "Gospel". . . .
When we compare Jesus and John
we have two outstanding prophets.
John preaches a lot.
Which side are you on?
Change direction and
be baptised.

Jesus goes further

He does not demand that people come out to Him
He does not camp out by Jordan
He travels around the countryside
in Galilee
reaching out to people. . . .

His is a recreative ministry
of compassion
to heal
to resurrect
to set people free.⁴

Jesus goes beyond Jordan, into the wilderness. Withstanding temptation, the second clear decision of His ministry is to go back into Galilee. This is a positive theological initiative. It is not a step back towards familiarity, and the security of His past. Again, with deliberate intent, He takes His identification with common people a step beyond the ceremonial of an isolated baptismal act.

Jesus begins a unique ministry of unparalleled identification with those who reputedly “know nothing”. New initiatives, characterised by an unexpected gospel praxis, which contrasts significantly with John’s fiery preaching from his somewhat isolated rural pulpit.

In fact, Jesus’ style of ministry, or praxis, is so radically different from the usual prophetic role, that John himself becomes confused as to what are reasonable expectations. Is Jesus on the wrong track? Is what He is doing bound to be misdirected and ineffectual? From prison, John sends some of his disciples to convey this disquiet to Jesus. And Jesus’ answer to John’s probing is informative. His words, in a definitive way, reveal His early methodological focus on praxis:

“Go back and tell John what you are hearing and seeing,
the blind can see
the lame can walk
those who suffer from dreaded skin diseases are made clean
the deaf hear

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

the dead are brought back to life
and the good news is preached to the poor” (Matt.11:4, 5).

Preaching is notably the last item on the list. It could be argued that, in the early months of His ministry, Jesus is so busy “doing” and “being” the human actualisation of the kingdom, that radical action takes preference over reflection, theologising, and preaching. This is so, at least until conflict and polarisation begin, and Jesus’ protagonists insistently engage Him in theological and theoretical word battles.

In the early months, this young man has a compassionate commitment to a unique theological praxis, which is unmistakable in its involvement with the ordinary people of the land.

Robert McAfee Brown, a contemporary American theologian, describes vocational learning as an experience of “creative dislocation”. The terms he uses in his autobiographical reflection in the *Journeys in Faith* series are helpful, when applied to an inquiry into Jesus’ historical ministry. Brown records his own learning under the heading of “The Gift of Disturbing Discoveries”.

The first three in the list are as follows:

1. First Disturbing Discovery:
Who we listen to determines what we hear.
2. Second Disturbing Discovery:
Where we stand determines what we see.
3. Third Disturbing Discovery:
What we do determines who we are.⁵

These perceptual discoveries disturb, because they also provoke other questions, which are sometimes overlooked in studies of Jesus’ activities. Questions such as:

Where did Jesus choose to stand?

⁵ Robert McAfee Brown, *Creative Dislocation: the Movement of Grace*, Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1980, pp. 105-110.

Could He have stood elsewhere?

Could He have chosen to work with other people?

What did Jesus see happening to His people?

Did Jesus experience “multiple rejection”, typical of relations with other Galileans?

To whom did Jesus listen, and what did He hear?

What did Jesus respond to the question: What can be done?

So much of the quest for the historical Jesus has operated out of one particular mind-set, which reflects a kind of anxiety about expectations, similar to that experienced by John in prison. Its focus is upon words in isolation, “Are you the one?” But that person’s anxiety to get an answer to personal questions may be built on a mistaken presupposition that “we are who we say we are”, uncritically assuming that what a person says about himself or herself determines what that person does.

But that doesn’t work so well for me any more. It implies that there is an easy transition from thought to action: work out a worldview, and then “apply it”. That becomes a nifty rationalisation of the status quo. People say they are for love – and find it possible to build B52s, and fly them against defenceless peasants. People say that they believe in sacrifice, and worry their heads off about retirement-benefit programs. We find it too easy to say who we are, engage in actions that are the exact contrary, and not even be aware that we have a problem. The opposite route is more accurate. Our self-definitions are not constructed in our heads, they are forged by our deeds. The payoff is not a consistent theory, but a committed life.⁶

Jesus began differently from the other preachers and teachers of His time. For Jesus, “what we do determines who we are”. We are not defined by rhetoric, but by identification, by solidarity, by where we choose to locate ourselves with people who are crying out to God in their distress.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

Jesus did not baptise. Instead, He went out to seek and to serve the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Here we have a second decision – a second praxiological clue to the mind of Jesus. He did not feel called to bring everyone to a baptism of repentance in the river Jordan. He decided that something else was necessary, something that had to do with the poor, the sinners, the sick – the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

One gospel story, which, perhaps, in a paradigmatic way, characterises Jesus' early ministry, is recorded in Luke 7:36-50.⁷ This story is about relationships. It shows the inclusive way in which Jesus related to both sinners and Pharisees. The story also shows the way in which Jesus' affirmative action sharply points up the separatist mentality of the respectable people, and highlights their frustrated expectations concerning the way they think that Jesus ought to act.

Jesus is having dinner at the house of Simon the Pharisee, when a sinful woman touches him. A key verse is, "If this man were really a prophet, He would know what kind of sinful life she leads" (Luke 7:39).

These are the Pharisee's thoughts
and their values.
Actually this woman
"gate-crashed" his party.
Pharisees were separatists
and kept sinners out!

On their books, prophets were also expected
to keep holy
and not to allow sinners
to come near.
Personal pollution
right on meal time!

But Jesus does not reject this woman
He accepts her.
He breaks through the barriers of custom
with love and compassion

⁷ The gospel writer, Luke, positions this story directly following John the Baptist's probing from prison, when his expectations were not being met.

for a woman
whom everyone knows is a sinner.

Both by His words to Simon
and by His non-verbal personal acceptance of her
Jesus has made possible
new relationships.

This man had allowed her to touch Him
Jesus had touched her
He had not rejected her
He had not punished or scolded her with harsh words
He had not treated her as unclean!

Like the father in the prodigal son story
He has no qualifications,
no “ifs”
no “maybes”
like that father, He says in love and acceptance
Come home.
Your sins are forgiven!

For the woman
in one simple gesture
she had been totally freed from her past.
This was grace and
it was free!
The poor and the sinners
found the company of Jesus
a liberating experience
His presence and attitudes
made them feel accepted
renewed
as if a whole new way of living
had already begun.
It was not necessary to fear evil spirits
or evil men
or storms on the lake. . . .
They did not need to worry about
how they would be clothed, what they were to eat,
or about falling sick again from those kinds of anxieties.

More than this
those who were most alienated
Jesus seemed to find equally acceptable.
Heavy “debtors”
both suffer more
and are more gratefully loving
when cancellation of debts is possible.⁸

Jesus, with initial, non-verbal, affirmative action, accepted this woman. He dares to be demonstrative, showing firstly by non-verbal action, and secondly, by spoken word (cf. vv. 44-48), that this woman is a person of worth. Jesus asserts that she, who is obviously a sinner, has shown great love. And Jesus has the audacity, not only to praise one of the common people, but also to make fairly-pointed comparisons:

“You gave Me no water for My feet” (v. 44).

No doubt these words caused more than a little embarrassment, even public shame, for Simon the Pharisee. Moreover, it is hard to imagine that Jesus was naively unaware of the ferment of societal confrontation, which was being highlighted in what He was saying and doing. The house may have been precipitously close to an uproar, as Jesus adds insult to injury, by declaring in such a context:

“Your sins are forgiven.
You are saved (by faith).
Go in peace!”⁹

⁸ This attempt at blank verse was prepared for the Aboriginal people in North Australia, to raise deep theological issues with people, who have limited literacy facility in English.

⁹ The message of forgiveness, and the way in which these utterances of Jesus cut across the religious sanctions that kept sinners in bondage, is one of the crucial dynamics in the prophetic challenge that Jesus brought to the heart of traditional Judaism. What is transparently obvious is that such declarations of forgiveness challenge and subvert the whole edifice of legalism, upon which Pharisaism is built. Cf. Carrington, “Jesus’ Countrymen”, *The Bondage of Sinners*, pp. 76ff. Walter Brueggemen, *Prophetic Imagination*, Philadelphia PA: Fortress Press, 1971, writes: “His readiness to forgive sin (Mark 2:1-11), which evoked amazement (v.12), also appeared to be blasphemy, that is to say, a threat to the present religious sanctions. At one level, the danger is that Jesus stood in the role of God (v. 7), and, therefore, claimed too much, but we should not miss the

In this story, therefore, as in numerous other events, what begins as a response of identification, solidarity, and compassion, becomes also the affirmation of a creative, theological alternative, “the kingdom of God is among you”, with a challenge to those in power, which disturbs and discomforts.

Dorothee Soelle is one of the few contemporary theologians who have appreciated the creativity of Jesus’ initiatives. Soelle speaks of the “phantasy of Jesus”. Now “phantasy” is perhaps a term which commonly calls forth many misleading, even ghostly associations, but Soelle’s use of the words is grounded in solid socio-historical analysis. There is also a consistent etymology, in which “phantasy” is defined positively as meaning visionary, imaginative alternatives. Jesus, in liberating His own “phantasy”, points the way for others, whereas a loss of “phantasy” is a loss of world possibilities:

This limited awareness of reality plays a remarkable, as well as a fatal, role in the attitudes, which many took towards Jesus. Fisherman are fishermen, and belong at their nets – He who disturbs this order, and makes wandering preachers out of uneducated fishermen, is unrealistic. Illnesses, especially those of a chronic nature, where there is no acute danger to life, can be dealt with during the week. He who is concerned about others on the Sabbath, instead of keeping the religious commandments concerning God and the holiday rest, bursts established boundaries. He who tolerates, or even favours, foreigners, and people of a different faith, has removed the boundaries of the national religious consciousness – His soaring phantasy really acknowledges but a single principle: the creation and propagation of well-being.¹⁰

radical criticism of society, contained in the act. Hannah Arendt had discerned that this was Jesus’ most endangering action, because, if a society does not have an apparatus of forgiveness, then its members are fated to live forever with the consequence of any violation. Thus, the refusal to forgive sin (or the management of the machinery of forgiveness), amounts to enormous social control. While the claim of Jesus may have been religiously staggering, its threat to the forms of accepted social control, was even greater.

¹⁰ See Dorothee Soelle, *Beyond Mere Obedience*, Minneapolis MN: Augsburg Publishing, 1970, pp. 64-65.

Thus Soelle, in one succinct chapter, focusing on Jesus' "phantasy", begins to name and identify some of the characteristics of Jesus' ministry, which are at the centre of this enquiry. The concluding paragraph of Soelle's chapter on "The Phantasy of Jesus" bears directly upon the issue being explored in "Theology by the people".

Jesus, by doing some "phantastic" thinking and acting, really does open the way for a new theology by the people. He is primarily setting out to create theologians of faith, by liberating the phantasy of the people with whom He is working. It is not that He sets out to rewrite "the rules of the game", but, rather, that He challenges us to discover, in every context, those possibilities which release creativity in other people, so that they, too, may develop "enveloped faith", and become theologians for others.

There is a saying which has become a banner in some churches; it reads:

Love is like a basket with five loaves and two fishes
It's never enough until you start to give it away.

Love is for giving away. Love, selfishly held, with no sharing or giving, goes sour and rancid. The very nature of love is to give itself to another. Another "common-sense saying", often quoted, says, "love is caught not taught".

Both of the above injunctions, regarding "love", point to significant dynamics and complexities in understanding Jesus' ministry. There is so much expectation-shattering originality characterising this man called Jesus, that the great temptation is to focus on Jesus alone, making Him the "prima donna"; making His sayings, His originality, and His person, the subject of study and adoration. So to do, is to neglect the relational, historical dimensions of His originality and spontaneity, and to focus only on personal abilities, which leads to an all too-logical conclusion that this man was unique, without discovering the divine dynamic and potentiality being communicated to humankind, as never before.

Creativity, and the ability to theologise, is like love, in so far as the activities of a solitary "prima donna" inevitably sour, decay, and die. In

particular, elitist, self-seeking “theologies” often must be judged as worse than useless, because they have become the rationale which legitimates domination and exploitation in the name of God.

Jesus’ originality and spontaneity was innovative, because it was both radically open to Yaweh, the God of Moses, the God of Freedom, and open to people who are crying out in their lostness. His originality is constantly being given away, and constantly challenging, head-on, the self-seeking religious “status quo”, based on the conservative law, and the temple establishment.

The complexities that face Christian theologians, who follow Jesus’ lead, with “love and faith”, do not end with a religious demand to give “gifts”. Traditional pietism has understood its task for centuries as anxiously pursuing the necessity for Christian charity in all things. Most traditional religion of this kind, at least on the surface, abhors “self-seeking love”. Many groups, however, have failed to grasp the nettle of the relational challenges, which Christ initiates, by calling forth creativity and faith, in plain, ordinary people. As a result, so much pious activity has degenerated, in some kind of “packaged religion”, which assumes that the pagan is hungry for religion, but is otherwise a passive consumer of someone else’s “love gifts”.

In theological education in third-world situations, problems erupt when an eager Western theologian, from the storehouse of his riches, attempts to give religious gifts to “poor” people. There are at least two problems in this process. Firstly, what is given to the recipients often resembles lifeless commodities, long frozen, or, in some other way, moribund, yet still carrying the label “love”. If there is some problem, the immediate temptation is to assume that it is because of a technological breakdown in production, and so recall the defective products. A great deal of time and effort in Christian mission history has been spent doing and redoing the packaging.

But, no matter what the quality of the ministerial “gift”, the second problem, that of dehumanisation, remains, i.e., what does this “giving” process do to the recipient?

Recipients of ministry are condemned to perpetual consumerism. In religion, they are relegated to being dehumanised sponges, soaking up charity from elsewhere. In fact, misplaced charity produces its own dehumanised, debilitating dependency, with even worse forms of impoverishment to come, as whole peoples have their basis for self-support and subsistence taken from them, in the space of a decade or so. History provides countless examples of this kind of systematic impoverishment, where whole countries are currently being squeezed onto a process of under-development.

Some people suffer an under-development process, where the basic subsistence skills of the people are being lost, in the space of one generation, in an urban ghetto. But the real question at issue here is: Is there a parallel impoverishment going on in our “theologising”? Have we misinterpreted the nature, purpose, and process Jesus intends, turning from a development of originality and spontaneity to an abortive religious productivity, which, in its “process”, destroys the potentialities of people, by relegating them to the role of being passive consumer drones?

Passive consumerism is not the dynamics of the “good news” process that is recorded in the gospels, as Jesus relates to the people. When people encounter Jesus, they find themselves liberated, and their God-given capacities are enhanced.

Of all the men who ever lived, I consider Jesus of Nazareth the most conscious of His identity. And I am of the opinion that the strength of His phantasy must be understood as rising out of the strength of this joyous self-realisation. Phantasy has always been in love with fulfilment. It conceives of some new possibility, and repeatedly bursts the boundaries, which limit men, setting free those who have submitted to these boundaries, which have, thereby, been endlessly maintained. In the portrayal of the gospels, Jesus appears as a man who infected His surroundings with happiness and hope, who passed on His power, who gave away everything that was His.¹¹

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.

Maybe Soelle has it right here, but her words still fall into the traps, mentioned above, precisely because Jesus' self-realisation finds fulfilment in the fulfilment of other people, especially the poor. Without the self-realisation of others, dare we say that Jesus has not yet reached His own self-realisation? He gave away everything that was His, in order to be filled again. Again, the metaphor tends to be stretched to breaking point, or is, perhaps, wrongly conceived, when we speak of "filling and emptying". Our very words tend to come as "packages", which deny the integrated relationships which we are seeking. The "phantasy" and style of ministry, which we are seeking, wants to break out of the captivity of "haves" and "have-nots" to a dynamic which affirms self-realisation without, at the same time, taking from anybody else.

These tensions are seen in a comparison between the traditional "Have faith in Jesus", which is commonly placed in contradistinction to "Have faith in yourself", as if the two are mutually exclusive. But Jesus consistently says to people who have sought cures, "Your faith has healed you". This is a surprising saying, which immediately separates Him from the other doctors, physicians, exorcists, wonder-workers, and holy men of His time.

The doctor may think he heals the sick.
The wonder-worker usually does some magic.
But Jesus says, "If you are to be healed,
YOU must have faith."

His words about faith are truly surprising. He says you do not need magic, you need faith: "Your faith will make you well."

Many doctors and healers in Jesus' country believed that God could heal. But Jesus said, "Everything is possible for anyone who has faith" (Mark 9:23).

If you have faith, like a grain of mustard seed, nothing will be impossible for you . . . you could say to this mountain, "move from here to here", and it would move (Matt 17:20).

Jesus relied on the power of people's faith!

Faith for Jesus is an almighty power, a power that can do the impossible, and liberate people. The person, who has faith, receives God's power. The person, who has faith, in a way, becomes like God (or like Jesus). At this point, again our language is close to the point of breakdown, bordering on the blasphemous. Part of the problem may, in fact, be that the English language has a very individualistic understanding of the "possessive", i.e., what is mine is mine, must be mine, and not anyone else's. Yet the phantasy of faith in Christ's understanding goes way beyond the individualistic possession of an attribute, and becomes a rational entity, through which God stimulates one's originality and spontaneity. This, in turn, must be "originality and creativity" for others, stimulating their faith and creativity, also. Phantasy is not for self-aggrandisement.

Faith was an attitude people caught, when they had contact with Jesus, who lived like a free man of faith. By faith, people were encouraged to break out of their bondage. By faith, people began to help themselves. This is an assertiveness, beyond the usual religious condemnation that puts sinners in their place for all time. It is a fantastic assertiveness, for here is one willing to say, "but I say unto you. . . . You can help yourselves".

By faith you can stand up!
It can be done!
You can do it!

Into a community of numbed fatalism, Jesus brought hope and faith. People, who had lived for a long time, without hope, saw the impossible begin to happen, people, who were paralysed, began to move, other people were healed, evil spirits were cast out, and lepers were cleansed. The miracles of liberation had begun to take place. Faith was people power, and enabled people to do the "impossible". "A new humanity, working together with God, in recreating all things." This is a faith that responds, with God, in establishing the new age.

The antithesis, or opposite, of spontaneity is paralysis. Another paradigmatic story in the gospels, where Jesus focuses on initiative, is found in John 5:1-18. This is the story of the pool of Bethzatha.

Imagine the setting, with that ragged mob of cripples all camped around, waiting for a miracle. People expected miracles at that sacred place, for, it was said, that, every now and then, an angel of the Lord went down, and stirred up the water. And, it was said, that the first sick person to get into the water, after it had been stirred, would be healed of whatever disease. The trick was to get as close to the water as possible, and jump in first. The trouble was that there could only be one first.

A cry might
start a rush
everybody pushing and shoving
over 50 people in together
makes a big splash
anyone healed?
Now for that wet and dripping return to our places.
How many times
must we do this?
Lord how long?

The day this happened was a Sabbath, so the Jewish authorities told the man, who has been healed, “this is our Sabbath, and it is against our law to carry your mat” (John 5:10).

Now angels do not work
on the Sabbath.
For six days you shall watch the pool
but on the Sabbath
do not expect waves or even ripples
relax
no anxiety today
no hope either today
do your laundry
allow visitors
tomorrow at the earliest.
Jesus came
on an off day
from over the hill
at the back not up from the water!
What really happens is that
a visitor to this place of miracles

walks up to a long-term resident
and asks, what on the face of it
seems a simple, even stupid, question:

“Do you want to get well?” (John 5:6).

I have been here for 38 years, that’s a long time
Do you know how many times
I have gotten wet and had to crawl back?
THIRTY-EIGHT YEARS.
And he asks me
“Do you want get well?”
Who amongst us
is comfortable in their paralysis?
After 38 years
it’s possible to develop a coping style
make some friends
see more than rumours of angels.

Do you ever ask yourself?
amidst your present religious activities,
Is there any other way?

If you do, then
get up!

Pick up your bed and walk.
You can do it!

Faith is communicated in this situation.
Face-to-face with Jesus
this man gets up
uses muscles
not used for 38 years or more.
He moves at a time
when there are no angels
on a day when the law says
paralysis is better than carrying a bed.
“Listen, you are well now, stop sinning
or something worse will happen to you.”

How many steps did this lame man take before he stumbled,
and straightaway “told the authorities”?
He puts the finger on Jesus.
Whether naively or not, he betrays Him to a powerful group
who are against the One who healed him?

This story does not have a happy ending.
We could say that our friend remains “crippled”
because he prefers to side with conservative authorities
remaining dependent on their ways.
These same authorities are “crippled”
paralysed by their interpretation of the Sabbath laws
when God’s salvation is being realised elsewhere
right before their very eyes.

John, who wrote the gospel, has not missed the irony here.
The very one who is healed at this time
fails to see that the authorities
are against liberation
and against Jesus, who embodies God’s active liberation.
This betrayal
sadly focuses on oppressors
powerful cripples
who themselves are in need of liberation.¹²

¹² Vv. 15 and 16 are an interesting counter to an overly-romantic interpretation of this story. The reality, in that is opposition to Jesus is mobilising. The writer of John’s Gospel develops, in more detail, this kind of interchange in John 9. If we take these two incidents together, I am inclined to favour an interpretation that Jesus’ betrayal by these beneficiaries of His kindness arises, in these early days, from their “naivete”. Certainly, in John 9, the man who faces the inquisition becomes cheeky and aggressively for Jesus, and against the authorities. The writer may, in fact, have intended readers to experience some progression from the sad collaboration in John 5 to a more anti-authoritarian stance in John 9. However, in this Bethzatha story, it would seem to be introducing uncalled-for paranoia into the interpretative process to posit betrayal by this man, who had waited 38 years for some miracle. It is, therefore, doubtful that what we have here is a case of “quisling betrayal”, as if the man were reporting “underground Zealot activity on the Sabbath to the authorities”, especially since the report comes from one who has benefited so much. In a later period, Jesus, of necessity, becomes more cautious about who is told of the group activities. Yet, even in situations of later conflict, the “Son of man”, at no point, engages in the binary opposition of the “we versus they” variety. On the contrary, Jesus’ ministry, in both word and action, dissolves binary barriers, and in a unifying way, moves towards recreation and the kingdom of God’s alternative reality.

In the gospels, Jesus turns, and says, apparently to the most unlikely persons, “Your faith is the only qualification you need to exercise initiative and creativity. Come follow Me!”

His is not a call to dependency. Jesus is not saying, “have faith in My faith, I have enough for both”. As if the son of Mary will painlessly transform the world, and other persons can “hang around to sample the cream on the cake”, which Jesus has created.

On the contrary, Jesus’ “disturbing discovery” is that “the way” leads into problematic areas, where so much of conventional strategy is useless, and that “participatory faith”, i.e., “actively exercising God-given skills of creativity”, opens the only categories that will enable one to reflect upon what is liberating, in a new context.

To begin such a journey, passively dependent, is to make dropping-out a foregone conclusion. Indeed, there is much to suggest that mistakenly passive passengers are in danger of “changing to the wrong train, before leaving the station”. Which may be just as well, as “someone else’s faith is no preparation at all to be a follower of Jesus”.

In terms of creativity, it is a strange paradox that Jesus would have failed, if He had begun to “do theology” in such a way that “people’s theology” was made redundant. If Jesus had, in the crisis caused by wrong expectations, chosen to be a charismatic leader, who surged ahead of the people, and presented them with a “fait accompli”, then overall failure would certainly have been His lot. Unless, of course, He called upon “readily-available legions of angels”, and, in that eventuality, we still would have no hope available to us, as mere humans, except to wait for Him to come and do it for us again.

What Jesus did succeed in doing was energising and enabling a small group of ordinary people, disciples, who were prepared to act and to think according to new categories. He succeeded in showing, by personal paradigm, a style of creative struggle that maintained creativity, in and through extreme conflict with powerful people. He continually affirmed others, and could not be put down Himself.

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