

A Social Action Mini-Profile of our Leader and Savior – Jesus Christ

- What Do We Learn from Jesus' Behavior in the Gospels?
- What Does This Say to Us Today About Social Concerns?

The Local History of Jesus Time

Jesus lived during the Roman occupation of Palestine. The Romans imposed their own political leadership (recall Pontius Pilate was the local governor), burdensome taxes and other aspects of Roman pagan culture. Romans were very skeptical of the Jewish monotheistic religion. Although generally allowed to worship, the Jews understandably hated the Romans and wanted them conquered and removed.

The Religious Environment at the Time

The Jews of the day worshipped in the Jerusalem temple and their local synagogues. They based their worship on the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament), with special attention to the law, their history and the prophets. By the time of Jesus, there were factions in the religious leadership each entrenched in their own views – Scribes (lawyers), Pharisees, Sadducees, priests and others. Each of these in their own way was wedded to a strict interpretation of laws and religious practices – often well beyond the intent of the Law. Their common worship was rooted in the Covenant of Abraham, in Psalms and was conducted by rabbis or priests. Their notion of political leadership was a melding of secular and religious roles in each leader. As a result, the common people and leadership alike were looking for a savior who would fulfill a strong political, religious and military role, a leader who would banish the Romans and return the Jewish people to freedom as a small, autonomous nation under God.

Jesus' Role - a Big Surprise to Many

No one expected Jesus to arrive in an obscure little town and to live a hidden life until into mid-life. Jesus' early years were surely a time when He learned from his parents, studied His Jewish Scripture, faith and heritage. He most likely took up the trade of his earthly father, Joseph. Jesus was of simple, lower class family roots without any perks of the day. So when Jesus finally asserted himself at age 30 and took over from John the Baptizer, he caused quite a stir and drew a large following. A person of deep love and peace, Jesus was not to become the kind of military leader the Jews had sought.

Jesus the Preacher and Teacher

Jesus led a multifaceted life – as a preacher, teacher, healer, friend and helper to all in need - and a person who was often in prayer connecting with his heavenly Father. Jesus' background in the Hebrew Scriptures gave him a firm foundation (history, law, prophets) from which to engage his community spiritually and to launch his mission. He spoke with great authority and insight into their religious traditions, to ordinary interpersonal issues and to human psychology. He frequently called the established leaders to task when they acted as hypocrites, saying one thing and acting differently - clearly counter to their religious heritage and counter to Jesus earthly teachings.

Jesus the Social Activist

Jesus' teaching "to be a neighbor to all people" was quite radical compared to the culture of his day, which relied on a variation of "an eye for an eye" and "a tooth for a tooth" morality. The earlier prophetic calls of Isaiah, Amos and Jeremiah – calling for respect of God and care for the poor – were somehow lost. Jesus set instead the very high standard of love of neighbor – explicitly requiring love of enemies, prioritizing attention to the poor, the outcast, the disabled, the imprisoned, the foreigner and the sinner. Jesus broke with religious taboos as He made a point of visiting and eating with public sinners, including tax collectors and prostitutes. Jesus reached out to many who were burdened with sin - and Jesus' judgment of sinners was as gracious as it was stern – as He asked them to reform their behavior and to sin no more. Jesus also engaged women in conversation, despite the prohibitions of the day to not converse with any woman who was not a close relative. Jesus demonstrated his love and empathy for many people who were sick, medically challenged, disabled or overcome with evil spirits – healing them and affirming their value as individuals. Jesus broke down any social obstacles that got in the way of sharing his message and engaging and inviting everyone without prejudice. And throughout all this work of loving neighbor, Jesus was a person of prayer, communicating with His Father at each step and receiving His direction and encouragement.

The Challenge to Modern Day Christians

The bottom line is expressed in the two great commandments – Love God and Love Your Neighbor. Loving the neighbor calls for a change of heart – to achieve an understanding of and empathy for those who are less fortunate, those who are different from us - and arriving at actions which express our commitment to help each other. We are to give financially, yes, but we are also called to physical outreach in our local and national communities. Jesus teachings also call for us to promote public policies which can eliminate the structural injustices and inequities found pervasively in our modern society. Based on a reading of the Gospels, Jesus would be pro-life, pro-woman and pro-worker. Jesus would work for affordable healthcare, more educational opportunities, living wages, and against the violence of war and death by execution. And Jesus would not measure success by whether "he was better off now than in the past", but instead measure success by whether "all persons in society are better off and have life's essentials, reflective of our human dignity"!

Think this is going too far? I invite you to check back on the 10 principles of Catholic Social Teachings. And check out www.faithfulcitizenship.org. It is no accident that Jesus gave us His message and own personal example in such striking detail and clarity, a message appropriate for all times!

Deacon Bob Wallace November 2008

Representative Sources:

- *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Vatican, June 2004 (Available from the Vatican web site: www.vatican.va, just search on the English title.)
- *New American Bible - New Testament*, especially the four Gospels which chronicle Jesus' life in terms of His travels, sayings and behaviors.
- *Noisy Contemplation – Deep Prayer for Busy People*, by William R. Callahan, Quixote Center, 2008 (www.quixote.org)

Discussion Questions:

1. Based on what you recall of Jesus' actions from Scripture, recall and discuss several progressive stances he took in contrast to the prevailing culture of His day:
 - Jesus comments to religious leaders (Scribes, Sadducees, Pharisees, etc)
 - Jesus actions on behalf of sinners
 - Jesus actions on behalf of the sick or disabledFor each, why do you think Jesus acted the way he did?
2. Express in your own words Jesus' meaning of the two great commandments – love of God and neighbor:
 - How did Jesus say we should love God? What examples did he give us?
 - How did Jesus say we should love our neighbor? What was so different about Jesus' views from the accepted view of that time?
3. Cite some examples of modern day persons who show love for their neighbors with the kind of love which Jesus demonstrated (local, national or international persons).
 - What risks do (did) they take?
 - What aspects of the current culture do (did) they press beyond?
4. What ideas do you have to more fully follow the example of Jesus regarding
 - Love of God?
 - Love of neighbor?
5. Do you see a relationship between the two great commandments? If so, describe the relationship and what it means to you as you grow in the practice of your faith.