

An excellent article by Donal Dorr, an inspiring Kiltegan Father – who gets to the heart of Jesus and his gospel – Do read it

The Ministry of Jesus

Donal Dorr

According to the Gospels Jesus began his public ministry by coming to John the Baptist at the Jordan. He joined the hundreds of others who went down into the water to be baptized by John (Mark 1:9). At that moment he had a life-changing experience. He saw God's Spirit 'descending upon him like a dove' and heard a voice from heaven telling him: 'You are my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' (Mark 1:10-11). This account suggests that even Jesus needed to be assured of God's overwhelming love and acceptance. So it increases our awareness that Jesus was fully human.

The Holy Spirit who had 'descended' on him, then led him into a wilderness place (Matthew 4:1; Mark 1:12). That gave him time to 'let in' the significance of God's overwhelming love and acceptance of him. He could then go on to take time to discern how he would carry out his public ministry. He had been empowered by his experience of being unconditionally loved and accepted by God. His question was how best he could enable others to have a similar experience. The Gospel accounts of his 'temptations' suggest that the primary focus of his discernment was on how he would use his power – above all how he would avoid dominating those who chose to follow him and would empower them instead.

GOOD NEWS TO THE POOR AND THE SICK

The guidance of the Spirit in his time of discernment in the wilderness led Jesus to focus mainly on bringing 'Good News' to people who had been left on the margins of his society. These included people suffering from serious physical

or mental illnesses – especially those who had been shunned by society because they suffered from the dreaded skin disease called 'leprosy' in the Gospels. He also brought new hope to people who were believed to be possessed by evil spirits, as well as to refugees, dispossessed widows who had been forced into prostitution, indebted people who had lost their farms and to the hated tax-collectors. All these were considered to be 'unclean' or to be punished by God for not practising the various rituals and petty regulations which people had been told were all part of God's Law. The 'Good News' which Jesus brought to them was that each of them was loved unconditionally by God.

Jesus wanted to convince these marginalized people that they were accepted and treasured by God. He did so by sharing the lives, the poverty, and the homelessness of



Baptism of Christ by Fra Angelico (1395-1455) in the Dominican Convent of San Marco in Florence, Italy. (Photo: L. Lew OP) Left and right: *The Women of the Old Testament* by Claudio Pasto (1945-2016), in the Basilica of Our Lady of Aparecida, Brazil. (Photos: T. Redmond)

the poor. And, living among them as one of them, he treated them with utmost compassion and brought them healing and new hope.

CHALLENGE AND COMPASSION

By engaging in this kind of ministry Jesus was posing a truly radical challenge to the dominant forces in his society. He was calling into question the teaching and mindset of the religious authorities. And, since religion was so deeply interwoven with the political structures, his words, his actions, and his whole lifestyle were an open defiance of the status quo. He was a prophet of liberation whose ministry was in continuity with that of the great prophets in Jewish history. And his challenge to the authorities was at a far deeper level than the violent rebellions which occasionally broke out during his time.

As though to balance the overt challenge of Jesus to oppression of all kinds, we find that the key feature of his ministry was compassion. Perhaps the most striking example is the story told by Jesus of how the father of the prodigal son welcomes him home:

The father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this child of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate (Luke 15:22-24)

In his story of The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37) Jesus challenges us to realize that for him and for God what matters most is not what religion we profess or what country we come from but whether we show real compassion by coming to the aid of people in trouble. And St John's Gospel (8:11) gives a very moving account of how Jesus dealt so compassionately with the woman 'who was found in adultery'.

WOMEN

In the Palestine of that time women were treated as second-class people; they were discriminated against politically, economically and religiously. One of the more radical aspects of the ministry of Jesus was that he invited women to be members of the inner circle of his followers. Furthermore, the Gospels indicate that it was his women followers who remained faithful to him even in his darkest hour on the Cross – and that they were the first to believe that he had risen from the dead.

Luke's Gospel gives us three striking instances of how Jesus recognized the equality of women.

(1) He allowed Mary of Bethany to take up the position of a disciple – a role that, in the society of the time, would have been reserved to men. (Luke 10:39-42)

(2) He insisted that the greatness of his mother Mary lay in her hearing of the Word of God rather than simply

in being the mother of such a great man. (Luke 11:27-8)

(3) He touched and healed a sick woman and invited her into the middle of the synagogue – a place that was reserved for men. Then he called her a 'daughter of Abraham', a phrase that is unique in the bible since the Jews invariably spoke of the 'sons of Abraham'. (Luke 13:12-6)



FRIENDSHIPS AND VULNERABILITY

Jesus gathered around him a group of women and men who became not just his disciples but also his close friends. He spent time with them (e.g. Luke 9:10), celebrated with them (e.g. John 2), shared his healing and Good News ministry with them (e.g. Luke 10:1). Most striking of all are his words in John's account of his Last Supper: 'I do not call you servants any longer ... I call you friends.' (John 15:15)

Jesus' love for his friends was warm and quite emotional. This aspect is strongly emphasized in John's Gospel. We see him moved to tears by the grief of Martha over the death of her brother (John 11:33-36). So it is not surprising that Pope Francis sees tenderness as an attitude which should be characteristic of Christians e.g. his call for Christians to live a 'revolution of tenderness' in Santiago, on September 22nd, 2015.

Perhaps the surest proof of deep friendship is that one is willing to show vulnerability and to ask for support from one's friends. The Gospel accounts tell us that Jesus showed this kind of vulnerability, especially during his Agony in the Garden, when he repeatedly asked his three special friends to stay and watch with him. (Matthew 26:38)

CONCLUSION

As Christians we have been given an extraordinary gift. Not content just to tell us how to live a truly human life, Jesus, the Word of God, came to live among us in order to show us what a fully human life involves – how to combine a radical challenge to injustice with compassion, tenderness and vulnerability. ■

Fr Donal Dorr is a theologian, a writer and a priest of St Patrick's Missionary Society and lives in Dublin, Ireland. In this article Donal has borrowed material from his new book *A Creed for Today* which will be published this year by Veritas in Ireland and Orbis Books in the USA.