

“Jesus for the Non-Religious”

Fifteen miles from Orlando, Florida, you'll find the Holy Land Experience, an evangelical theme park that promises to take you back two thousand years in time to let you walk the streets of old Jerusalem and experience the ministry of Jesus. Developed by the same company that created Universal Studio's *Island of Adventure*, Holy Land Experience is a little like Christmas itself: a blend of spirituality, hucksterism and good old-fashioned entertainment, where you can munch on a Goliath Burger, visit the Old Scroll Shop for souvenirs, and where for a modest \$35 admission ticket, according to the park's website, you'll find answers to life's most persistent questions: Where did I come from? Why am I here? And where am I going? All with plenty of free parking thrown in.

One wonders what Jesus would make of the Holy Land Experience. Would he recognize the palm trees and acacias, the faux Middle Eastern market, or the actors dressed up to look like Roman soldiers? What would he make of the park's proclamation that through his birth, "a miraculous event occurred: God became man, dwelt among us, and redeemed mankind through His death and resurrection?" Jesus might be puzzled by that, since the doctrines of the Incarnation and Atonement weren't fully developed until sometime after his death. But almost certainly he would find one familiar sight: a replica of the Great Temple, built to half scale yet still six stories tall, for although now the Wailing Wall is all that remains of the structure, Herod's Temple was one of the most grandiose buildings of the ancient world.

Only half Jewish, Herod the Great was a client king appointed by his Roman masters to rule over the territory of Judea. He was ambitious, vain, and determined to perpetuate his reign in stone, constructing palaces, forts and cities on a scale that taxed his subjects to the edge of revolt. To finance his projects, he occupied and executed enemies ruthlessly to confiscate their land. Resistance was crushed. When two rabbis and their students defaced a Roman Eagle in defiance of his rule, Herod had the ringleaders burned, not hesitating to kill three of his own sons and his wife Marianne, a revered descendant of the Macabees (who had managed to briefly liberate their homeland a century before), when it seemed necessary to consolidate his power. Caesarea, one of his newly constructed ports, he named to honor his sovereign the Emperor Augustus. But the Great Temple, designed to placate the religious sensibilities of the *hoi polloi*, was the grandest of his architectural glories. Begun in 20 B.C.E., work on Herod's Temple may still have been underway during Jesus' time, for John's Gospel says it took "six and forty years" for its completion.

This history offers some insight into why Jesus may have turned over the tables in that same temple. For although Herod the Great died four years before Jesus

was born, his son and successor Herod Antipas was not much different. When rebellion erupted at the old king's death, Roman legions were sent from Syria to quell the outbreak. In the urban center of Sepphoris, just four miles from Nazareth, where Jesus was most likely born, troops overran the city and sold the survivors into slavery. Continuing south to Jerusalem, legionnaires crucified two thousand of the Jewish capitol's defenders to demonstrate the consequences of opposing Rome. These events would have taken place when Jesus was a child. Early on, he would have learned that official brutality, economic exploitation, and state-sponsored terrorism directed at civilians were all standard tools of maintaining the status quo.

Jesus stood directly against this prevailing order. He was a political subversive and, although he may have been more than a rabble rouser, he was certainly nothing less. For if there is one item on which all the gospels agree, he appeared on the scene preaching the Kingdom of God. Although he might have decided to speak of the family of God, or the community of God, or the elect of God, he didn't. He seems to have deliberately chosen to juxtapose the moral power of the universe against the power of the Caesars, who sometimes called their domain an empire or imperium, but who certainly would have recognized any other kingdom as either a tributary or competitor. So Jesus was being purposely provocative.

He himself, after all, came from the bottom of a society in which there were really only two kinds of people: the powerful and the powerless. There was no middle class in that culture. There were the rulers and the ruled. And while tradition says his father was a carpenter, the Greek word *tekton* doesn't describe a skilled artisan, but rather a landless laborer with nothing to sell but his own sweat and toil. We needn't imagine him growing up in utter destitution. But it's fair to say that Jesus came from the underclass, not the privileged elite. He was a boy from the 'hood.

So when he taught his disciples to pray, it was first of all a petition for bread. Give us this day enough starch and protein, enough calories, our daily ration. And secondly, he asked, forgive us our debts. Because foreclosure was the chief cause of destitution, how peasants lost their land if they were lucky enough to have any in the first place. People weren't borrowing, back then, primarily to start new businesses or put new patios on their homes. They went into debt to feed their families and, when they couldn't repay the moneylenders with exorbitant interest added on, they became beggars, or might be imprisoned or sold into servitude. And when Jesus prefaced his prayer with a supplication that "thy will done on earth," he seemed to be saying that heaven was already in great shape. It was this world, with its balloon mortgages and variable interest rates, that needed reforming.

Like the Jewish prophets before him, he spoke often of the poor, and called them blessed, even as he prophesied “woe to you who are rich now, for you have received your consolation.” He lived and taught among the outcasts and untouchables, the homeless and the street people. And the good news he shared was that a new day was coming, a reign of justice when the hungry would be filled and the oppressed set free.

God’s law would then replace the laws of Herod. And observance of that law consisted not in submission to Roman governors like Pontius Pilate nor in sacrifices or ceremonies offered up before the high priests the Romans appointed. Rather God’s law was the law of love—of unconditional regard for other people, regardless of their religion, or sex, or financial circumstances. So many of Jesus’ teachings challenged the caste system of both the Jews and the Gentiles that divided people into a hierarchy of clean and unclean, pure and impure, overlord and underling, slave and free. As citizens of God’s kingdom, all were equally entitled to respect, to be treated with dignity and compassion. For love was no syrupy sentiment, as Jesus understood it. There was to be no “sloppy agape.” To be compassionate was to be all embracing, not only to see a reflection of the infinite and eternal in each and every human face, but to commit to that vision and act on it.

And to the legal codes of Caesar Jesus counseled passive resistance. “If anyone strikes you on the right cheek,” he says in Matthew, “turn the other also.” The saying has been misinterpreted to mean don’t fight back. Surrender to tyrants and bullies, even if you’re provoked. Just give in to abuse. Indeed, Jesus states, “Do not resist an evildoer.” But the Greek words “do not resist” might be better translated “do not resist with violence,” and their meaning becomes clear when you consider the body mechanics involved. Across time and cultures, over ninety percent of the human population is right-handed. So the only way I can strike another man on the right cheek is with a backhand slap across the face. Then as now, it’s the way a superior strikes a subordinate, the way (Jesus’ listeners would have understood) a landlord strikes a tenant, or a jailer strikes a prisoner. The way a man might strike his dog or other chattel. When that happens, Jesus said, turn the other cheek. If someone in power or authority hits you, make them punch with an overhand blow, the way an equal strikes an equal. They may be able to beat you up, he seems to say, but don’t allow them to beat you down. Don’t ever let them break your spirit.

It’s the same with what Jesus says next, after the bit about turning the other cheek. “If anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well.” Imagine a dirt farmer so poor, he owns just two items of clothing, a long tunic and an outer garment that also serves as a blanket at night. He’s taken that overcoat to the local pawn shop, or promised it as collateral on a debt, and is now being

sued for non-payment. That's the situation Jesus is describing. Peasants, the most vulnerable, didn't even own a change of clothes. Fine, Jesus says. Give your cloak as well. Might as well be stripped naked, right down to the buff. In a Jewish context where public nudity was a sign of shame and scandal, the act would have been a powerful indictment of courts and laws that left the poor without a scrap on their back.

Whether his listeners actually disrobed or not, statements like that got people thinking about ways to monkeywrench the system. They planted a seed, which like a mustard seed looked small and inoffensive but unchecked could quickly take over a whole plantation. No wonder that figures like Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. looked to Jesus for inspiration in their own campaigns. And no wonder the powers-that-be had him put to death on a cross, the punishment Rome especially reserved for dissidents and rebels. For in some ways, Jesus was the original community organizer, one of the first to engage in political street theater, to realize that real power came from the masses and that changing consciousness at the bottom was a more potent tool of transformation than changing rulers at the top. That's Jesus for the non-religious.

But of course Jesus was also more than that, more than an agitator or social critic. He was also a mystic or, in the phrase of Jesus scholar Marcus Borg, a "Spirit person," who seemed to live on a plane of awareness that most of us see only dimly. The kingdom of sisterhood and brotherhood that for most of us is just an ideal, a lovely aspiration, was for him a powerful reality, so real that he could see it, touch it, breath it, absorb it through his senses until he himself almost shone with its presence. He was transfigured in such a way, according to Luke, that "those who followed him were filled with awe." According to the gospels, they bestowed names on him: Son of David, Son of Man, Son of God—names that expressed their feeling of encountering an exalted personality. Some called him simply rabbi, while the recently discovered Gospel of Thomas calls him rather the "Living Jesus." And that's how we can think of him, too, if we choose, as a living individual whose message in some way transcends time and space, not to be found in holiday frivolity or forced good cheer and certainly not in a place like the Old Scroll Shop or Oasis Café in Orlando, but in a very different kind of Holy Land Experience. Wherever the hungry are fed, the naked clothed, and the thirsty given drink, Jesus will be there also.

Meditation

Liberating God
Hope of the Oppressed
Compassionate One

In this season of celebration
Help us to remember
Those among us who find no room at the inn of rejoicing

In this season of giving
Help us to recall that all people deserve the necessities of life
Not as a matter of charity but of simple justice

In this season of peace,
Help us to remember that lasting peace
Needs a solid foundation,
Not the strength of marching armies
But an equitable distribution of earth's resources

In this season of devotion,
Help us to avoid the unreal gods
of materialism, of shopping, of accumulation
To discover your true spirit of sharing

In this time of Christmas,
Turn our minds and hearts toward the reason for the season.

So may we experience the love, the kindness, the friendship
Unbounded by race or class or tribe
That are the blessings of your kingdom. Amen