

THE INSPIRATIONAL JESUS

Jesus, the Kingdom and Social Justice



By Ruth Valerio



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Introduction

Martin Luther King, Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Shaftesbury... When we look at the great reformers and champions of equality and social justice, there is one thing that stands out: they take their inspiration from Jesus; from who he was, from what he did and from what he said. Indeed, throughout history it has been Jesus' life and death that has been the motivation behind a myriad of acts both small and historically groundbreaking: acts of mercy, of compassion and of courage. And yet, two thousand years after he lived, he is viewed in all manner of different lights. Some see Jesus as a firebrand, seeking to bring about an underground revolution to overthrow the Roman oppression. Others see him merely as a wandering prophet, speaking words of judgement about the end of the world, whilst still others view him just as a morality teacher who taught a system of universal ethics, based on the principle of love.

But none of these do him full justice, so who was Jesus? What did he do and say that was so inspirational? And, two thousand years on, how is he still relevant to us today? These are the questions that this *Cred Paper* seeks to address. In our lives as Christians our aim is to be followers of Jesus. It therefore stands to reason that we should seek to know as much as we can about this Jesus and increase our understanding so that we might be enabled to follow him more effectively. In a discussion on how Jesus informs our quest for social justice today, attention often focuses on key texts such as Luke 4 and Matthew 25. These texts are, indeed, important, but the relevancy of Jesus to justice issues today goes more deeply than that and is not dependent only on those passages. The aim of this paper, then, is to look at Jesus in his historical context and explore how that informs us in our search for social justice.¹

The Message of Jesus

Jesus was no floating angel or cosmic being who could have alighted on this earth at any point in history and just happened, coincidentally, to choose first-century Palestine. Both Matthew and Luke go out of their way to stress the historical specificity of Jesus' birth: Matthew giving Jesus'

genealogy (Matt. 1:1-17), showing how he fits in to the scheme of Israelite lineage since Abraham, and Luke locating him precisely within both the current Jewish and the current Roman world (Lk. 1:5, 2:1). It is important to realise that Jesus was a Jew and he came with a message aimed primarily, though not exclusively, at the Jewish people.²

To understand that message we need to see it within the broader history of the people of Israel. The final couple of chapters of the 'pre-history' of Genesis 1 – 11 describe the proliferation of humanity after the decimation of the flood. All is not well, however, and the story of the Tower of Babel shows the discord that exists between God and people. Into this situation God calls Abram to be the founder of a 'great nation', but this nation is to exist with the specific reason to be the means through which 'all peoples on earth will be blessed' (Gen. 12:2-3). Time and again in the stories of Abra(ha)m, Isaac and Jacob this concept is reinforced: this group of people that will become the nation of Israel is to be a blessing to the nations around them (eg. Gen. 22:17-18; 26:4; 28:14).

One of the most foundational events in the formation of the people of Israel is the Exodus, when God acts in power to bring his people out of slavery in Egypt and sets them on their journey which will lead, ultimately, to Canaan: the 'promised land' (see Gen. 28:3-4 and also Ex. 3:8). We see here a clear demonstration of the character of God. He is a God who is concerned about suffering and oppression and who acts when he hears the cries of his people (Ex. 3:7-10). It is because of the Exodus event that later writers could state so confidently that, 'the Lord is a God of justice' (Isaiah 30:18) and that, 'the Lord loves righteousness and justice' (Psalm 33:5).

The nation of Israel is, therefore, given its shape by this experience of being rescued out of such a miserable situation of poverty and oppression. As Middleton and Walsh put it, the 'purpose of the exodus-Sinai event was for Yahweh to found a community with an ethical pattern of life alternative to that of imperial Egypt'.³ Where Egypt stood for rule by military might, fear and oppression, Israel was to stand for justice and compassion, rooted in a worshipping relationship with their God, Yahweh. The laws that God gives his people to enable them to maintain their side of the covenant relationship and live successfully in their new land (laid out from Ex.19 through

Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) thus reflect this background. They are to live in a way that takes care of those who are traditionally disadvantaged precisely because they were slaves in Egypt and were redeemed by God (see, for example, Deut. 24:17-22). It is no surprise to see that God's character should be reflected in his people.

The story of Israel, however, is a sad one and, by the time we reach the words of the Prophets, Israel is in exile in Babylon (or threatened with it, in the case of the earlier writings), with no control over the land she was to live in, and the Temple – the supreme sign of her relationship with Yahweh – destroyed. Why? Because Israel failed to do what God had asked of her. Instead of being a blessing she had become the very antithesis of what she was supposed to be: she became like Egypt. Instead of a right relationship with God that demonstrated itself in holiness, compassion and justice, she forsook God, went after pagan idols and oppressed and enslaved others (1 Kings 9:20-21; Hosea 4:1-3; Amos 8:4-6, amongst many others). As Israel broke her side of the covenant, so Yahweh carried out his warnings and sent his people into exile.

When Jesus was born it was just under 600 years since Jerusalem had been destroyed, and the circumstances were now different. There had been a return of the exiles to the land of Israel and the Temple had been re-built.⁴ However, it seems clear that Israel still saw herself as living in exile. They were still under foreign oppression (in this case, the Romans) and the magnificent words of, for example, Isaiah 52:7-10 and Ez. 43:1-7 were far from being fulfilled.⁵ Isaiah 49:6 confirms that, 1500/2000 years after Abram was called, Israel's fundamental *raison d'être* is still to be a blessing to the wider nations: God says, 'it is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth'. The problem is that Israel is now still in no position to fulfil her calling. If Israel is to fulfil her role and bring God's salvation to the ends of the earth - which will result in justice and righteousness being seen throughout the world - then Israel herself must first be restored. It is into this situation of exile that Jesus comes.

This explains the remarkable scene in the Temple when Jesus was taken there to be circumcised

(Luke 2:25-35). We are told that there was a righteous and devout man called Simeon who had been told by the Holy Spirit that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah; the one whom many Jews believed God would choose to defeat the Israelites' oppressors and bring about liberation.⁶ Simeon was led by the Holy Spirit to go to the Temple on the same day that Jesus was brought there and, on seeing this tiny week-old baby, took him up in his arms and said, 'Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel'. Simeon saw clearly what so many others failed to see. Jesus was the Messiah: the one called by God to bring about the salvation of the Jews so that they might fulfil *their* calling and bring God's wider salvation purposes to bear throughout the world.

The problem – as has been stated so many times – was that Jesus seemed to go about it all the wrong way. The Jews expected a national hero who would overthrow their oppressors by military might, not a man with little wealth who rejected all attempts to make him into a leader (John 6:14-15) and said that the only way to rule was to serve (Matt. 20:25-28). However, in ways so far away from what the Jews were anticipating, Jesus did indeed fulfil what the Jewish people were looking for. The Jews, to state it again, were expecting the Messiah and his followers to triumph over their enemies and bring about the full return from exile of the people into their land. The tangible results of this would be that the temple would be completely restored and their God would come back to Jerusalem/Zion to reign in fullness. In other words, God's kingdom would be established and his justice and righteousness would be brought to the world⁷. In Jesus, this happened. When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, God – in the person of Jesus – returned to Zion. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, God won the victory; the 'temple' of Jesus' body (where God meets humanity) was re-built and the kingdom of God came in.⁸

Jesus' critique was focussed on Israel's leaders: that they followed the minutiae of the law whilst neglecting a deep personal morality and social concern for the welfare of the ordinary people of the land. Their faith was based more on what God had given them in the covenant – the land, temple and the law – (what EP Sanders calls their 'identity

badges' that they wore with such pride) than on God himself. Fundamentally, Israel forgot her servant calling: a point that we shall return to more fully later.

As the hymn in Philippians 2 makes clear, Jesus took that servant calling on himself. In this he fulfilled in himself the Isaianic figure of the servant of the Lord, who is told that he will be made 'a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth'.⁹ In his death, Jesus took the judgement of God for Israel's sins on himself and the dreadful consequences of those sins, both personally and in society, was defeated. When God raised Jesus from death, God vindicated both his identity as Messiah and the efficacy of his atoning death. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, the people's sins could be forgiven and they could receive new life. The true exodus was happening: exile was no more.¹⁰

The Message of Jesus Today

So, if Jesus' ministry was primarily aimed at the Jews, how are his life and words applicable to us today and, in particular for this paper, how do they relate to our concerns for social justice? It can seem that, the more we appreciate the specific context of Jesus, the further away he gets from being relevant to our contemporary situations.

Part of the answer lies in understanding who we become when we choose to follow Jesus. Peter makes this explicit when he writes to the churches, 'you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God' (1Pet. 2:9). By using words that, in the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament), were used to describe Israel, Peter is making the clear point that the followers of Jesus have now joined the 'true Israel'.¹¹ We now carry Israel's mandate to be a blessing throughout the world and, of course, a key aspect of this is to live in a way that demonstrates the character of God as one who loves justice and righteousness. Thus, to use Tom Wright's terminology, our commission is to be for the world what Jesus was for the Israel of his day.¹² If this is so, then we need to keep probing into the Jesus of 2000 years ago to understand more fully what he did and said and, consequently, how to apply that today.

Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at Hand¹³

Like the prophets of old, Jesus came with one overall message: repent! Whilst sounding somewhat old-fashioned, 'repent' is a word that

has been neatly packaged up in church usage, particularly in Evangelical circles. It is used as part of the A-B-C, step-by-step process that a person must go through in order to become a Christian: **Admit** (that you have done wrong – ie repent of your sins); **Believe** (that Jesus died for you and was resurrected) and **Commit** (your life to him). A helpful process for a person to go through, to be sure, but one that can rob the idea of repentance of its fuller meaning. So what might Jesus have meant when he called people to repent?

The Hebrew word for repent in the Old Testament means 'to turn' or 'to return' and Jewish thinking in the first century saw repentance along two lines, following this literal meaning. Firstly, it was bound up with what we have seen earlier about their hopes for liberation and return from exile. Israel's exilic condition was the result of her sin as a nation in rejecting Yahweh as her one God, turning to the other nations' gods and forgetting her call to practise justice and righteousness. For Israel to be restored and returned to her land, she must repent so that her sins might be forgiven.¹⁴ 'Repentance' thus had an eschatological focus in that, when the people as a whole repented, the hope they longed for would come to pass.

Secondly, 'repentance' had a more every-day meaning. This is best illustrated by an event that happened in AD66. Josephus – an aristocratic Jewish historian who became an interpreter for Emperor Titus – went to Galilee to sort out some trouble there being caused by a Jewish faction. Having foiled a plot against his life by the rebel chief, Josephus told him that he would overlook his actions if he repented and believed in him.¹⁵ In other words, the insurgent leader was to abandon his militaristic, revolutionary way of achieving the overthrow of the Romans and trust in Josephus' way instead.

Thus, Jesus' call to repent carried two emphases: 'it was an *eschatological* call, not the summons of a moralistic reformer. And it was a *political* call, summoning Israel as a nation to abandon one set of agendas and embrace another'.¹⁶ This is not to say that there is no individual aspect involved as, of course, personal repentance from sin was well known to the Jews (hence the complex sacrificial system of the Old Testament). Rather, it is to highlight that the concept of repentance should not be reduced to the individual alone.

Repentance, then, is about more than an individual saying sorry for their sins and committing themselves to Jesus, although it certainly involves that. It is a broader concept to do with how we expect 'salvation' to come, both for our communities and ourselves. What are our agendas today? Where do we expect liberation and salvation to come from? For many in our society, salvation is looked for in consumerism, in the things we buy and surround ourselves with. This demonstrates an underlying agenda of self-satisfaction and the continual quest to see that happen. Liberation is thought to be something that comes from our own selves. We have the ability to do it. It is up to us to stand strong and not let ourselves be mucked about and messed around. Our inner selves should be strong, beautiful and calm! For our communities, salvation is looked for through government initiatives and pumping money into projects; through better education and improved laws and policing and, on an international level, liberation is secured through war and militarism; economic might and aid and development.

Jesus, however, says we have to repent: leave all of that behind and follow him. As individuals and as communities, we must admit that we have not got all the answers and we cannot do it ourselves. Jesus calls us to abandon our agendas and false expectations of salvation/liberation and, instead, pursue his agenda.

The Kingdom of God

Jesus' very Jewish agenda was to see the Kingdom of God come. To put it at its simplest, the establishment of the Kingdom of God meant that God would reign fully on earth. It meant the overthrow of the enemies and the re-formation of the people of Israel, so that all peoples on earth might acknowledge Yahweh as God: the one king of the world.¹⁷

Jesus' shock announcement – and subsequently that of the early Christians – was that God's kingdom had come *in him*. The future that was being waited for had happened in his person: in his life, his death and his resurrection.¹⁸ Not Rome but the ultimate enemy – Satan and his dominions – had been defeated. The new age of God's reign had come in.

This leads to a broader understanding of what salvation means. As with the word 'repentance', so

salvation has become a neatly packaged concept. It is used to refer to what happens to an individual who commits their life to Jesus: they are 'saved' from hell - the consequences of their sins (whatever hell might mean) - and guaranteed eternal life.

A Jewish understanding of salvation in the First Century, however, would not have been primarily about 'life after death'. It would have been more along the lines of 'the inauguration of the age to come, liberation from Rome, the restoration of the Temple, and the free enjoyment of their own land'.¹⁹ We see this in the disciples' question to Jesus in Acts 1:6: 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?'. Even after having lived with Jesus and heard his teaching; having watched him die and then seen him as a resurrected person, their focus and understanding of what Jesus was doing was still on the literal restoration of Israel, rather than on the more 'spiritual' concept of an individual being 'saved' and gaining eternal life. This is not to say that that aspect is not a crucial part of salvation, for it surely is, and, as one reads the letters of the early church contained in the New Testament, one can see how that realisation developed as the first Christians reflected on who Jesus was and what he had done. As it came to be recognised that the good news was for also those outside of the Jewish nation and that Jesus' death secured forgiveness of sins for all humanity, so the more individualised understanding gained in prominence. However, this has to be seen within the context of a wider grasp of what salvation is.

Salvation, then, was - and still is - about the kingdom of God. It is about seeing God's kingdom established on this earth, and salvation for individuals, communities and nations means entering into the kingdom of God and being set free from Satan's hold. This can be seen in the story of Zaccheus in Luke 19. Having eaten at his house and seen Zaccheus' very practical response, Jesus declares: 'Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost' (vs. 9-10). What Jesus is saying is that, through him, even this man – declared a 'sinner' by everyone else - can be included as a true 'son of Abraham'.

One important incident that informs our understanding of salvation is in Matthew 11:2-6 (and paralleled in Luke 7:18-23). John the Baptist was in prison for his words against Herod and was hearing reports of what his cousin, Jesus, was

doing. John sends his followers to ask Jesus if he really is the Messiah, whom he has been expecting. The answer that Jesus gives John's followers is to go back and tell John what they have seen: 'the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor' (v.5). Marshall says that salvation is a 'comprehensive term for the benefits brought by the sovereign action of God through the Messiah' and Jesus' response here would seem to be a pretty good summary of what those benefits are!^{20 21}

Because of this, the lines are blurred in the Gospels between salvation as rescue from natural elements (eg. Matt. 8:25), as physical healing, as demonic exorcism and as the more 'spiritual' concept that leads to eternal life in Jesus. This is shown clearly in a number of incidents, but two are of particular note. Firstly, in Luke 8:26-39, we hear of a man who is set free from a multitude of demons. Our English translations tell us, in verse 36, that 'those who had seen it told the people how the demon-possessed man had been cured' (NIV), but it could equally well be translated that they 'told the people how the demon-possessed man had been saved'. Here is a man set free in order to tell everyone in his town what Jesus had done for him (v.39) and, most importantly, this man is not a Jew, but still has been 'saved' by Jesus.

The second incident is the wonderful story – in Matthew 9 – of the woman who touches Jesus' cloak and is healed of the bleeding that has kept her not only physically ill, but socially estranged from being a part of the acceptable people of God. In all three cases where the word 'healed' is used (vs.20 – 22) the word 'saved' could, again, equally well be substituted. The story would then read, 'She said to herself, "If only I could touch his cloak, I will be saved". Jesus turned and saw her. "Take heart, daughter", he said, "your faith has saved you". And the woman was saved from that moment'. Here is a woman saved by Jesus: physically healed and brought by him into the Kingdom of God.

To quote Marshall again, 'Jesus announced the kingdom of God with its attendant blessings; the language of salvation spells out what this means in terms of the benefits for humankind'.²² Another place where a summary of salvation seems to be given is in Luke 4, where Jesus reads from Isaiah 61 in his home synagogue. In placing this incident right at the start of Jesus' ministry, Luke

makes it clear that an important part of Jesus' Kingdom announcement was the Jubilee motif. Found in Leviticus 25, the Jubilee legislation was based around the return, every fifty years, of people to their tribal and familial land. It included the cancelling of debts, the freeing of slaves, the regular resting of land and animals and the possibility of the redemption of land by relatives of the original owner. Its aim was to be a radical system of social reform that prevented massive social inequalities occurring.

The debates as to whether or not this legislation was ever actually carried out are not so important for us here. What is significant is that the Jubilee concept became a part of the hope of the exiled Israelite people for the future: 'its two central concepts, *restoration* and *release*, became symbolic... of the new age of salvation when God would intervene to establish his kingdom of peace and justice. Then there would be the restoration of all things to their intended purpose, the release of God's people from sin and all that oppresses and binds and enslaves'.²³ Jesus takes this motif, with all its implications – personal, social, physical, economic, political, and spiritual – and declares to the people listening, 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing' (v.21).

It is interesting, too, to note Jesus' inclusion of 'to release the oppressed', which is not from Isaiah 61 but, rather, from Isaiah 58:6.²⁴ Isaiah 58 is, of course, God's word to his people about why he has deserted them and how, therefore, they are to find restoration. As we saw earlier, paralleling the people's rejection of Yahweh as their God is their widespread practice of injustice and oppression. How, then, are they to be healed and rebuilt (vs.8, 12)? By spending themselves on behalf of the hungry and satisfying the needs of the oppressed; by loosing the chains of injustice; setting the oppressed free; giving food and shelter and by doing away with the yoke of oppression (vs.6-10).

Luke makes a clear reference to the Jubilee principles in his description of the early church in Acts 4. His statement that, because of the willingness of the Christians to sell their things, 'there were no needy persons among them' (v.34), directly reflects Deut. 15:4. This states that, if the people fully obey the Lord and follow the commandments he is giving them (most explicitly here, the commandment to cancel debts every seven years), he will bless them so that 'there

should be no needy person among you'. For the early church, then, the Jubilee motif was not just something to be looked for in the future, it was something to be outworked *now*, in the everyday lives of the believers.

The descriptions of the church in Acts 2 and 4 surely contain much for us to learn from too. They are a wonderfully holistic view as to what those who follow Jesus should be doing: we should be learning from the "apostles' teaching"; meeting together and praying and breaking bread with one another; expecting to see the miraculous; experiencing growth in numbers and sharing our possessions with one another as there is need. I know of one couple who decided to use their excess wealth to pay off all the debts that were held by their church leader, who was struggling under the burden they placed on him. That is one example of outworking the jubilee motif today and, as followers of Jesus in our churches, we should be actively seeking other ways too.

Jesus thus came proclaiming that the kingdom of God had come in him. This kingdom was *good news* (see Luke 4:43) and it was good news because the salvation that Jesus brought was personal, social, physical, economic, political and spiritual.

That has not changed for us today and we rob the good news of Jesus of its full potential when we restrict it only to the attaining of eternal life. When we pray for someone to 'be saved' we are praying that they might enter into God's kingdom and be set free from Satan's hold, and that will have implications on all levels. As we seek to 'preach the good news' into society – and preach it we must -, we do not only preach that an individual can receive new life: we also preach that a part of this new life is that people can be set free from economic oppression; that relationships can be mended; that political repression can be stopped; that healing can come from physical and psychological ailments and that whole communities can experience the blessings of God's kingdom.

Who is the Kingdom of God for?

So Jesus came with a clear announcement and an unmistakable call: 'In me has come the kingdom of God, therefore leave your old ways and agendas behind and follow me'. But who did he make this declaration to? Who was invited into God's kingdom?

The situation within Judaism was complex, with a number of factions competing over who – when God finally acted to rescue Israel – would be in and who would be out in terms of the kingdom of God, and what a person had to do in order to qualify. The Sadducees, the Pharisees, the Essenes, the Zealots... all had their own definitions. All of these definitions, though, worked within the basic framework that the kingdom was for Jews and for righteous Gentiles who converted.

Jesus was thus living and speaking into a situation in which the Jews had forgotten their calling. Instead of drawing people to God through themselves and practising righteousness and justice within their nation, they acted so as to exclude people from God's presence. Within Judaism – and particularly associated with the Pharisees - a complex system of rules and regulations were therefore developed to enable people to maintain their purity for God and, hence, to exclude those who were not 'pure' from God's presence. The Temple became the focus for this system and was intricately bound up with the kingdom of God since, when God reigned fully, he would do so through his temple. The Temple, of course, was at the centre of Jewish life.²⁵ It was the place where God dwelt and where the sacrificial system took place (thus enabling the continued relationship between God and his people). It also held immense political significance, acting as political legitimation for those who were in charge of it. Because of all of this, 'the closer one came to the Temple, and, within the Temple, the closer one came to the Holy of Holies, the further one moved up a carefully graded scale of purity and its requirement'.²⁶

Jesus, however, came in saying something radically different: the kingdom of God was for whoever followed him. One of the central aims of Jesus', therefore, was to challenge the exclusivity of the Jews and extend the welcome of God's Kingdom to those who had been excluded, even to the point of that meaning that those who currently thought they 'owned' the kingdom would have it taken away from them.²⁷

One of the ways in which he demonstrated this was through his action in the Temple: a highly complex and controversial scene (both then and now).²⁸ Standing in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets and their symbolic actions (such as

Jeremiah's broken pot and Ezekiel's clay tablet²⁹), Jesus was prophetically symbolizing the impending destruction of the Temple: a destruction that would be God's act of judgement on his people. Through this judgement, however, redemption would come as the New Temple would be built in Jesus who, as the embodiment of God and the ultimate sacrifice, brought in the new creation in God's kingdom.

It is important also to recognise the socio-economic message behind what Jesus did. At a popular level there was unrest amongst the poorer classes directed at the Temple, who clearly saw it as 'symbolizing the oppression they suffered at the hands of the rich elite'.³⁰ The fact that he chose to turn over the tables rather than do something else indicates that he was very much alive to this issue. The quote from Jeremiah that Jesus gives (Jer. 7:11) comes in the context of a warning of judgement from the Lord. The people of Judah thought that the presence of the Temple made them immune from any repercussions from their behaviour. Jeremiah tells them to repent of their ways so that they might be allowed to keep living in the land. And what were their evil ways? They did not deal with each other justly. They oppressed the alien, the fatherless and the widow. They committed murder and they followed other gods. They stole and committed adultery and perjury.

Jesus' action in the Temple was, therefore, an action against the very heart of the system that resulted in exclusion instead of inclusion; injustice instead of justice; sin instead of righteousness.

One of the other key ways in which Jesus demonstrated the inclusivity of the kingdom of God was through his attitude towards, and association with, those who were on the edges of society. With women and people who were poor; with the ill and disabled; with rich tax/toll collectors and prostitutes; with children and Gentiles: through spending time with all these people, Jesus demonstrated that the barriers that had been erected to being included in God's kingdom had been destroyed in him. One of the most well known incidents in Jesus' life that demonstrates this is his conversation with a woman at a well in Samaria. Commonly in Jewish thought it was considered that 'the kingdom was only for men (not women), only for the righteous (not sinners) and only for Jews (not others)'.³¹ And yet, here is Jesus engaging precisely with a Samaritan woman with an ambiguous history and not only does she

respond to him, she is the means of many others coming to faith in him as well (4:41-42).

The time that Jesus spent with 'outsiders' and, in particular, his 'table fellowship' – as the meals he had with them are often called – was thus an immensely powerful part of his message. It spoke of God's love and compassion; of his anger against marginalisation; of his acceptance and mercy and of his passion for justice and freedom. As Bosch says, 'all of those who were accustomed to cringing in the presence of the social and religious establishment, are empowered to lift up their heads and hold them high, to recognise their own dignity, to begin to see themselves in a new light. After their encounter with Jesus, they are transformed into people who know themselves to be God's children'.³²

Jesus' table fellowship was not only a demonstration of the inclusivity of God's kingdom for all who had faith in him; it was a sign that God's kingdom was actually being inaugurated, now, in the person of Jesus. The symbol of a banquet was used in the Old Testament and in Inter Testamental literature to represent God's Kingdom and would have been a familiar concept to the Jews of Jesus' day.³³ Jesus thus himself uses this symbol freely to refer to the kingdom of God – such as in Matt. 22: 1-14 and Luke 14:1-23 - and the meals he shares with others must be seen in this light. So, too, should the parallel versions of the miraculous feedings of Matthew 14 and 15. In chapter 14 Jesus feeds a Jewish crowd but the four thousand are Gentile (he is now in the Gentile Decapolis region, along the Sea of Galilee from Tyre and Sidon), hence the significance of Jesus' words that he 'has compassion for these people' (15:32).³⁴ Jesus, therefore, is saying that God's Kingdom is a present reality and that all these people who had thought they were excluded, were in fact central in God's plans. As Tom Wright says, 'Jesus was, as it were, celebrating the messianic banquet, and doing so with all the wrong people'.³⁵

It is no wonder, therefore, that Jesus' table fellowship caused the religious leaders to be so upset!³⁶ It is also no wonder that Jesus described his mission as being 'good news to the poor'.³⁷

The message that we see Jesus bringing in the Gospels thus picks up on the Old Testament expectation that God's Kingdom would result in the eradication of injustice and a reversal

of fortunes for rich and poor.³⁸ The interesting question that has to be asked, then, is are 'the rich' actually welcome at all by Jesus in God's Kingdom? Certainly, Jesus has some harsh words to say on this matter - 'woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort; woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry'³⁹ - and he uses several parables to illustrate this: the parable of the rich fool who greedily stored up material things for himself, but was not 'rich towards God' (Lk. 12:13-21) and the parable of the rich man, who goes to hell, and the beggar, Lazarus, who ends up by Abraham's side (Lk. 16:19-31).⁴⁰

One important incident (as demonstrated by the fact that all three Synoptic Gospel writers include it) is Jesus' encounter with a young man who 'went away sad' from talking with Jesus because he would not give up his great wealth in order to follow him.⁴¹ Jesus then makes the startling statement that, 'it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven'. This is startling because it was assumed that the rich would be a part of God's Kingdom since riches were considered a sign of God's blessing and favour on a person: hence the disciples' astonishment and subsequent question, 'Who then can be saved?'. According to Jesus, 'the rich were not only not automatically within the covenant, but very likely outside it'.⁴²

However, it is important to notice Jesus' attitude towards the man that Mark draws attention to in his account of the incident. Mark tells us that 'Jesus looked at him and loved him'.⁴³ Clearly Jesus longed that this young man, too, would enter the kingdom. The rich, therefore, are not thereby automatically *excluded* since, 'with God all things are possible'. This brings us back to our earlier look at repentance: in order to enter God's Kingdom a person has to leave behind their own agendas - in this case security in possessions and money - and follow Jesus. As Jesus makes clear, this will result in having to leave behind things that a person holds dear, whether that be possessions, houses, family members or whatever. Thus, whilst the rich are welcome in God's Kingdom (Joseph of Arimathea is an example of a wealthy man who followed Jesus⁴⁴) it does come with consequences. There is no prescriptive advice given as to what those consequences are exactly. The young man of Luke 18 was told to give away all his possessions, whilst Zaccheus demonstrated his repentance by giving away half of everything he owned and repaying the poor he had swindled four-fold (and

doing that must surely have dented his finances severely!) and we do not know what the impact on his finances were when Joseph of Arimathea decided to become a disciple of Jesus, although we can assume that he remained fairly wealthy since he owned his own tomb.

What we do know is that the key is in where a person's focus lies. As Jesus makes abundantly clear, 'you cannot serve both God and Mammon'. The thing that a person should run after is the kingdom of God and pursuing God's righteousness, which must include justice.⁴⁵ This cannot but have implications for the amount of wealth a person amasses for themselves.

Who, then, is the kingdom of God for in our day? The initial answer, of course, is that Jesus welcomes everyone and his followers are told to 'make disciples of all nations'.⁴⁶ However, following Jesus' example, we also are charged with focussing on those who are forgotten. In a society that is obsessed with celebrities and people who are financially successful, it is easy for the church to follow suit and place its emphasis on reaching the rich and famous. We want to have 'successful' people in our church! We should be willing and prepared to spend time with anybody and everybody. However, our emphasis should be on those on the edges of society (and, as with the tax/toll collectors, those people may sometimes be materially rich): those who have been left behind and excluded, both on a local and global level. We must make sure that the Gospel we live and preach in our own lives and churches is good news to the poor.

The Impact of the Kingdom

Matthew 21:43 is a pertinent verse in which Jesus tells the chief priests and elders of the people that 'the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit'. The parable of the wicked tenants gives in a nutshell the story of Israel. God - the landowner - plants a vineyard - Israel - in the full expectation that that vineyard will bear fruit as Israel brings God's salvation to all the nations. When the landowner wants to get the fruit he sends his servants - the prophets of the Old Testament (and John the Baptist) - but the farmers that he has rented the vineyard to - the leaders of Israel - beat, stone or kill each one of the servants. Finally, the landowner's son - Jesus - is sent, but he also is thrown out of the vineyard and killed. The vineyard

is thus taken away from the farmers and given to other tenants 'who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.'⁴⁷

As we have seen, the kingdom of God was being established through Jesus, but it was being established with all the 'wrong people'. Those who had thought they were the children of God, the true Israel, on the grounds of national lineage, God's election and observance of Torah were hearing from Jesus that, as they rejected him and did not produce the expected fruit, so they were rejected from the Kingdom of God. Instead, the kingdom and all its benefits was being widened to include a whole new set of people. Israel was being re-defined!

This re-definition involved a very definite way of living. As Wright puts it, Jesus was summoning people to follow him 'in his new way of being the true people of god.'⁴⁸ This new way demanded much greater holiness, justice and righteousness than had previously been expected. As Jesus said, his followers were to practise righteousness that 'surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law'. That righteousness was to find its focus in him, who had come 'to fulfil' the Law and the Prophets.⁴⁹

This is laid out most famously in the Sermon on the Mount of Matthew 5-7 (and Luke 6). There is not the space here to go through it in detail, but of particular note is Jesus' injunction to be salt and light (Matt. 5:13-16). This, of course, is precisely what Israel had failed to do. They should have done such good deeds that whoever saw them was led to praise their God. The newly defined Israel is now called to do just that. The rest of the Sermon on the Mount would seem to spell out in more detail what those good deeds should look like. Whether it is hungering for justice and righteousness; working for peace; a new attitude to retribution or the marriage relationship; giving generously; praying to our Heavenly Father; considering our earthly security... whatever it is concerning, it should be done in Jesus' way.⁵⁰ Only when it is Jesus' way that is followed can a person and community be sure that they will be like a house built on the rock, rather than one built on the sand that will collapse when trouble comes.⁵¹

Jesus' declaration that the Kingdom of God was being established in him was, therefore, also a call to a whole change of lifestyle. Jesus was looking for

people who would bear the fruit of the Kingdom and live out its characteristics; to be the light on the hill and the salt that Israel was supposed to be. He did not come to take the Kingdom from one group of people, only to give it to another group who would also then keep it to themselves!

And what are those characteristics – the fruit – of the kingdom? This paper has looked at many of them already and they include righteousness, justice, love, mercy, compassion, forgiveness, healing, liberation from demonic oppression, peace... all based on a joyful, worshipping relationship with God, through Jesus, the King of the kingdom. Central to this is Israel's call to be the conduit of all the blessings that come from God's kingdom and to share those with the rest of the nations of the world, so that they too might come to worship God. When the characteristics of the kingdom are practised and lived out, people are drawn in to know God. As this happens, the kingdom is extended and those same characteristics are spread more widely until the ultimate goal is reached: that God's will would be done here, on earth, in the same way as happens in heaven, the sphere in which he reigns fully.⁵²

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to develop our historical understanding of Jesus and to see how his mission relates to, and inspires, concerns for social justice. The aim has been to move away from treatments of Jesus that lift passages such as Luke 4 straight into the modern day, without asking what the original message really was.

One could be forgiven for feeling that, the more we see Jesus living in, and speaking to, a specific historical context, the further away he gets from being relevant to our situation today. Unlike Israel in Jesus' time, which was under Roman rule, most of us reading this are not Jews trying to work out how to follow Yahweh in occupied territory! And yet the hope is that, as this paper has unfurled the aims and methods of Jesus' ministry, so it has opened our eyes afresh to the global purposes of God and how they relate to us; how we fit in to that story.

It is an interesting thought that one of Jesus' initial aims, as he went throughout the villages and towns, may have been to establish what Tom Wright has called 'cells of followers, mostly continuing to live in their towns and villages, who by their adoption of his praxis, his way of being Israel, would be distinctive within their local community'.⁵³ In fact, once you have thought of it, it is hard to imagine why this would not have happened!⁵⁴

How would a person, a family, a village in First Century Palestine, once they had heard the good news and the teaching of Jesus, live their lives in the new light that this brought? Two thousand years later, this question is no less true for us. Using the language within which Jesus was operating, how can we be the true Israel today?

We are to be the people who live out the characteristics of the kingdom of God and bring its blessings to the people and the world around us. Roger Forster has said that, 'the fruit of the Kingdom is the impact of being obedient to Jesus in salting and lighting our society'.⁵⁵ In other words, wherever and whenever we follow Jesus' agenda - whenever we follow the way of peace and love, of justice and compassion, of holiness and righteousness; whenever we pursue social, physical and spiritual liberation - there we will see salvation, in the fullest possible sense of the word, as God's reign is brought to bear in this world. The role of the church, therefore, is to be a model to the world so that people might see in our lives and hear in our words that the kingdom of God is open to them, through Jesus. The more one understands the historical specificity of Jesus' message, the more one can appreciate its universal relevance.

The blessings of the kingdom are, on one level, spiritual because they are centred on a relationship with God through faith in Jesus, but it will be clear by now that having such a relationship with God spills over into every area of life: the personal, the social, the physical, the economic, the political and the spiritual. In particular, we should not be afraid of the political implications of the kingdom of God. As Wright says, 'it was because this way of life was what it was, while reflecting the theology it did, that Jesus' whole movement was thoroughly, and dangerously, "political"'.⁵⁶ It should be impossible for individuals and churches to follow Jesus without that challenging our political rulers and structures.

It is important to remember, too, that we are enabled to do all of this only through Jesus' death and resurrection. Because Jesus died for us, so we can have a relationship with God that sets us off on the path that we have been describing above. But, the cross is not just something that saves us personally and then can be left behind while we get on with the job, so to speak. Our vocation is to be 'cross-bearing people, the people in whose lives and service the living God is made known'.⁵⁷ The cross should inform everything we do. As we go about our mission, therefore, we do it in ways that reflect the cross: in humility, in service, in peace - in ways that subvert and undermine how the powers that rule our world today operate.

Jesus did not come to teach us 'how to get to heaven' - although the offer of eternal life was integral to his mission. Jesus did not come to teach us 'how to be good' - although righteousness was a key part of his message. Jesus did not come to show us how to find personal fulfilment and satisfaction - although he did teach that the way to save our lives was to lose them and serve others. A false understanding of Jesus can lead to a false understanding of the Christian faith whereby we use it as a sort of spiritual 'self-help'.

No, Jesus came to be the means through whom the Kingdom of God was made open to all people and, as the re-defined Israel, we are called to follow him in that. Thus our mission is to bring the benefits and blessings of God's Kingdom to other people so that, on receiving those blessings, they too can offer them to others so that the ripples spread out across the water until 'the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea'.⁵⁸

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(Endnotes)

- ¹ Much of the material in this paper on Jesus' historical context is taken, unashamedly, from NT Wright's writing in this area.
- ² Whilst the majority of Jesus' ministry was to Jews, he does very occasionally go wider than that as, for example, when he goes to the Geresene region and heals the demon-possessed man (Mark 5:1-20) and then later to Tyre and Sidon, where he meets the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mark 7:24-37).
- ³ J. Middleton and B. Walsh, truth is stranger than it used to be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age, 94.
- ⁴ See the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.
- ⁵ For more on this see Wright, The New Testament and the People of God (NTPG), 268-270.
- ⁶ For a full discussion on Messianic expectations at the time of Jesus, see Wright, NTPG, 307-320.
- ⁷ Wright, The Challenge of Jesus, 53-54.
- ⁸ To explore this properly see Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God (JVG), Part III.
- ⁹ Isa. 49:6
- ¹⁰ See Wright, JVG, chapter 12.
- ¹¹ Eg. Deut. 10:15; Ex. 19:6.
- ¹² Wright, Challenge, x.
- ¹³ Matt. 4:17 and Mark 1:15.
- ¹⁴ See, for example, Isa. 45:22; Jer. 3:10-14; Ezek. 14:6; Hos. 3:5; Joel 2:12.
- ¹⁵ The official translation of the phrase is, 'I would, nevertheless, condone his actions if he would show repentance and prove his loyalty to me' but the Greek can equally well be translated as 'if he would repent and believe in me' (Wright, JVG, 250).
- ¹⁶ Wright, JVG, 251.
- ¹⁷ See, for example, Psalm 145:10-13; Isa. 52:7-10; Dan. 7:9-14.
- ¹⁸ Matt. 12:28/Luke 11:20; Rev. 11:15
- ¹⁹ Wright, NTPG, 300.
- ²⁰ I.H Marshall, 'Salvation', in JB Green, S McKnight, IH Marshall (eds.), Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, 724.
- ²¹ There is constant debate as to exactly who is meant by the term 'poor' (Gk. *Ptochos*). Various interpretations (attempting to locate the term within an Old Testament context) are, 'the pious, those who do not belong to the religious establishment, those faithful disciples who have renounced worldly possession, those who are actually destitute, those who suffer, particularly Jesus' persecuted disciples, Israel and the faithful remnant within Israel' (W. Heard, 'Luke's Attitude Toward the Rich and the Poor', in Trinity Journal NS 1988, 47. However, to make too much of a distinction between the literal and the metaphorical, the material and the spiritual is not helpful. As PH Davids says, in our world righteousness tends to make one poor ('Rich and Poor', in Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, 704). Whilst material poverty might seem to be more in Luke's mind, and spiritual poverty more in Matthew's, we should be able to see a way through that balances the two together.
- ²² Marshall, 'Salvation', 724.
- ²³ CJH Wright, Living as the People of God: The relevance of Old Testament ethics, 102.
- ²⁴ It is this phrase which leads commentators to believe that Jesus is picking up on the language of the Jubilee here, as the word for 'release' – *aphesis* – is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word for 'release' – *deror* – used in Lev.25.
- ²⁵ See Wright, JVG, 406-411, and 412 for a brief description of those who opposed the present Temple in the First Century.
- ²⁶ Wright, JVG, 407.
- ²⁷ Matt. 21:43.
- ²⁸ Matt. 21:12-17; Mark 11:12-18 Luke 19:45-48. See the discussion in Wright, JVG, 413-428.
- ²⁹ Jer. 19; Ez. 4:1-17.
- ³⁰ Wright, JVG, 412.
- ³¹ M. Goldsmith, good news for all nations: Mission at the Heart of the New Testament, 99.
- ³² D. Bosch, 'Mission in Jesus' Way: a Perspective from Luke's Gospel', 8.
Bosch's words here pick up on Hosea's prophetic naming of his as 'Lo-Ammi' ('not my people') and then God's words of promise that, 'where it was said to them, "you are not my people", they will be called "sons of the living God"' (Hos. 1:9,10).
- ³³ Eg. Isaiah 25:6, 1 Enoch 62, 2 Baruch 29.
- ³⁴ M. Goldsmith, good news, 34-39.
- ³⁵ Wright, JVG, 431.
- ³⁶ Luke 7:34.
- ³⁷ Luke 4:18.
- ³⁸ See Mary's song in Luke 1.
- ³⁹ Luke 6:24-25.
- ⁴⁰ Tom Wright makes the important point that the aim of this parable is not to teach on the afterlife. Rather, it is a statement on 'what was happening to both rich and poor *at the present time*. Jesus' welcome of the poor and outcast was a sign that the real return from exile, the new age, the 'resurrection' was coming into being' (Wright, JVG, 255).
- ⁴¹ Mark 10:17-22/Matt. 19:16-22/Luke 18:18-25.
- ⁴² Wright, JVG, 302.
- ⁴³ Mk. 10:21.

⁴⁴ Matt. 27:57.

⁴⁵ Matt. 6:24, 33.

⁴⁶ Matt. 28:19.

⁴⁷ Matt. 21:33-46.

⁴⁸ Wright, JVG, 200.

⁴⁹ Matt. 5:17-20 and compare Rom. 10:4. Of course, exactly what Jesus (and Paul) meant by these words is hugely debated!

⁵⁰ Wright, JVG, 287-292.

⁵¹ The original sense of this, of course, is alluding to the Temple and what will happen to it if a nationalistic, revolutionary agenda is followed, instead of Jesus' way (Wright, JVG, 292).

⁵² It is worth pointing out this concept of the kingdom of God extending out is, in itself, new. The Old Testament writing thought more in terms of people being brought *into* the kingdom.

⁵³ Wright, JVG, 276.

⁵⁴ Both John the Baptist and the Pharisees formed distinct groups that would have been recognisable within local communities (Wright, JVG, 276)

⁵⁵ RT Forster, The Kingdom of Jesus, 88.

⁵⁶ Wright, JVG, 297.

⁵⁷ Wright, Challenge, 69.

⁵⁸ Isa. 11:9. This whole chapter is a description of the true return from exile.

