

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION OR READING GROUPS

Jesus: A Pilgrimage

by

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INTRODUCTION: WHO IS JESUS?

1. If Jesus asked you, “Who do you say that I am?” how would you respond?
2. If you, like Thomas Jefferson, were to remove those passages from the Gospels that make you uncomfortable, which ones would you choose? What might those passages reveal about your understanding of Jesus?
3. Which approach to Jesus Christ appeals to you: the “Jesus of history” or the “Christ of faith”? Or both?

CHAPTER 1: PILGRIMS

1. Pilgrimages, which involve travel to a meaningful destination and separation from our normal daily patterns, are often the occasions for many graces. On pilgrimage you can experience a range of emotions, from disappointment to elation. Have you ever made a pilgrimage to a holy site or an important location? What was your experience? Did you encounter God there?

CHAPTER 2: YES

1. The Annunciation is the first in-depth consideration of the miraculous in this book. And the miracles are an essential part of Jesus's life, particularly his public ministry. As William Barclay notes in *The Mind of Jesus*, "the whole framework of the Gospel falls to pieces and often even the teaching of Jesus is left without an occasion and a context." What place do miracles have in your conception of Jesus?
2. Mary is being "recovered" today not simply as the "Blessed Mother" but as Miriam of Nazareth, a young woman living in a backwater town. Is it easier for you to relate to the "Mother of God" or to the poor woman in Nazareth?
3. When have you said yes to God in the face of a confusing situation?

CHAPTER 3: BETHLEHEM

1. Does it surprise you that Luke and Matthew wrote differing accounts of the birth of Jesus? Why might the Gospel writers present the same story in different ways for their different communities?
2. How does the example of Joseph in the Nativity story speak to you?
3. God entered the world in the most vulnerable state imaginable—a newborn child utterly dependent on others for his care. What might that say about God’s love for humanity? What might it say about the way God invites us to love?

CHAPTER 4: NAZARETH

1. What was the most surprising aspect of the description of daily life in Nazareth?
2. One interesting facet of the Hidden Life is the possibility that Jesus visited the town of Sepphoris, then being rebuilt by Herod. Given what was said about Sepphoris in this book, how might visits there have influenced Jesus?
3. Jesus lived an ordinary life in Nazareth for (roughly) thirty years, in large part working as a *tektōn*. How does his working life influence your understanding of him?

CHAPTER 5: JORDAN

1. Using what scholars call the “criterion of embarrassment,” the baptism of Jesus is often said to be one of the most historically attested events in the Gospels. Why do you think Jesus decided to be baptized?
2. At the Jordan River, Jesus received a dramatic revelation of his identity. He also heard himself pronounced (according to the Synoptic Gospels) as “beloved.” Have you ever had similar experiences—that is, of understanding who you are called to be and of feeling loved by God?
3. In the testing in the desert, Jesus was tempted to go against the person he was called to be, his “true self.” Have you ever been tested in that way?

CHAPTER 6: REJECTION

1. In many ways this Gospel passage is about Jesus’s courage in proclaiming his identity, even at the risk of not being liked, and of the crowd not condoning his actions. Have you ever struggled with the need for approval? How might Jesus’s actions help you in your struggles?
2. When the townspeople say, “Do here also in your hometown the things we have heard you did at Caper-

naum,” do you hear a challenge, a shallow interest in seeing a miracle, or a true desire to know Jesus?

3. How would you describe, in your own words, the “reign of God”?

CHAPTER 7: GALILEE

1. Why do you think Peter and the other fishermen said yes to Jesus?
2. Jesus’s invitation to the fishermen is open ended. In other words, when Jesus says he will help them “fish for people,” he doesn’t say how. Have you ever experienced an open-ended call? Also, what “nets” prevent you from responding to God’s call?
3. Jesus says that he will “make” (*poiēsō*) Peter and his friends fishers of people, a phrase that evokes a sense of a new creation. What do you hope God will “make” of you?

CHAPTER 8: IMMEDIATELY

1. John Meier notes that claiming Jesus was viewed as an exorcist has as much “historical corroboration” as almost any other statement we can make about the historical Jesus. Given that, how do you see the role of

exorcisms and the confrontation of the demonic in his public ministry?

2. William Barclay posits two approaches to exorcisms: either we relegate possession to the realm of primitive thought, or we admit the possibility of the demonic both then and now. What approach do you prefer?
3. Have you ever asked God to free you of any “demons,” or things that kept you unfree?

CHAPTER 9: GENNESARET

1. What do you think led Peter to say, “Go away from me, for I am a sinful man”?
2. Despite Peter’s admission of sinfulness, Jesus calls him to be a disciple. Why do you think Jesus does this? Why does he call Peter, specifically?
3. Witnessing the catch of so many fish may have enabled Peter to accept Jesus’s invitation. That is, the miracle may have served as proof of his power and authority. What “fish” in your life help you say yes to God?

CHAPTER 10: HAPPY

1. “Blessed are the poor” is Luke’s version of this verse of the Beatitudes. What does that mean for you?

2. What is for you the most challenging of the Beatitudes, in Matthew's version (pp. 180–81)?
3. Do you know anyone you would call a “person of the Beatitudes”?

CHAPTER 11: CAPERNAUM

1. Mark's Gospel says the paralyzed man's friends “unroofed the roof,” in other words, ripped off the thatch. Luke, writing later for a more cosmopolitan audience, changes that explanation to “they let him down . . . through the roof tiles.” Do such edits in the Gospels surprise or bother you?
2. The “scribes and Pharisees” have frequently been portrayed in negative terms in Christian history. Yet, as Amy-Jill Levine and other scholars remind us, they were devout believers trying to lead holy Jewish lives. Can you understand some of their suspicion of Jesus?
3. How have your friends “carried you” to God?

CHAPTER 12: PARABLES

1. In your estimation, why did Jesus use parables?
2. Which parable mentioned in this chapter—The Sower, The Lost Sheep, The Laborers in the Vineyard, The Tal-

ents, or The Prodigal Son—“teases” your mind the most? Which one disturbs you the most?

3. In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus offers a vivid image of God as a loving parent. What other images from the parables help you envision God?

CHAPTER 13: STORMS

1. One of the most powerful lines in the story of the storm at sea describes the disciples’ reaction. The Greek is *ephobēthēsan phobon megan*: “They feared a great fear.” God’s power can overwhelm and awe. Has it ever frightened you?
2. Why do you think Peter asks Jesus if he can walk on the water?
3. Have you ever felt as if God were “asleep” in your life during a stormy time? What, if anything, showed you that God was with you?

CHAPTER 14: GERASA

1. Is the Gerasene demoniac a terrifying figure, a pitiful figure, or both? Why?
2. After his exorcism, the former demoniac does not follow Jesus but instead is missioned to tell his people

what has happened to him. How is this a form of discipleship?

3. Do you see parallels in your life, or in the lives of your family and friends, to the self-destructive behaviors of the demoniac? What does the image of the man “bruising himself with stones” say to you?

CHAPTER 15: TABGHA

1. Have you ever heard the “nice thought” interpretation of this Gospel story, which explains Jesus’s miracle as one in which the crowd shares what they have? Have you heard similar interpretations of the miracles? What is your response to them?
2. This is the only miracle—outside of the Resurrection—that appears in all four Gospels. Why do you think the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes was so important for early Christian communities?
3. In what ways has God “multiplied” the offerings you make in life?

CHAPTER 16: BETHESDA

1. Why do you think Jesus asks the paralyzed man, “Do you want to be made well?”

2. John's Gospel often sets up "the Jews" as figures opposed to Jesus. What do we need to understand about that phrase so that we can avoid anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism and remember that Jesus and his followers were all Jews?
3. Sometimes healing in our lives is not *euthus*, or immediate. Can you recall experiences of healing—physical, emotional, or spiritual—that took months or even years? Can you still see them as "miraculous"?

CHAPTER 17: JERICO

1. Jesus again poses a seemingly obvious question when he asks Bartimaeus, who is blind, "What do you want?" Why does he ask this?
2. Gerhard Lohfink notes that besides those who followed Jesus on the road, there were "resident adherents" and "occasional helpers." How does this influence your idea of discipleship?
3. Jesus offers to visit Zacchaeus's house even before Zacchaeus has made his promise of restitution to anyone he has defrauded. This would have been seen as a sign of Jesus's acceptance of the "chief sinner" in the region. Why does Jesus do this? What implications might it have in your life?

CHAPTER 18: BETHANY

1. In the Gospel of John, Lazarus is called not “Lazarus of Bethany,” “Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha,” or even “Lazarus, your friend,” but *hon phileis*, “he whom you love.” What does this tell you about Jesus?
2. When Mary and Martha say, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died,” are they scolding him, expressing disappointment, or professing their faith?
3. What parts of yourself might you want to leave behind in the “tomb”? How is Jesus calling you to new life?

CHAPTER 19: JERUSALEM

1. Gerard O’Collins, SJ, notes that Jesus understood the Cleansing of the Temple to be a “dangerously provocative act.” Other scholars suggest that Jesus also knew his entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday would have been seen as a threat. Does his recognition of the inherent danger of these actions, and what may have been an intentional use of symbolic gestures, influence your understanding of Jesus?
2. Do you agree with Sandra Schneider’s suggestion that the Foot Washing was more about establishing a “community of equals” than about “humble service”? Could the two ideas coexist among a group of friends?

3. Would Christian churches be any different if they performed the Foot Washing as often as they celebrate the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper?

CHAPTER 20: GETHSEMANE

1. The words used to describe Jesus's emotions—*ekthambeisthai* (“greatly distraught”) and *adēmonein* (“troubled”)—are strong ones. How does knowing that Jesus experienced these emotions influence your relationship with him?
2. At first, Jesus seems to resist his fate. (He “prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said, ‘Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me.’”) Then he seems to accept it. (“Yet, not what I want, but what you want.”) Is that a fair summary of his response in Gethsemane?
3. What do you think enabled Jesus to surrender to what the Father had in store for him?

CHAPTER 21: GOLGOTHA

1. Crucifixion was a horrifying ordeal. Why do you think the Gospels are so spare in describing it (“And they crucified him”), without giving many details?

2. When Jesus cries out, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” is it a cry of true abandonment, or is he, as some have suggested, quoting Psalm 22 in full and therefore expressing his trust in God?
3. Beyond the physical pain, what kinds of pain did Jesus experience on the cross?

CHAPTER 22: RISEN

1. Why do you think Mary was at first unable to recognize the Risen Christ?
2. As Stanley Marrow, SJ, said, the Risen Christ is “identifiable” with Jesus of Nazareth. That is, the “Jesus of history” is the same person as the “Christ of faith.” How does this influence your understanding of him?
3. In your own words, what does it mean to “accept our crosses?” Have you experienced the “paschal mystery” of death and rebirth in your life?

CHAPTER 23: EMMAUS

1. Do the varying descriptions of the Risen Christ—physical versus ghostly, unrecognizable versus recognizable—in the various Gospel accounts disturb you?

2. “We had hoped” are some of the saddest words in the New Testament. Can you recall a seemingly hopeless time that was followed by an experience of new life?
3. When have you failed to notice God?

CHAPTER 24: TIBERIAS

1. It is easy to imagine Peter, who denied Jesus three times during the Passion, feeling ashamed of his actions or embarrassed before Jesus. Yet Peter unhesitatingly leaps into the water at the mere mention of Jesus’s name. Why?
2. Why does Jesus ask Peter three times, “Do you love me?”
3. Why would Jesus choose someone like Peter to head the Christian community?

CHAPTER 25: AMEN

1. Looking back on our pilgrimage—with the Gospels, in the Holy Land, and through the spiritual life—what was your most meaningful discovery about Jesus? Now that you know Jesus in a new way, how might you respond to the question “Who do you say that I am?”