

Class 1: Who is Jesus of Nazareth for the 21st Century?

Class Goals

Begin to answer Jesus' question: "Who do you say I am?"

- Provide the Gospels' perspective on Jesus of Nazareth, called the Christ
- Understand why Jesus was put to death when his message was "God loves you"
- Identify in our culture and in ourselves those same oppositions to the Gospel
- Realize the meaning of the resurrection for the early Christian Church
- Explore the meaning of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus for us today
- Grasp the source and meaning of Christian mission and ministry

Resources

- a. Vatican II. *Dei Verbum*.
- b. CCC, #430-483, 522-747.
- c. *Handbook for Today's Catholic*, 15-16 and 23-25.
- d. *The New Dictionary of Theology*, 533-542.
- e. Wm. Barry, *Who Do You Say I am? Meeting the Historical Jesus in Prayer*. Notre Dame, Ind.: Ave Maria Press, 1996.
- f. J. Dupuis, *Who Do You Say I Am? Introduction to Christology*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994.

A Note:

We begin our Basic Christian Formation course with the subject of Jesus of Nazareth. The message and teaching of Jesus are foundational to discipleship and what it means to have faith in God who is our origin and destiny. Jesus' life was one of communion, compassion, and an outpouring of love. Those who were on the margins of society - lepers, women, and the possessed - were brought back into the community. Jesus communicated God's love by what it means to be fully human, as persons and as communities.

The challenge for Christian communities who strive to be God-centered and more human is to reinterpret the meaning of Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection - the Paschal Mystery -- for this present generation. What does it mean to die and to give life again in a society where self-centeredness is so common? What do I see and feel when I see the crucifix? Does it have meaning for my life and the life of others, including all creation?

A step toward answering these important questions is to ask why do parishes exist? Another question is: Does the religion of Jesus bring liberation or oppression? Often we see religion as doctrine and dogma that take away personal freedom. Obedience is often demanded without discussion and a search for truth. Jesus' life is a teaching of grace and freedom. Parishes exist so that individuals can grow in an intimate

relationship with Jesus, now the Christ, and become his follower, as well as a believer. It is this relationship that is fundamental to what it means to be a Christian.

The first class in the Christian Formation program is a reflection about Jesus' identity and how the Church struggled with the question "Who do others say I am?" Each generation answered this question. The other classes, such as scripture, sacraments, and saints, build on this question. Our task is to embrace the same question for this age, in this place, and with these people: "Who do YOU say I am?"

1. Christology is the study of Jesus, his humanity and his divinity, and it's meaning for us.

There are two main approaches:

- One has as its focus on the divinity of Jesus (sometimes called "high" Christology); the other focuses on the humanity of Jesus (sometimes called "low" Christology).
Examples of the focus on the divinity of Jesus: the Prologue of the gospel John, the Nicene Creed.
- The focus on the humanity of Jesus developed from a study of Jesus' human history presented in the Synoptic Gospels. (Christianity = mystery of the Incarnation).

The Roman Catholic Church confesses that Jesus Christ is truly and fully God and truly and fully human, in one person without confusion (*Catechism of the Catholic Church --CCC-- #464-468*).

2. Jesus' mission was to establish the reign of God.

In fact, Jesus IS the living reign of God. After his baptism and intimate experience of being loved by God in the Jordan, Jesus came to announce the good news of God's love and the forgiveness of sins to all. By his acts of healing and compassion Jesus revealed the meaning of God's love – the reign of God. The Father desires to bring all, especially the poor and outcasts, into loving relationships with God and with one another. Jesus' life, death and resurrection, his identity as the one who reveals the heart of God, is the source for all Christian life and mission. With Jesus, our mission is to bring about loving relationships with God, self, others and all creation. In this way, one collaborates with the ongoing creation and transformation of the world with justice and right relationships. Sin, the obstacle to fuller life in the Spirit, blocks relationships with an excessive preoccupation with the self. This preoccupation is often built into systems and institutions. Thus, we have sin in its personal and social/structural sense.

3. The proclamation of Jesus demanded a change of heart

"The chosen time is accomplished

And the kingdom of God is at hand;

Change your hearts

And believe in this news of salvation (Mk 1:15)

A change of heart was needed to:

- Realize that God's love and salvation could not be earned. Ritual practices do not earn God's salvation, In fact, nothing does.
- Open one's heart to receive the forgiveness of sins
- Accept God's radical love and generosity for oneself and for all.

4. Jesus taught that it is the poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who seek justice, and the peacemakers who are the true Israel and the children of God.

- Jesus shows his authority in the Kingdom of God by boldly picking the unlikely—the “nobodies”— to be the real heirs of all God’s ancient promises.
- Jesus turned the values of the religious establishment (overemphasis on ritual and dogma) of his time upside down. God wants our hearts, not our rules and doctrines.
- These words and actions of Jesus aroused the deadly hostility of those in power, and he was handed over to the Roman authorities to be crucified.
- Jesus’ death was brought about by human injustice and hardness of heart, not because it was the will of God the Father.

5. God then overcomes the evil of sin and death by raising Jesus to life. The resurrection changes everything!

- Because of the resurrection we confess that God was present with Jesus all along.
- The resurrection is a vindication, a justification, of all that Jesus did and taught. It means that sin IS forgiven and that death IS overthrown; and the reign of God has come.
- All of the good news that Jesus preached— and did— is true!
- For the apostles, disciples and the early Church, the starting point is the resurrection—all else is seen and understood from this perspective. It is the starting point of our faith too.
- The meanings of Jesus’ resurrection for us are the blessings of the reign of God, the forgiveness of our sins and the gift of the Spirit, incorporating us into the communal life of God, that is, the Trinity.
- These blessings are for fully living our lives now, not only for the life to come.

6. We, the church and the extended body of Christ, are charged with Jesus’ mission and that of the early communities to build the Reign of God (GS, 17).

The way that we build the Reign of God by being Christ in the world---

- changes according to the needs of the times and
- leading of the Spirit and
- way we answer the question posed by Jesus, ““Who do you say I am?”
- Our answer comes from our experience of the love of God and liberation in Jesus. If we think that our life in the Spirit is a life of the compassion of Jesus—forgiving, healing, including the marginalized— then the response that we make to such things as poverty and violence, the environmental crisis, and the AIDS pandemic, will reflect who we say Jesus is (Jn. 13.35).

7. What we know about the historical Jesus:

- Probably born around the year 6 or 7 BC.
- Grew up in Nazareth in Galilee.
- Was a woodworker.
- Was influenced by John the Baptist.
- Became an itinerant preacher and baptizer.
- Was known as a miracle worker.
- Died by crucifixion around 30 CE.
- Probably was able to read and write Aramaic, Hebrew and some Greek.
- To know God, one looks at Jesus. God’s intent for humanity is found in the mission of Jesus.

8. Who is the “Christ” – the “Anointed One,” the All-embracing, inclusive, Cosmic Christ?

- The title the “Christ,” or “anointed One,” is a title given AFTER the resurrection to identify the transformed Jesus and the mission that must be carried forward into time.
- The term “the Christ” was and is used to communicate the experience of the fullness of God in us and in the entire cosmos.
- The Christ is also the *Logos* or Word in the Prologue of Jn 1, 1-18. Christ is present “when two or three are gathered” (Mt 18,20). Alpha and Omega (Jn 1.1-18).

Discussion Questions

1. “Who do YOU say that I am?” (Mt. 16, 13-16). Is Jesus more God or more human? At the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE), the person of Jesus was “defined” as “fully human and fully divine.” (See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Council_of_Chalcedon. Each generation must answer this question. How is Jesus relevant for today’s generation?
2. Difference between *believing* in Jesus and *following* Jesus. Believing in Jesus: Nicene Creed and Apostles’ Creed (*Handbook for Today’s Catholic*, 99-100). Following Jesus implies knowing and understanding the scriptures (Mt. 13, 1-23; *Handbook for Today’s Catholic*, 25-26).
3. *Logos* means a “blueprint” (R. Rohr) or template from which a pattern is copied. Read the Prologue substituting “Word” for “blueprint” or “template.” (The blueprint is “outpouring of love.”)
4. Then read Philippians 2, 5-11. How is one to “have the mind of Christ”?
5. Jesus’ mission: Mt. 25,31-46; Lk. 4, 16-19. How did people receive his announcement? Read verses 20-30. Beatitudes.
6. Summary of the New Testament and Jesus’ mission is Jn. 10,10. What are the implications of this scripture passage? Who lacks abundance of life?
7. How is the mission of Jesus described in Jn. 17? What is the main message?

More Discussion Questions

1. What is Jesus doing? How would you describe his ministry?
2. What does his ministry tell you about him?
3. What does “Reign of God” mean?
4. What your understanding of God as found in the person of Jesus?
5. What are some of the new challenges that we face as Christians? How can we be the heart and hands of Jesus in responding to them?
- 6.. What has stood out for you in this Christology? Why?