

Jesus as Whistleblower

Christian churches typically present the religious mythology about Jesus, as the supernatural Son of God who was sacrificed on the cross as atonement for man's sins. But there is a more historical Jesus who instructed the poor about the injustices they faced and died for it, writes Rev. Howard Bess.

By Rev. Howard Bess

In the John account of the beginning of the ministry of Jesus, Jesus starts by calling his disciples. Philip, who had already become a follower, brought along Nathaniel and declared with great excitement: "We have found the messiah, the one of whom Moses speaks. He is Jesus, the son of Joseph, from Nazareth."

Nathaniel's response was quick: "Can anything good come from Nazareth?"

I grew up in Fairbury, a small farm town in central Illinois that survived and thrives as a shopping and banking center with an excellent high school, the result of consolidations with surrounding school districts. But around Fairbury are a handful of dead towns.

At one time, each of these small towns had a general store, a bank, a grain elevator, a church and a one-building school that housed kids first grade through high school. These towns now consist of a few homes, but nothing more.

Nazareth of Jesus's time can be compared to these small dead communities but much worse. At one time, Nazareth was a thriving town populated by farm families. Farmers owned and farmed their own land but did not live on the land they farmed. They lived in villages like Nazareth.

However, by the Jesus era, the area had gone through a dramatic change, much because of the heavy hand of Roman occupation. Nazareth was a dead town that was a part of an "advanced agrarian society." Farmers had lost ownership of their land. Ownership had passed to wealthy people who lived in the big Roman-dominated cities of Sepphoris and Tiberius.

The population of villages like Nazareth was made up of former farmers, who stayed in Nazareth, having lost land ownership and were reduced to peasants trying to exist as farm laborers, expendables who had become starving beggars, and women who had been abandoned. The poverty was beyond description.

The words ascribed to Nathaniel are understandable: "Can anything good come from Nazareth?"

A thinking person cannot help but ask "how did things get so bad?" The answer is

very involved but is vital to the search for the historical Jesus. For now, we can say that the plight of the rural Jews in Galilee was terrible and that fact can be verified by historical research.

We also can emphatically say that these were the roots of Jesus, and Jewish peasants were his audience. The added tragedy is that the poor both then and now seldom realize what had happened to them and who it was that had put them in their lowly position.

In our own day a poor person working for minimum wage applies for food stamps, goes to a local food bank, buys clothes at a second-hand store, and lives in subsidized housing without asking why she/he cannot be paid a livable wage. She/he also shops at Walmart because the prices are so good.

I do not know how Jesus figured out what was being done to his fellow peasants. But we know that Jesus realized that the rich land owners in Sepphoris and Tiberius were crooks, their retainers were thieves, and the priests, who kept peasants in line, were spiritual thugs.

History has preserved for us very important information about Jesus. The number one source is the parables he told. Many people still think that the parables of Jesus are nice earthly stories about heavenly subjects. However, placed in the context of the dynamics of an advanced agrarian society, the stories become pointed protests against the rich, the politically powerful and the haughty religious.

This collection of stories becomes political and social commentary that the poor began to understand. They decided to rise up in protest. Jesus was the whistleblower exposing and explaining the injustices. He was put to death for his unholy activity.

I have a dear minister friend, whom I greatly admire. My friend spent many years as a hospital chaplain and loved her job. The nurses had grievances with the hospital and went on strike. My chaplain friend joined their picket line. Because she joined the picket line and would not cross the line to go to work, she lost her chaplain job. The union hired her, and she finished her ministerial career as a union executive. I have nothing but admiration for the decisions she made. She was a first-rate Jesus follower.

Jesus is my Lord. I believe he died for the sins of the world, which is the side of Jesus that we hear presented every Sunday in worship services. My protest is about the side of Jesus that ministers and churches keep side-stepping.

Jesus constantly spoke about the Kingdom of God on earth and instructed us to pray for that reality. If our religious gestalt does not include Jesus as a

whistleblower on earth in life's real situations, the picture is not complete.

Can anything good come out of Nazareth? You be the judge.

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