

What was Jesus Christ Really Like?

August 14, 2005

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

Did you ever wonder what Jesus Christ was really like? Oh, we know him from the Gospel accounts, but we know, on the surface at least, more of *who* he was than what he was like. Did he have any hang-ups, beside the devil? What did he do for a little R & R? Did he ever, in a relaxed moment among his friends, say *did you hear the one about.....?* Did he ever laugh out loud? Did he have a sense of humor?

My suggestion to you is that Jesus very definitely had a sense of humor....a very sharp wit....and that this wit is quite evident in the Gospel accounts, three of them anyway....Matthew, Mark and Luke....and so often we miss this.

We are so sure that he was always deadly serious that we often twist his words in order to make them conform to our pre-conceived notions. A misguided piety has made us afraid that finding the wit and humor in Jesus would somehow be blasphemous or

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sacrilegious. Religion we think is a serious business and is totally incompatible with banter. We more often than not think of Jesus as mild in manner, endlessly patient, somber in speech and serious almost to the point of dull.

The supposed mildness is contradicted in a spectacular manner in his attack on the Pharisees in the 23rd chapter of Matthew (23:33) when he called them a *brood of vipers*. The fiction that Jesus was endlessly patient just doesn't hold up. In his impatience with his inept disciples, for one example, Matthew quotes him as saying "*How much longer must I endure you?*" And this, to men who had given up everything for him (Mt 17:17).

The literalism that we are exposed to not only misses the humor when humor is present, but what is worse misses the point of the teaching. Jesus taught in riddles, parables and symbols nearly all of the time

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and we all know that this device is not to be accepted in its entirety. No one could suppose that when Jesus said *he was the door*, he meant that he was made of wood, or that he was an empty space between two walls. Most devices exist to illustrate single points and to do so vividly.

Consider his words about where to put a light. The message is about the necessity of witness, but the failure to make a witness is rendered laughable when Jesus asks, *Is a lamp brought in to be put under a bushel, or under a bed and not on a stand?* (Mk. 4:21) Since the lamp mentioned has an open flame and since the bed is a mattress, it's easy to see that in this situation the light would be suffocated from lack of oxygen, or, the bed would go up in smoke. The appeal here is to the absurd, but his fresh statement of the obvious is, I think, delightful. Recall one of his encounters with the Pharisees: he illustrates their concern with *externals* by accusing them of *washing*

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only the outside of the cup (Mt. 23:25-26). Can you imagine a hostess after a coffee clatch, washing only the outside of her cups and putting them neatly back in her cupboard that way? He uses an amusing analogy to emphasize the importance of cleanliness from within.

One reason for our failure to laugh with Jesus is our extreme familiarity with the texts. The words are so hallowed that they emphasize our inherited assumptions. We need to confront Jesus as he is actually portrayed rather than as we have imagined him to be.

A second reason for our failure to recognize the humor of the Gospels is their great stress upon the awful tragedy of the crucifixion and the events immediately preceding it. Because the tragedy is definitely not humorous, we have come to see the sad picture as the *whole* picture. The Gospels we call *synoptic*, because

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they parallel each other, provide a powerful antidote to distortion. The person they present has many contrasting features. He is man of sorrows, but he is also a man of joys. He expresses blazing anger; he uses rough and blunt language; he teases; he gathers with a happy crowd. An assertion of sadness is not a denial of humor.

In the Gospel for this Sunday (Mt. 15:21-28) Christ's encounter with the Canaanite woman, whose daughter was deranged, is, perhaps, the closest thing to a true dialogue we will find in the Gospels. This was totally inconsistent with his tenderness and respect for women as shown elsewhere. This is a difficult story and we need to look for a little humor because any alternative to that is not acceptable.

For one thing, Jesus, initially, did not even reply to the woman's pleadings (Mt. 15:23). This was totally inconsistent with his tenderness and respect for

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women as shown elsewhere. Second, he told her, and his disciples, that he was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel (Mt. 15:24), a further uncharacteristic withdrawal. Perhaps he was not being harsh, but only restating his sense of vocation. The hard part comes, when, in response to her further pleading, he says "*It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.*" Taken at face value, the sentence is rude and contemptuous. It is at complete variance with the general picture of Christ which we get from the rest of the Gospel, particularly in connection with the poor and needy.

The best part of the confrontation is the woman's sharp and witty reply to this apparent insult: *Even the dogs, she said, even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the Master's table.* What she is saying is that though she may be a dog in his eyes, she deserves something and even the dogs don't demand anything special. The clue to Jesus' spirit in this entire

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encounter is his immediate affirmation and friendly response to the woman's wit. He accepted her plea and consequently the child became the object of his attention. If Jesus could respond so readily to the banter of another, there is reason to suppose that there was an element of banter in his own earlier insulting statements. If those earlier words were serious, they are a permanent stumbling block to the Gospel. But if his words were compassionate banter, they give us one of the most delightful pictures of our Lord that we possess.

It's clear that Jesus liked this gentile woman. Beyond the border of Tyre and Sidon she was an unknown, a secondary figure in Scripture. Yet upon this figure there suddenly fall the penetrating eyes of Jesus and he spoke to her the surprising words, "*Great is your faith*". To only one other had he said this, another secondary figure, the Centurion of Capernaum. To paraphrase St. Paul, *in having nothing she possessed*

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all things. What had she done that Jesus should extol her faith? She simply met him and stretched out her hand to him and he took it. She did something we all can do, whether we need to or not. And we all can do what Jesus did, respond in good humor and gracious affection to those who reach out to us.

AMEN.