

Pilgrim Uniting Church

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An Early Word: Who was Jesus?

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Any open-minded reading of the New Testament demonstrates clearly that the early church was riven with factions and divisions and that the leaders had to work hard to hold things together and keep the fledgling Christian communities on track. And yet, in an earlier life, I somehow managed to gloss over that and believe that there was such a thing as a straightforward 'New Testament Christianity' – and that we should all be trying to return to it. Well, when we do that kind of selective reading we're likely to miss some important insights.

I was reminded of this very recently when I attended a lecture at the Seminary of the Third Age, in which New Testament scholar Vickie Balabanski got the audience thinking about who Jesus was. *Who was Jesus?* Well, surely we know the answer to that, don't we? The New Testament tells us clearly that Jesus was the Son of God, conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of a virgin, and that his birth was heralded by angelic choirs and an amazing new star. This birth narrative is presented to us with certainty and has become deeply embedded in our culture. It has been assumed by many to be the basis of and central to claims of Jesus' divinity.

But if we look more closely at these familiar birth narratives they are by no means straightforward. There's actually evidence of some serious uncertainty there about who Jesus was. Vickie suggested that, within the Jewish society of which he was a member, Jesus might well have

been a very marginal member indeed. He may have been a *mamzer*, a product of an illicit sexual union, a union that was forbidden according to the Torah, a union whose offspring were “not to be admitted to the assembly of the Lord”, even to the tenth generation! (Deut. 23: 2)

Could Jesus really have been a *mamzer*? Well, it seems like a plausible charge. For starters, who were his parents? It seems pretty clear that his mother was a young woman called Mary, who at the time of his conception was unmarried. But who was his father? That’s where it gets tricky. According to the biblical record, Mary didn’t know, or wasn’t telling. She was betrothed to a man called Joseph, but he was taken aback at the news that she was pregnant, as the two of them hadn’t had sexual relations. Matthew tells us he was inclined at first to “put her away” quietly to avoid scandal. (Matthew 1:19) According to Luke, Mary herself was confused and “greatly troubled” by her pregnancy. How could she bear a child, she asked, since she had no husband? (Luke 1: 29,34) Mark records no birth story, but when he writes about the adult Jesus returning to his home village of Nazareth, he notes that the locals recognised him as the son of Mary, and the brother of various siblings -- but there’s no mention of a father (Mark 6: 3). Furthermore, the uncertainty about Jesus’ parentage is not confined to the bible: it is also present in some early rabbinic texts – that is, authoritative Jewish sources. These suggest a Roman soldier as a possible father of Jesus, or a priest, or . . . who knows? The rabbis were divided about the matter but reached the conclusion that until Mary could prove otherwise, the assumption that she had become pregnant by a *mamzer* - an outcast, a person of no account - was a reasonable one. And of course that would make Jesus a *mamzer* too. And, as Vickie suggested, there are lots of clues in the New Testament that fit with this theory: he was rejected in his home town, he was unmarried, he transgressed Jewish holiness codes, he locked horns

with the temple authorities, he associated with sinners, and made a point of including the excluded.

Well, what are we to make of all that?

We know that when the gospel writers surrounded the story of Jesus' birth with all the paraphernalia of the miraculous, the unique, the divine, they were trying to impress upon their first century audience, in terms that they would understand and accept, what they had come to believe about Jesus. The stories were statements of their faith that this man Jesus was a unique revelation of God, whose radical life and teaching had the power to transform their lives. Vickie's point was not to undermine that reading of Jesus, or that faith, but to ask:

- *What additional richness and power is added to the narrative if we consider seriously that this remarkable man, who had the capacity to transform lives, was actually an outcast, a person of no account, within his own culture and religion?*
- *What does it do to our valuing of humanity, and what does it offer the most marginalised and poorly credentialed sections of human society, if we don't flinch from the notion that that's what Jesus' origins were? No angels and stars, but plenty of rejection and public opprobrium.*

So: who was Jesus? Perhaps recognising Jesus as a *mamzer* would strengthen and enrich the other more familiar, elevated titles we have given him? It's worth thinking about.

References

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