

YOUTHSCENE



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This is the first of a series of articles we've asked Jim Punton to write on issues raised for the wider Christian Community by the experience and thinking of more youthful disciples.

However baffling to 'man come of age', there's no denying the worldwide phenomenon that for thousands of young people Jesus is 'in' and Jesus is 'the greatest'. In all our 'secularised' cultures they are to be found affirming a living, contemporary relationship, personal and communal, with a very real Jesus. The institutional church may be dead for them, but Jesus is very much alive. We can look only briefly at some of the images in which committed young Christians are describing their Lord. I believe there is much we can learn.

Used to sleeping rough

(a) Firstly the young are affirming this Jesus is fully man, one of us, not God in disguise, not a man with powers not available to men. This Jesus ate and drank and slept and wept as we do; he got hungry, tired and lonely; he knew moral struggles, wrestled with sexuality, and with family misunderstanding; he knew real graft as a lumberjack; his feet got dirty; his hands got chapped; he was used to sleeping rough and had a closeness to nature; he was down to earth in his conversation and teaching and had a strong sense of humour; yet his anger at injustice and hypocrisy were powerful and his courage before the authorities quite breathtaking; he loved life; he loved people; he shared their sufferings and miseries and experienced the awfulness of public execution. This biblical emphasis challenges the docetism that so easily distorts our understanding and our message. Jesus was not some kind of 'reverse astronaut'. He was indeed fully man.

Authentic manhood

(b) But young Christians find this ordinary man an extraordinary man with all the compelling attractiveness and authority He had in the first century. Man-ness is at a premium in Jesus. He is the one who was truly human while the rest of us have allowed the demonic to deprive us of the freedom to be. He embodies for the young the

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The clown is not only comic, but tragic; we laugh and we cry. He enables us to enter his experience and to find that the way we see things is not always the way they are. Young Christians find this a helpful picture of Jesus who questions our preceptions and challenges our understandings. Further, the clown is the scapegoat, absorbing our hostility, our violence, our contempt, our guilt and frustration. How completely Jesus took upon Himself all our failures and antagonism and became our substitute and representative before God. We all would do well to consider this metaphor.

Jesus as 'black'

(f) Related to this image is that which sees Jesus as 'black'. So much of the experience of the black person, so much of the suffering, deprivation, denial of dignity and identity, so much that has created 'soul', is true of Jesus. Many young Christians have sensed this and are being faithful to the vision. Whatever his pigmentation, and he was clearly no Nordic, what we know as 'white' is less than an adequate vehicle for understanding the Jesus of the gospels.

Jesus the Liberator

(g) Another basic dimension to their Jesus is 'Liberator' 'Emancipator'. 'Deliverer', Jesus brings from unwholeness to wholeness; this is liberation or salvation. It is used of body, of mind, of heart, of personal and social relationships. Young people have experienced Jesus as delivered from so many varied enslavements; and are not cautious about naming 'sin', both personal and societal. There is no other Jesus than the liberator from sin—'His name shall be called Jesus, for he shall save His people from their sins'. His cross marks the routing of the demonic, and the triumph of the Liberator.

Organism, not organisation

(h) Jesus is also known widely as 'charismatic'. Risen from death he baptises men and women into His body in His Spirit, giving new life in new community. And all the gifts of His reign are given to His body to equip it for all His purposes of love in mission and worship. Only twenty-one of His gifts ('charismata') are specifically mentioned; but all his gifts of love enable His body to be true to Him. Though some young groups are in danger of limiting the charismatic provision of Jesus to the seemingly more 'dramatic' gifts, yet this message about Jesus is needed. The community of God's people is organism rather than organisation, and it makes no sense to insist that Jesus gives all His gifts to one man so that the main body of the people can share only vicariously.

vision of true, authentic manhood. He is, as man, what God is calling us to be and makes possible for us in Him. This is recovery of another Biblical emphasis. Only Jesus has been 'all there'. Humanization has its model and its goal in Him.

Community of love

(c) And young people see a Jesus who has no truck with a 'status quo' which does not reflect the reign of God. The Jesus of his mother's song 'has scattered the proud . . . ; put down the mighty from their thrones; exalted those of low degree; filled the hungry . . . ; sent the rich away with nothing'. His manifesto is ". . . good news for the poor; . . . release for prisoners; sight for the blind; liberty for those being oppressed". The young person refuses to make these into figures of speech which deny their context and clear meaning. He sees Jesus expelling from the temple those who were defrauding the poor; hears him call Herod 'that fox', baffle the legalists with 'Give to Caesar what's Caesar's; to God what's God's' (How much to a Hebrew was Caesar's?); expose the hypocrisy of the leading religious leaders; direct his followers to call no man 'master'. He sees him break sainted conventions, talking freely with women, accepting prostitutes and tax collectors, embracing Greek, Roman and Samaritan, forming a community based on radically different values. This is a community of love and forgiveness where God is Father—yes, even 'Dad'; where men and women are brothers and sisters.

No guru like Jesus

(d) For the young, there is no teacher, no guru like Jesus. Unlike many of us, they believe his words to be realistic, relevant, and intended to be normative for social ethics. 'Godspell' puts this quite forcefully, and it's skilfully argued in 'The Politics of Jesus' by John Yoder.

Comic and tragic

(e) An exciting image is youth's emphasis on Jesus as 'clown' (c.f. the film 'Parable' and 'Godspell').

(i) The praying, worshipping, praising Jesus means much to young Christians. And many are seeing their own celebration and priesthood as caught up in His. There is a new joy, a new freedom, a new victory in youth praise. Jesus is Lord of the Dance.

Lord of all

(j) Yet another image strong among young Christians is the Jesus who is Lord of the Universe, the coming King; history is moving towards a purpose. Jesus is the one who will receive the acclamation and worship of the whole cosmos because His death upon the cross was the means of God's restoring it to Himself. Not man alone, but all of creation is the object of God's love in Jesus. Young Christians have been quick to see Jesus' concern for nature and what this means for His community in relation to the rest of the created order. 'In Him all things hang together'. This Jesus has respect and love for all created things.

'I am the way'

(k) This Jesus for young people is obviously unique. Sensitive though they are to world cultures, Jesus alone provides the grounds on which man is acceptable to God. The 'one-way' symbol of the fore-finger pointing upward, is exclusive. It challenges the ultimately uncharitable syncretism of so much folk-religion. There's no doubt that these youngsters are truer to Jesus and to the apostolic message.

Sign of the fish

(l) Finally, the sign of 'the fish' is as widely used among young people now as it was in the early centuries when it was a secret code. The Greek word for fish, *i-ch-th-u-s*, was an acronym for the word *Iesus Christos Theou Uios Soter* meaning 'Jesus Christ, of God Son, Liberator'. This is their experience of him, and it's an experience, authenticated in the NT.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem on the donkey, the whole city was stirred saying, 'Who is this?'. The church leaders had been debating, 'Who is this who even forgives sins?' And the disciple team had whispered, 'Who is this that winds and seas obey Him!' We have looked at a few of the many images used by young disciples when they share the Jesus they are encountering day by day. Like all of us, different youngsters stress those aspects of His person which most meet their personal needs and understanding. And this bias can lead to distortion. Each of these pictures, however, has validity and if taken together, they are true to the Jesus of history and of faith.