

A LIFE OF JESUS
a seven-part sermon series

"a man from Nazareth"



In the early Church, the season of Lent was a time of instruction for the catechumenate who were preparing for their Baptisms at the Easter Vigil, and Lent has remained a season of teaching in the Church ever since. Accordingly, I now begin a series of seven sermons attempting to sketch the life of Jesus. Most Christians' images of Jesus are, I fear, formed more by Hollywood and later Tradition, than by the Scriptures. Thus I think it is essential that we as Christians, as followers of the

Nazarene, consciously examine the Scriptures and early historical records to properly inform *our* images of Jesus.

So let us begin. The very first benchmark in the life of Jesus is that it began in obscurity. The first Christians did not really know or apparently care much about the early years of Jesus' life. Their interest was in his teachings, and in his death and resurrection. Sadly in our culture today, more people will know the Christmas Story better than the details of any of the rest of Jesus' life. Yet the New Testament Scriptures focus on Jesus' Passion, almost to the neglect of his birth and childhood, or anything else. It is perhaps surprising *how little* background information on Jesus is actually confirmed in the earliest sources. For instance, Paul's numerous epistles (which are the oldest literary material of the New Testament) do not mention Jesus' parents, or where he was born, or where he grew up, or even when he lived. The early sermons of the Apostles as recorded in the Book of Acts reveal little more. Nor can we get much more information from the Epistle to the Hebrews or the letters of James, or Jude, or the several letters of John and Peter.

Two of the Gospel accounts, including Mark the earliest, begin their narratives of Jesus' life with his baptism in the River Jordan, telling us nothing at all about his earlier years. Only the Gospels of Luke and Matthew record any stories of Jesus' birth and early childhood, and though they have become so

familiar to us as that beloved Christmas story, between themselves Luke and Matthew agree with each other's account on only three details, namely, that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, that he grew up in Nazareth, and that his parents' names were Mary and Joseph. Believe it or not, that's the full extent of their agreement with each other. They don't even agree with each other about where Jesus' hometown was at the time of his birth. The rest of their stories, like those numerous other infancy accounts found in the later apocryphal gospels, seem more to be answering the curiosity of later Christians than the handing down of accurate historical details of Jesus' early years.

Thus Jesus' life begins in virtual obscurity. About the most certain thing we can say about Jesus' beginnings is that he was conceived out of wedlock. Matthew explicitly and Luke implicitly both relate that Jesus' birth was due not to his father Joseph. Still the Gospels of Mark and John do not refer specifically to a Virgin birth, nor does Paul in his numerous letters or Peter in his early sermons recorded in Acts. But the opponents of Jesus perhaps confirm a dispute about his origins in repeated questions to him about his paternity: "Where is your father?" the crowd says at one point in Jerusalem, "We are not born of fornication . . . We know who our father is" (Jn. 8.19, 41) they cry. Perhaps it was well known that Jesus was an illegitimate child. There is a rumor of this kind among Jewish sources that can be traced back to at least 150 A.D. These references concur with Matthew and

Luke that Jesus was not the son of Joseph, but they instead suggest he was the product of an illegitimate union between Mary and a Roman soldier, variously named Pandera, Pantera, or Panthera. Later Christian writers have tended to dismiss this rumor as a malicious invention, and have suggested that the Greek name of 'Panthera' is simply a corruption of the Greek word for virgin, "parthenos." Intriguingly though in 1859, tombstones of 9 Roman soldiers were discovered at Bingerbrück in Germany during railroad construction, one of which was a tombstone of one Tiberius Julius Abdes Panthera, a Roman archer from Sidon in Palestine, dating to the early first century. And there is also a peculiarity in the genealogy ascribed to Jesus in Matthew's Gospel. In it there are only four female ancestors named --- Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba, and each happens to be a 'fallen woman' of some kind. Was the author of the Matthean genealogy implying something about the only other woman mentioned there, Mary, the mother of Jesus?

Jesus apparently grew up in very small towns of Galilee, like Nazareth and Capernaum. The first century Jewish historian Josephus, for instance, lists in his writings what appear to be all the main towns and villages of Galilee where he was the General of the Jewish forces of rebellion in the first century, but Josephus makes absolutely no mention at all of Nazareth. For centuries some scholars have suggested that no such town existed, and was a mistaken reading of the Scripture where Jesus is

understood as a Nazarite (Num. 6:1-21). Indeed it was not until 1955 that there was found archaeological evidence for the existence of Nazareth at the time of Jesus. And there was no known mention of the town of Nazareth except in Christian writings until 1962 when archaeologists discovered a Roman inscription that finally listed the place. But what is just as interesting though, and perhaps more important, is that Galilee's larger towns, like Tarichaea, Garaba, and especially Sepphoris, the capital of Galilee and only four miles from Nazareth, these larger cities go totally unmentioned in the Gospels and in other writings of the early Church. Clearly Jesus was associated only with obscure little villages in his early life.

The Gospel of John records the common saying of that day that "nothing good comes from Nazareth" (Jn. 1.46). Because the region is notable for extremes of daytime heat and nighttime cold, it is known that many succumbed to pneumonia in that place. Dysentery was also common in the regions along the Sea of Galilee as was malaria along the River Jordan. Thus there was disease everywhere around the little town of Nazareth. And sure enough, miserable cripples and sick people appear one after another on almost every page of the Gospels.

Jesus and his family were also probably poor, which wouldn't be surprising seeing that they came from such a small back water town. Their poverty is perhaps confirmed at the time of his birth by Mary's sacrifice in the temple of a "pair of turtle doves, or

two young pigeons" (Lk. 2.24), which was the poor person's sacrifice according to Levitical law, when one could not afford the traditional lamb (Lev. 12.6-8). Jesus' parable of the woman who searched all over her house for a mislaid silver coin may suggest the kind of life he was used to. We should not be surprised that he later instructed his disciples "to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts, but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics" (Mk. 6.8-9).

There is some uncertainty in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark as to whether Jesus was himself a carpenter (Mk. 6.3), or simply a carpenter's son (Mt. 13.55). Actually the better translation of the Greek word is something more like a manual laborer, but whatever the case the imagery of building is present in the sayings and stories of Jesus. There is the familiar parable that ends "Why do you observe the splinter in your brother's eye and never notice the plank in your own" (Mt. 7.3-5; Lk. 6.41). There is also Jesus' story about the houses built on sand or rocks (Lk. 6.47-9), and his fondness for the words from Psalm 118 about "the stone that was rejected by the builders that became the chief cornerstone" (Lk. 20.17, et al.).

Most laborers of that day, though, were itinerant workers. Despite the imagery of Hollywood there was probably no quaint little carpenter's workshop, but rather such laborers moved about from job to job. That Jesus' experience of life was somewhat

broad can be seen in the keenly observed cast of characters which populate his parables --- the unscrupulous judge, the importune widow, the crafty steward, the virtuous Pharisee, the Good Samaritan, and so on. These are not stereotyped figures, but carry the conviction that they, or someone like them, had come from Jesus' own experience of life. Also many of Jesus sayings and parables reveal an intimate knowledge of rural life. Within one chapter of Luke (ch. 13), for example, Jesus is depicted as knowing how to revive a barren fig tree (vv. 6-9), he is sensitive to farm animals' needs for watering even on the Sabbath (v. 15), aware of the remarkable growth patterns of the mustard seed (v. 19), well informed on the amount of yeast needed to leaven dough (v. 21), and keenly observant of the characteristic manner in which a hen 'gathers her brood under her wings' (v. 34). In Matthew's Gospel Jesus' saying is the oldest known record of interpreting a red sky at night as a sign for good weather the following day (Mt. 16.1-3).

Thus the most next surprising element of Jesus' early years is its ordinariness. His early life appears to have been a common one. This was almost unbelievable to later Christians who were forever searching in his early years for some proof of his uniqueness. Later apocryphal stories, just like those in Matthew and Luke, suggest all sorts of extraordinary events and actions in his childhood. But a more careful reading of Scripture suggests a very mundane life for Jesus. He was simply the

illegitimate son of a poor laborer in Nazareth. It was a life, perhaps, not unlike our own in its ordinariness and obscurity. And perhaps that is what makes it so extraordinary, to think that Jesus humbled himself in such simple human form, and lived out a simple human life like ours. Even his name was commonplace, and his life appeared to follow an uneventful routine no different from others. Perhaps there is the very meaning of the Incarnation, and the assurance of God's compassion for us. Jesus was definitely not some Greek God disguised as a human. He was a simple man, living out an ordinary life. No super powers or extraordinary tales at first, but only the austere life of a backwater town.

Where together with his contemporaries Jesus experienced the sweat, misery, and poverty of a struggling working class, and yet in the synagogue each Sabbath together with his neighbors Jesus would have heard from the various scrolls of the prophets of a promised kingdom of God, a kingdom where the blind would see again, the deaf would hear, and the lame would leap for joy. Yet what a great divide lay between the wretched realities of Nazareth and this vision of the "kingdom of heaven" which he and his contemporaries heard each week proclaimed from the prophets.

According to Luke's Gospel (3.23), Jesus began his public ministry when he was thirty years old, a ministry which is believed to have lasted about three years. And yet at one point in the Fourth Gospel (8.57), Jesus' opponents in Jerusalem

declare that he was a man not yet fifty years old, an odd reply to a man in his early thirties. Perhaps Jesus simply looked older than his years. I like to think that maybe he was prematurely grey. But perhaps some shadow of the nameless suffering of the region around Nazareth was cast prematurely across his face. Perhaps weary eyes reflected some measure of the interior pain and anguish in the life of that poor laborer's son, maybe a look of sorrow hovered around his eyes. Jesus was, perhaps, listening intently for the voice of God to answer his cry and the cries of those around him --- when he heard instead another voice, crying out in the wilderness, the voice of John the Baptist there on the banks of the River Jordan. Jesus' response to that voice is the next stage in his life. And we shall look at it more closely next week. AMEN.