Come Here, Jesus

Barbara Cawthorne Crafton

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Introduction

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I don't suppose there is much of anything in this book about Jesus that will be news to anyone. I do love the Scriptures, but I am no biblical scholar—probably I could name you a dozen people just in my neighborhood who are smarter than I am about the Bible. And I don't know how many books about Jesus there are, but I know there are a lot. So the impetus for my writing it was not any sense of the world's need to learn more about Jesus from the likes of me.

On the other hand, we have to learn about Jesus from *somebody*. Somebody has to tell us. Jesus has been told to people by other people for better than twenty centuries. There are things you only have to hear once and you've got it—no matter how many times you analyze table salt, it's always going to be sodium chloride. Look them up in as many atlases as you like, but the Alps will always be in Europe, and they won't be any more in Europe in fifty years than they are today.

Jesus is different. Him, we have to tell and retell. We mostly

experience him in each other: in our ways of telling and, more importantly, in our ways of showing who he is. It is this that has prompted me to write a book about Jesus, something I never expected to do. I was all set to begin a book about forgiveness, which I *do* think will contain some things that will be news to many people. But then this happened.

You need to write a book about Jesus.

This was not a voice I *heard*. Not with my ears—nothing that spooky. It was just a thought that popped into my head one night when I woke up at about three a.m. And don't think there was anything remarkable about my waking up at that hour, either—when you get to be my age, you're for sure up a few times every night, and you consider one during which you arose only once to have been a good night's sleep. Those brief waking moments in the dark of night have become interesting times of reflection for me, times when I can entertain a thought or two without having to go and do something about it. But this one had an air of urgency. And it refused to leave.

You need to write a book about Jesus.

Well, all right then.

There must be a reason why it refuses to leave. We've already established that the reason is not my superior knowledge of biblical criticism. That's not what I'm bringing to the Jesus potluck. So why me? What *do* I have to bring?

I suppose I could bring some stories. People first met Jesus through stories—the ones he told. It was his favorite way of teaching, and it is mine as well. And then they met him again through stories other people told about him. First,

it was people who had known him when he walked the earth. We always wish we had been one of them, so we could have a sure and certain faith in Jesus—forgetting that just about everybody who knew him well hightailed it out of there during and after the events surrounding his death, afraid for their lives. I doubt if we would have done any better. Then it was people who knew those people, and then it was people who had heard about those people, who had read the stories those people told about him. Layer after layer of Jesus-memory laid themselves down on the table of human history. We clustered around it, looking at this and that. There was more and more to look at all the time.

The ongoing life of Jesus had to *dawn* on people. It had to creep into their experience, and mostly it did so slowly—St. Paul got a sudden conversion, knocked to the ground and blinded by it, but most everybody else came to it by degrees, the way we do. Somebody in a gathering says something about Jesus that intrigues you, and you listen a little more closely. Then it's time to go home. You don't think about it for a couple of weeks. Then you hear something about him again, and you remember what that lady said a couple of weeks ago. You think maybe you should read the Bible, as you've always said you wanted to do, so you get the one you got from your aunt as a confirmation present down off the shelf, unzip it—it closed with a zipper!—and turn to the Gospels. You know to do *that* much.

You figure you'll start with Matthew, since it's the first one. But you see a long string of names right at the beginning, and they remind you of that time you tried to read the

Bible straight through when you were ten years old—you got bogged down in all the *begats* in the book of Genesis and gave up. So you turn to Mark, the second gospel. You are gratified to see that it is also the shortest.

As it happens, the preacher talks about Mark in church on Sunday. This is somewhat remarkable, as you are by no means a regular there—you really only go when your parents come to the city to visit you. But he talks about how, in Mark 1:9–11, the baptism of Jesus is a little different from the one in Matthew 3:13–17. In Matthew, a voice from heaven says "*This* is my beloved son," as if he were being introduced to the onlookers, while in Mark the voice seems to speak only to Jesus: "*You* are my beloved son." As if, maybe, only Jesus heard it. So the preacher goes on to say that maybe this was the moment when Jesus became aware of who he was.

And you are shocked. Wait, Jesus didn't always *know*? You had always assumed he knew everything at birth, that the toddler Jesus already had it all figured out. You sit in the pew and wish you'd toughed it out in Matthew, gotten through all the names and gotten to the baptism of Jesus. You now don't remember which chapter he said it was in, but you'll find it. So you can see for yourself.

Come here, Jesus.

CHAPTER 1

Jesus the Son of God

We might be forgiven for thinking that "Jesus, Son of God" means that Jesus was God's biological offspring—so much ink has been spilled in defense of the idea. The whole folkloric edifice of the Virgin Birth, for instance, grew and grew in response to the church's need for Jesus not to have come into the world in the normal way. Once the word "virgin" as applied to his mother had come to mean that she didn't have sexual intercourse either before or after conceiving Jesus, there was no turning back. Among the things this entailed were the following:

1. Jesus cannot have had any brothers or sisters. This was necessary if Mary's virginity was understood to be perpetual. But sisters and brothers are mentioned in Mark 6:3, in Matthew 13:55–56, and in Matthew 12:47

(*"Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you."*) James is referred to several times as "the brother of the Lord." A cousin? A step-brother, Joseph's child from a previous marriage? Or just an expression indicating the closeness of their relationship? If so, he is the only one of the twelve referred to in that way. And it is not James who is described in terms of his emotional closeness to Jesus (the disciple "whom Jesus loved" in John 13:23). And *that* disciple is not called Jesus's brother. What to do?

2. Mary must also have been born without sin. If sin is communicated through sexual intercourse, as ancient and medieval theologians at least since St. Augustine believed, what then? The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, accepted informally for centuries but not promulgated by any pope until 1854, holds that Mary was sinless even though her parents conceived her in the usual way. It was the foreknown merits of her son that kept her pure. Just how that worked remains a mystery.
3. What about Joseph? He disappears from the biblical texts after the birth narratives, and Mary is solitary and in need of care at the time of the crucifixion (*Woman, behold your son.*[1]) Joseph is usually depicted in art as being much, much older than Mary—safely

1. John 19:26.

> unable to consummate much of anything. And yet, the genealogy in the beginning of the gospel according to Matthew, which is intended to connect Jesus with the house of David, is that of Joseph, not that of Mary. Her parentage is not mentioned in Scripture at all—Joachim and Anna, her parents, are the invention of a later era. Another puzzle.

I suppose one of the things we can take away from puzzles such as these is a healthy caution about loading more onto these ancient texts than they can bear. They were written by people, copied and recopied by other people—all human beings, like ourselves. Each book arose from a community bound together by the manner in which its members came to know Christ, and the communities were not all alike. It is certainly true that they were unlike us in many ways, and it is also true that we are not all alike, either. They had goals for their readers: they wrote so that their readers might think about Jesus in a certain way. We can learn much from these Christians who left us so long ago, but it would be unwise for us to try to become them. Aping the ancient church is not our project. Our project is to discover what in our day will do for us what their thoughts and visions did for them.

But if that is the case, if the Scriptures and their content are so community-relative, why need we revere them? Why can they not remain harmlessly on the dust heap of history? Why, when I was ordained an Episcopal priest nearly forty

years ago, was I required to swear that I believed "the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, and to contain all things necessary to salvation"? And why, almost forty years later, will this year's ordinands still be required to affirm the same thing?[2] Why?

Because they connect us with the person of Jesus, with people's memories of him and other people's memories of those memories. Because a little girl can hear the words of Scripture two thousand years after Jesus was born and still imagine that they apply to her.

You may know that there was a movement in the early church to dispense with the Hebrew Scriptures (what Christians until fairly recently widely called "the Old Testament"). The person most identified with this movement was one Marcion, who lived and wrote in the middle of the first century, but he was not alone in rejecting the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus was what was important, Marcionites reasoned, and *he* isn't even in the Old Testament. Besides, much of what they read in the ancient Hebrew texts offended them—such superstition! So many contradictions in it, and so little in the way of philosophy, of logic—it all felt much too primitive, especially to Christian converts who had not grown up within the fold of Judaism.

But the Marcionites and their ilk did not prevail. The Hebrew Scriptures would stay, and Christians would just have to reckon with them. Moreover— however luminously self-evident the books that *would* become the Christian Scriptures

2. The Ordination of a Priest, Book of Common Prayer, 526.

must have seemed to those who wrote them, reckoning with *them* is no picnic for us twenty centuries later, either. They, too, emerged from a world very different from ours, and we don't understand *that* world perfectly, either. It was a long time ago. There are many modern-day Marcionites, I imagine, who would just as soon ignore the whole Bible. Find Jesus in our own experience.

But how would we do that? How would we know it was Jesus? How would we move from the profound experience of oneness we have in meditation of any kind, Christian or no, to engagement with the person of Christ?

Would we even want to?

Without the Scriptures–warts and all—as our guide, we would lose touch with him. We would forget him.

In time, we wouldn't even experience the loss of him as a loss. Our faith might still be called "Christian," but it would no longer have much to do with Jesus. This idea has held a certain attraction for theologians, from time to time, providing as it does a rationale for not dealing with the chasm of cultural difference that separates us from Jesus and his century. Theologians refer to this as "the scandal of the particular." Baldly stated, it goes something like this: *Jesus was a man of his time. He thought and behaved like one. We should not take anything he says or does as normative. This or that may have been important to Jesus, but it need not be to us. All that should matter to us is the Cosmic Christ, the second person of the Trinity, who is the means by which the universe exists and who connects us with the power of that existence.*

So, never mind. There need be no conversation with Jesus of Nazareth. What he said doesn't matter—it doesn't even matter if he really said it or not. Unlike all our other relationships, we are free in this one to ignore the aspects of him we don't like. We can prune Jesus to our specifications. Think of it as theological topiary, and get out your clippers.

But relationship needs to be harder than that. At the very least, Jesus deserves a good wrestle. So does every last one of his followers, those who walked the earth with him and those who came after. And our descendants? They will have to wrestle with us. They will have to struggle with the fact that we claimed to follow the one through whom the earth is created and then shrugged off the fact that we smothered it every day with our polluting greed. They will be as mystified at our ability to worship with a happy heart while a third of the world's children went to bed hungry every night as we are by churchgoing slave owners before the American Civil War. They will be confounded by the fact that some among us called themselves "pro-life" but enthusiastically supported the death penalty.

When we contend with Jesus the Son of God, we contend with all of them. We contend first with his redactors, those who first wrote down the texts we now revere. And then with the ones who followed—every age has found in Jesus what it needed to find. He has not been the same throughout the ages. Each one has recast him in its own image. For us to acknowledge that this is the case is not to discount the value of any of these images—there was a reason for the choices

each made about who he would be for them. We may disavow their choices—and we must disavow some of them—but we cannot disown those people. In particular, we cannot disown the ones whose Jesus repels us: the slaveholders' Jesus, the Nazis' Jesus, the homophobes' Jesus; they are not ours, but those people are ours. If we disown them, we may miss the opportunity to learn from their errors, and then we will be in danger of making the same ones. How does a follower of St. Francis become an agent of colonization in the New World? How does a Christian theologian become an apologist for the Third Reich? How does the obsessively homophobic Westboro Baptist Church come to insist that our God is a god of hate and not of love? How does a mother disown her own son, allowing him to die of AIDS in a hospital far away without ever visiting him, and think that in this she is doing her duty as a Christian? I saw this during the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 1990s, and I saw it more than once. How does a young gunman apologize to his victims before killing them, telling them that, though they seem like really good people, he must now shoot them all because they are black and he is white? To what spiritual need do such beliefs minister? We need to know. Like it or not, our memory of Jesus is forever mixed with theirs. Everything comes from somewhere.

This exploration is not for sissies.

When we speak of Jesus as the Son of God, we do well to remember that the phrase meant more in biblical times than simply a filial relationship by blood. Certainly such a limited view of it is understandable in light of our sacred texts:

consider the kerfuffle in Luke and especially in Matthew about the virgin birth, the genealogical lists in Matthew of who begot whom. A person could be pardoned for thinking that the most important thing to know about Jesus was who his father wasn't.

But Jesus himself locates familial relationship in more than blood, and sometimes in opposition to it:

> Who is my mother? Who are my brothers? And pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."[3]

> Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.[4]

To be a son is to subordinate one's own will to the will of the Father. To reproduce the spirit of one generation in the next. Moreover, in assertions like "I and the Father are one" and "the Father is in me and I am in the Father," Jesus claims identity with God, not just filial relationship.

Like my friend Bob, who believed that God took his son from him because he loved him more than he loved God, Christians who imagine they must smother their obligation

3. Matt. 12:48–49.
4. Matt. 10:37.

of compassion toward other human beings beneath a blanket of their supposed duty to God can find themselves tragically opposed to their own hearts. They might also find themselves enlisted in a very ugly army. One thinks of the Crusades, for instance, or of the Inquisition in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Of the Salem witch trials. Certainly of the Holocaust. All of these shredded with murderous thoroughness the bonds of simple human empathy toward outsiders.

If we cannot look beneath Jesus's troubling words about the competition between obligation to God and obligation to family and see a critique of the tribalism that tempts and infects human communities, we will think that God is indifferent or even hostile to the bonds of our common humanity. We will miss something important. It turns out to be easier than many of us imagine to become monstrous.

Get Behind Me!

Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things.

Matthew 16:23

Well, that's a bit strong. All Peter was trying to do was save his friend's life. Who among us would not have given someone we loved the same advice? *Jerusalem?!? Now?!? Are you crazy?!?*

Sometimes the people you love do foolish things for no good reason, and you will move heaven and earth to try and stop them. In the end, you may not be *able* to stop them, and you will have to watch them reap what they have sown. In the end, the best you can hope for may be that the whole experience has been an unforgettable lesson.

And sometimes, someone you love takes a terrible risk for something very important, fully aware of what might happen. Again, perhaps, you move heaven and earth, and again you may not be able to stop it. And so you must watch as actions you have warned against yield to their consequences.

This time, though, the watching is very different. This time, the one doing most of the learning is probably you. You learn how brave he is, something you may not have known

before. And you learn—again—that even the most potent love does not empower you to control the actions of another, that the really important things in life are far too important to entrust to another's decision. Even yours.

You want life with your beloved to go on forever, but it will not. If you try to protect your world as it is, to the exclusion of all else, you will lose all the joy of it while you are doing so. And, in the end, you will lose your world anyway.

We cannot cling to safety. We cannot make our whole life about being safe. We cannot clutch it to our chests—if we do, we will not have our arms free to embrace the world for the little time we have to live in it and love its life. It will be over, and we will have missed it.