



The FURROW

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from the pew

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In a parish setting Jesus gets frequent mention. When we gather for the Eucharist, we open and close our celebration in his name. During the course of our act of Sunday worship we praise him, we listen to episodes of his life story and to what others, some few of whom had known him personally, said about him. In Advent and Lent particularly we hear a good deal too about the great figures of the religious tradition from which he hailed. We go on to consciously do, in a ritualised form, what he asked us in memory of him. We pray to the God he taught his disciples to call Father in and through his name. Jesus is at the very centre of our Christian lives.

At the outset of my ministry in the new parish to which I was assigned in the autumn of 2017 – my third as PP – I decided to find out just how much my new parishioners knew about Jesus. I was curious to establish how well they were acquainted with his life story, what understanding they had of his teaching, what importance they attached to knowing about him. I was keen to establish what relationship, if any, they believed they had with him whom, in the prayers of the Church, they so regularly addressed as Saviour and Lord.

The social, intellectual and ethnic composition of my parish community could be replicated, *mutatis mutandis*, in any country across the western world. The parish is suburban and might best be termed middle class. The parish family is made up of a good proportion of young families with school-going children, and a considerable number of retired couples, widows or single people of mature years retired from business careers or the liberal professions, many of them teachers. The millennials are virtually absent and those of the generation ahead of them are thin on the ground.

One in every ten inhabitants of the UK is Catholic so our parishioners are sensitive to the fact that, while they live in a Christian country, the majority of their fellow Christians see their shared faith and understand the Christian tradition differently to the

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way they have been taught to. They are keenly aware that, while there are many ways of viewing Napoleon, there are many more ways in which good people, whose virtuous lives they admire, understand Jesus.

We are in the Birmingham Archdiocese where the average Sunday Mass attendance is between fifteen and thirty percent. The Mass count held here last October indicated that the parish of Caversham is at the upper end of that scale with a weekend congregation hovering at around four hundred. Daily Mass gathers a congregation of about twenty. A homily is preached at every Mass: seven minutes on Sunday, five minutes during the week. Jesus gets more than a passing mention.

A prayer to St. Joseph of Cupertino, which did the rounds in my native Sligo at exam time back in the days before Vatican II, ended with words which deeply embedded themselves in my memory: if Joseph of Cupertino got us through Primary Cert, Leaving or Matric, we promised “to make thee known and cause thee to be known”. As a priest, and many exams later (thanks in no small measure to Joseph of Cupertino!), I always felt the essence of what I was called to do was to make Jesus known, to talk about him in public and in private, never bring him into disrepute but imitate him in such a way as to bring him credit. So many priests I have encountered, diocesan and religious, do this far better than I. The advocacy of priests on behalf of Jesus and his cause is all too often unsung.

In the light of this priestly calling to make Jesus known, it seemed a good idea for a new pastor getting his feet under the table to focus on Jesus in the first Lent Course of the new dispensation. On the six Monday evenings of Lent, in our modern octagonal parish hall, seating in a horse-shoe arrangement, a steady audience of between seventy-five and eighty adult parishioners were in attendance. It was lovely to see that one boy of fourteen came every week with his father. The course commenced punctually at 19.30 and ended with tea/coffee and digestive biscuits at 20.30: fifty minutes of formal in-put and ten minutes Q & A. There was a three-page prospectus each evening, two display panels with post cards, reproductions of icons and maps of Palestine. Each week the prospectus was posted on the parish website: those who missed a session could catch up on-line.

The course was advertised on the Caversham inter-church network and an invitation was issued through the local clergy to members of our neighbouring Christian church congregations to attend. Jesus belongs to us all. The host community was very gratified that fifteen percent of our weekly attendance was made

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up of members of St. Peter's and St. Andrew's Anglican parishes. Putting us slightly to shame, our guests had a 100% attendance record.

The course was entitled *Six Profiles of Jesus of Nazareth*. It may be useful for me to briefly set out my store.

In the opening session we considered *how* we know about Jesus, taking a cursory look at the NT and contemporary secular historical sources, alluding briefly to how problematic these sources are. We then reviewed the various elements - icons, masterpieces of Western art, Christmas cards and theatre, film and television - which are components of the personal image so many of us have of Jesus.

In the second week we considered who the NT authors, the Church at prayer and the magisterial, teaching Church, as well as the Church Fathers and theologians down the ages, understood Jesus to be. What identity did they detect in him who, through his Passion, death and resurrection, became the Christ and thereby entered into glory. This second session was a nod in the direction of Christology, but *pro forma* and without any pretention to shedding light on even the simplest issue of the divine identity ascribed to Jesus in the great tradition. The focus of the course was the historical figure Jesus of Nazareth (c.4 BC-AD 30).

The four sessions which followed addressed the following themes: Jesus the Jew, his cultural and religious background; Jesus the healer (and exorcist); Jesus the teacher; and (on the Monday of Holy Week) Jesus, the suffering servant. In all the sessions but for the second the approach was horizontal and the prism through which we looked at Jesus was the human of his place and time, the Jesus of history.

The giving of the course itself was a learning process and week by week provided interim answers to my initial question. The audience was made up of practicing Catholics and Anglicans who had a genuine interest in knowing more about Jesus. Many took notes, all took their hand-outs home and those who had missed a session were keen that the notes be available on the parish website. What was so encouraging was the keen appetite to learn about Jesus in as close to an academic setting as a modest parish could provide. I made a conscious decision not to hold the sessions in the church. All appreciated that they were not at a retreat conference nor in receipt of a homily or a spiritual exhortation. They wanted it to increase their knowledge, satisfy their curiosity about Jesus and his world, rather than deepen their faith or excite devotion.

Under the guise of assessing the effectiveness of the course and exploring whether it was an acceptable template for future courses,

I invited the eighty or so participants to contribute to a survey. What I was more interested in discovering was *when* they had learned what they felt they knew about Jesus of Nazareth, whether their image of Jesus had evolved over time and whether or not the preaching they had heard about Jesus at the liturgies they attended had increased their knowledge of him.

Virtually all those who returned completed surveys said it had been refreshing to see Jesus as a human being: his geographical and historical setting, his family, his friendships with disciples and the ways he interacted with casual acquaintances, people he met and those who were his adversaries. They had never succeeded in casting the Jesus to whom they prayed to in a human setting not that different from their own. Most confessed they wrestled with the two natures of Jesus and could not quite figure out how to accommodate their notion of divinity with the humanity of Jesus they felt the course had put them in touch with, some for the first time.

Most people said that, were they cross-examined now on what they knew about Jesus, they would have to admit that most of it was taught to them “by the nuns at school.” We are talking about primary school! Even those who had been through Catholic teacher training college still credited “the nuns” with having taught them about Jesus. Moreover, they had never stood back and questioned that information. There were Catholic parishioners who admitted to having read the NT from time to time but it was our guests from the Anglican parishes who attributed their knowledge of Jesus to regular (if uncritical) reading of the Bible.

Interestingly, even though the question had specifically been asked, no one claimed that their image of Jesus had been influenced by Hollywood or TV. Franco Zefferelli’s *Jesus of Nazareth* or Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* had not shaped their picture of Jesus. I told them that the most convincing interpretation of Jesus, as I understood him, came from Enrique Irazoqui in Passolini’s *Gospel according to Matthew*, greatly loved and admired by Paul VI. Where my parish audience was concerned Jesus on screen had made no impact. Even though the deadline for the submission of the completed questionnaire was the Second Sunday of Easter, no parishioner mentioned the *Divine Mercy* painting of Jesus as shaping their image of him either.

Part of my motivation in providing a sustained course on the Jesus of history was in the hope that, as Frank Sheed said of teaching theology to the Catholic laity back in the 1950’s, in learning more about Jesus they might come to love him more too. Curious to discover how the participants envisaged a relationship with Jesus,

it came as no surprise that people were very unsure of that and saw it exclusively in terms of the divine qualities, not least powers to answer prayer, that the Church in her doctrinal reflection and declarations ascribed to Jesus. Their life of prayer was exclusively shaped by a spiritual, doctrinal and thus vertical interpretation of Jesus rather than the horizontal profile that I had hoped might emerge from the course. Their high Christology owed less to John the Evangelist's understanding of Jesus and his identity than to the reassurance – again deeply embedded in their childhood – of having “a powerful friend” who “sat now at God's right hand”. They felt their relationship with Jesus – many described it in terms of “friendship” – gave them, especially in times of trouble, confusion and pain, great support and security.

The survey may have caressed the new parish priest's ego and reassured him as to his pedagogical approach, yet it also left many unanswered questions regarding how best to present Jesus to the parish community long term. There was the feeling that knowledge of Jesus, and an understanding of the calling to Christian discipleship, had not kept pace with all the other knowledge acquired over the professional and family lives of my parishioners. There was a reticence in letting go of the Jesus they had been taught about by “the nuns”. There was a very un-nuanced assimilation of the information received about Jesus, whether it be from the ambo in the homily or from the chair during the Lent Course. There was a studied reluctance to embrace the horizontal perspective on Jesus which the course encouraged lest it should taint or chip away at the vertical understanding of Jesus so essential to the life of prayer and devotion. We were a long way from the German Enlightenment or Paul Tillich!

Having learned, thanks to the course on Jesus of Nazareth and the post-course survey, where the parishioners found themselves in relation to Jesus, the question as to how to expand and deepen an understanding of Jesus based on knowledge of him became particularly acute. The six-week exposure to Jesus in the formal setting of the parish hall had brought most participants to saturation point. What they had been given was enough for now.

A priest presenting a course on Jesus to a parish community who wishes to open the rich store of recent scripture scholarship has to proceed very gently. An explanation of the genesis of the four Gospels, their temporal distance from the events they describe and their predominantly theological rather than historical character takes considerable time for a parish audience to assimilate. I refrained from puncturing belief in the Nativity narrative, did not distinguish the words the early Church placed on the lips of Jesus

and the *ipsissima verba*, and decided that the resurrection stories and the Easter event might best await a second course. Difficult issues which tended to confuse or trouble an average parish public are best left to a later stage or might be tackled in seminars or discussion groups.

While those eighty or so parishioners and visitors from our Anglican sister parishes who attended the Lent Course demonstrated undoubted curiosity and interest at the outset, it remains an open question as to whether the six weeks changed in any degree the understanding of Jesus they had imbibed from “the nuns” or the Sunday school of their childhood. Does the infantilism or the childlike spirituality which shapes the picture so many of us have, make an adult assimilation of information about Jesus of Nazareth, based on research and critical scholarship, difficult and undermine our securities?

Herod requested of the wise men from the East: “Go and find out all about the child” (Mt. 2, 8). A parish priest has as central to his calling the task of discovering for himself all he can about Jesus and guiding those committed to his care in their own search for him who is “the Way, the Truth and the Life” (Jn. 14, 6). Our Lent Course was but a first step in the onward journey of one particular parish community. My only hope is that the story was told in such a way that some at least of those who offered an hour of their time to Jesus each Monday of Lent 2018 might have felt as Cleopas and his companion did on the first Easter Sunday: “Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the road and explained the scriptures to us” (Lk. 24, 32).

Trust and the Media. The lived reality of many people is not being matched by what they are reading in papers, and unlike previous decades, access to alternative sources of information is easy and free. Another key cause of the lack of trust is the deepening concentration of media companies and their connections to elites.

— JESUIT CENTRE FOR FAITH AND JUSTICE, *Working Notes*, June 2018, Issue 82, p. 21.