

For a book club

the good man Jesus....

AIM

This material presents a way of using the book 'The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ' by Philip Pullman (2010: Canongate) in a book group or discussion group, although if you have read the book on your own you might also find these materials helpful for reflection.

INTRODUCTION

Background

'This is a story' states Pullman and the back of his latest book. If you didn't like The 'Life of Brian', 'Jesus of Montreal' or any other attempts of the last forty years to interpret Jesus to western contemporary society, you may well not like this. But read it for yourself and decide rather than go with the media hype one way or the other. Better still read it with others and discuss it together. Reformed faith is supposed to be about: the opportunity to do our own interpreting so here's one opportunity to do that.

The Jesus of this book is not 'meek and mild' and he's probably rather different to the one you were introduced to at Sunday School. He has a twin brother for a start and that twin is called Christ. If this doesn't seem very likely to believers it's the obvious stuff of novelists: evil twin brother causes all the bother. Except that Christ is not really an evil twin, more a gullible one.

Borrowed from the gospels

If you do read the book you'll find much there you recognise.

The order of the life of Jesus is much as we have it in the written down gospels. The pattern is largely that of the Synoptics (Matthew, Mark and Luke). From Luke (and the Qu'ran of course) we have the annunciation to Mary followed by the journey to Bethlehem and the birth in a stable accompanied by visiting shepherds. From Matthew we have Herod, the wise men and the slaughter of the innocents. The order of the passion narrative (what we call Holy Week) is there except the last supper. There's more emphasis on the Garden of Gethsemane and what happened there with the last supper coming last – at Emmaus after the resurrection and then being written back in later.

There's stuff from John's written account too: turning water into wine at a wedding for example. Indeed perhaps the thing I like about it the most is that it is very like my own 'remembering the bible' approach to the gospel. All the bits you remember in the order you think they go. Of course many biblical scholars wedded to the printed text don't like this approach. All I can say is that Pullman shows it is something of the way contemporary western society thinks of the story, not as discrete gospels with specific editors and their agendas, but all mixed up together.

Being reformers

But Pullman does have an agenda. He is an atheist and he wants to demonstrate the differences between history, myth and story. It's a shame he never got to know any good dissenters. Had he done so he'd know that we've been doing it for generations. What did Jesus really say or do? How can we know? Where does truth end and faith begin? Each of us will have a different answer to this for, as I've already said that's Reformation for you. Interpret it for yourself but in the end it's how you live it that matters.

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Much of the living of Jesus and Christ is not recognisably first century Palestine. Characters behave like 21st century ones: swearing for a start in 21st century language and writing things down as they happen for another example. It is this aspect of the book that takes us furthest from the gospels. Christ is portrayed as the brother who wrote down what Jesus said in order to keep it safe 'for the church'. It is unlikely that the son of a small town artisan would have been able to write. There is no evidence Jesus did. Everything points to Jesus as an oral teacher, something our society finds hard to understand. But look at pop culture, at rap and street theatre and you see it more clearly. We can still learn through oral culture but book culture is presented to us as 'the better part'. Pullman is part of 'book culture' so it is not surprising that he presents this idea of the twin brother who writes down the first gospel account: Pullman's own attempt at story.

What's yours? Who do you say he is, this Jesus of Nazareth now two thousand years older? Would you follow him? Some still do.

For discussion

Setting: Is the setting of Pullman's novel plausible?

Characters: How do you relate to the characters in Pullman's novel?

To which do you find yourself more sympathetic – Jesus or Christ?

Of the background characters in the novel which do you find most memorable and why?

Plot: How do you respond to the plot device of twin brothers?

Motivation: What key similarities and difference do you find between Pullman's novel and the gospels? Do you find these help or hinder faith?

Pullman said in a recent interview in Reform that he could be a Jesus-ite but not a Christian. How do you respond to this distinction?

Prayer

Loving God, you nurture our imaginations and give us gifts to weave stories and make meaning. Help us to use these and all our gifts for the sake of your kingdom. May our opportunities to discuss and interpret be a gateway to greater understanding and a stepping stone to better relationships. Amen

EVALUATION

Please try to answer these questions for yourself and for others who will use this material:

1. What was the most helpful thing and why?
2. What was the least helpful thing and why?
3. What would you like to try now and why?

THE NEXT STEP

More material for Evangelism Year is on the website.

Acknowledgements

This material has been produced by Janet Lees

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HOW TO FEEDBACK TO VISION4LIFE?

If you wish to offer any feedback – brickbats and bouquets are equally welcome! – you can do so in various ways.

You can email the Vision4Life steering group and the coordinator about general issues via the website or at admin@vision4life.org.uk

Website issues can be dealt with through web@vision4life.org.uk