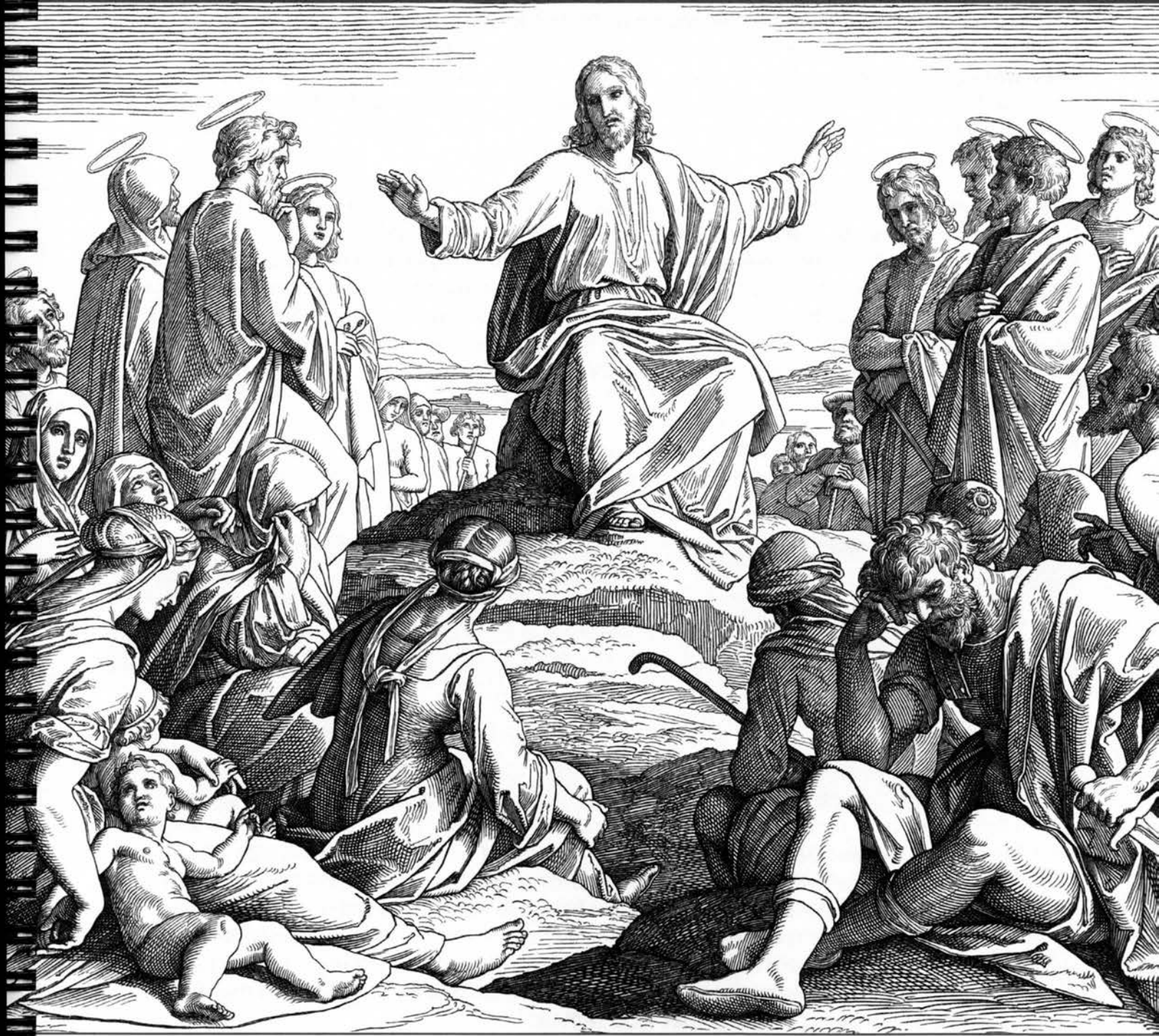


Session Seven: Jesus – Incarnate Teacher

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to ransom those under the law, so that we might receive adoption. Galatians 4:4-5



Session Seven: Jesus – Incarnate Teacher

WHAT IS THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS?

Session Introduction

Who is Jesus, and what did he come among us to do? To seek an answer to those two questions is to engage in the most important task of our lives. Whole libraries of books have been written by Christians about these questions. In this study we can only take a first look at the answers and attempt to get a kind of aerial view, to see in broad lines who Jesus claimed to be and what he came to accomplish.

The very name of Jesus reveals both his identity and his mission. In Hebrew, Jesus means, “God saves” – Jesus has come to “save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). The salvation from sin and death that Jesus brings is the Good News, the Gospel, that he proclaims from the very beginning of his public ministry. The trap which all of humanity had been ensnared in since Adam and Eve is undone by Jesus through everything he did and said and ultimately through his death and resurrection. God’s rescue plan is going to be enacted by Jesus to open again the possibility for us to share in God’s own divine life, what Adam and Eve lost for all of humanity when they fell.

In order, then, to make any sense of the Good News, we need to know Jesus, and know him well. We will want to keep a few things in mind about Jesus as we go forward.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 518

All Jesus did, said, and suffered had for its aim restoring fallen man to his original vocation.

First: The identity of Jesus is deeply connected to his mission and the Good News that he brings. The main reason Jesus got into trouble with the Jewish authorities was because of his claim to be equal to God. Jesus is truly God, the second person of the Holy Trinity. Sometimes he made this claim in straightforward declarations: “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). “Before Abraham was, *I am*” (John 8:58). “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). Sometimes he implied his divinity by his words and teachings. He claimed to forgive sins, something only God can do. He called himself Lord of the Sabbath, a position only God could have. He told his followers they needed to leave everything behind if they were to be worthy of him, an extraordinary case of megalomania if he were a mere mortal. We should be alert to the importance of Jesus’s identity in our study because the whole of the Christian faith is founded on the truth of this claim, that Jesus is *Emmanuel*: God with us.

Second: Jesus is the fulfillment of all that we have been looking at in our earlier studies. He is the new Adam who is renewing the human race. He is the new Moses giving a new covenant and establishing a new people. He is the new David, the promised Messiah and true king who will bring about the fulness of God's kingdom. He is the new Temple, the place on earth where God is present. He is the fulfillment of all the sacrifices of the Old Covenant and its priesthood. The Gospels and the rest of the New Testament go out of their way to show how Jesus brings to completion all that God has been doing throughout salvation history.

Third: Jesus is a teacher. Much of his time was spent going from town to town, teaching those who were willing to listen. He not only brought the Good News; he taught a path to follow, a set of beliefs and moral practices. Those who followed him were called disciples, men and women who were submitting themselves to his discipline. "Take my yoke upon you," he told his disciples, "for my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matt 11: 29, 30). Much of what it means to be a Christian is to embrace the way of discipline that Jesus taught, a "yoke" that leads to genuine freedom.

Fourth: Jesus is our example of what it means to be a man. We are made in the image of God, and Jesus is God's perfect image. We are all searching for our identity: not just how to behave, but who we are. We will find out who we are by becoming united to Jesus. He leads us into true manhood. He shows us what it means to have a father and to be a father by showing us his own relationship with God the Father. He leads us into the necessary battle for our lives and he trains us in how to fight it. He shows us how to love God and our neighbor. He tells us who we are and how we are to make our way through the world. To the degree that we are conformed to the person of Jesus, we are becoming normal and healthy. To the degree that we diverge from him, we wander from reality and lose ourselves.

The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. For Adam, the first man, was a figure of Him Who was to come,⁽²⁰⁾ namely Christ the Lord. Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear. *Gaudium et Spes, 22*

Fifth: The person of Jesus and his teachings demand a response from us. Jesus did not come to proclaim some interesting ideas. The Gospel that he proclaimed is an invitation to conversion and to a change of life. When faced with his teachings, people either left everything to follow him or went another way. Hearing the Good News proclaimed by Jesus offers us the opportunity to enter into relationship with God, but only through a conversion of life – leaving behind sin and turning to follow Christ.

Much more could be said, but this will get us started. As we set our gaze on Jesus in the living words of the Scripture, let us remember that we are approaching the center of all existence, and the one who holds the key to our lives.

I. Opening Prayer

Pray together as a group:

*O Lord Jesus Christ, open the eyes of my heart that I may hear your Word,
and understand and do your will.*

*Do not hide your commandments from me, but open my eyes,
that I may perceive the wonders of your Law.*

Speak to me the hidden and secret things of your wisdom.

*On you I set my hope, O my God,
that you shall enlighten my mind and understanding with the light of your knowledge;
not only to cherish those things which are written, but to do them;
For you are the enlightenment of those who lie in darkness,
and from you comes every good deed and every gift.*

Amen.

II. Reading Scripture

Read aloud as a group the following passages.

After reading each passage, answer the questions together in order to draw out some of the key ideas.

Some main ideas for each passage are listed in the back of this book to help with your discussion if needed.



1. Mark 1:14-20

(The Gospel is proclaimed)

- Describe in your own words what is happening in this passage.
- What is the gospel (good news) that Jesus proclaims here?
- What is the reaction of Simon, Andrew, James, and John to being called by Jesus?



2. Matthew 5:1-12 (The Beatitudes)

- Describe in your own words what is happening in this passage.
- Chapters 5 to 7 in Matthew's Gospel are often referred to as "the Sermon on the Mount." What might be the significance of this teaching taking place on a mountain?
- The Beatitudes offer a picture of the happy and blessed life. What are some key aspects of "blessedness" that Jesus highlights?

3. Luke 10:25-28 (The Two Great Commandments)

- Describe in your own words what is happening in this passage.
- How do these two commandments sum up the whole Christian life?
- What is the distinction Jesus makes between how we are to love God and how we are to love our neighbor? What might this mean in practical terms?
- Jesus tells the scribe to answer his own question from "the law," which is to say the Old Testament, and then he agrees with his answer the scribe gives. What does this say about the relationship between the Old and the New Testaments?

4. Mark 8:34-38 (The Conditions of discipleship)

- Describe in your own words what is happening in this passage.
- Jesus does not mince his words: what are his expectations for anyone who would follow him?

5. John 14:1-14 (Jesus at the Last Supper)

- Describe in your own words what is happening in this passage.
- What is Jesus promising his disciples concerning his "Father's house"?
- What is Jesus claiming here about himself? What is the difference between saying "I will show you the truth" and "I am the truth?"

III. Applying Scripture

Based on your reading, discuss the following questions as they apply to your life. Depending on how much time you have available, you may not be able to discuss all of these questions. If necessary, choose one question to discuss in a significant way.

- 1 When Jesus began his public ministry, he led with the message of the Gospel: The Kingdom of God is at hand, turn away from the works of the devil and follow Christ who has come to set captives free. Jesus himself is the Good News, the one who rescues us from slavery to sin and death – the God who saves. It can be easy at times to keep that message theoretical or as just an idea instead of seeing how this message is meant for each of our lives. **In what ways have you seen Jesus save in your own life or the lives of those you know? For men in particular, it is often difficult to admit that we are not able to save ourselves or fix every situation. Has there been a time in your life when you needed to surrender a situation or difficulty to God because you could not fix it on your own?**

- 2 When Jesus healed the paralyzed man (Luke 5), the spiritual and physical healing came because of the faith of the man's friends who brought him to Jesus. We encounter Jesus today in and through the Church, particularly in the Sacraments, and The Good News that Jesus speaks to us often comes through the words and actions of those around you. **Who in your life has brought you to Christ so that you could encounter him like the paralyzed man did? Who in your life have you brought to Christ? Is there someone in your life that you feel God is asking you to bring to Jesus now? How might you do that?**

3 Through his teaching, and in particular in the Beatitudes (Matthew 5), Jesus presents to us what true happiness is and what we should be striving for in our lives. **What does our world today hold up as the ideals of happiness and what we should be striving for in life as men? What standards does Jesus tell us to pursue instead? Which are you pursuing in your own life? Why?**

4 To be a Christian man is more than just to follow a set of moral rules. It is to follow Christ definitively and to turn our backs on the devil and his rule. This often comes at a price and is not easy. **What are things that have you already removed from your life or need to remove from your life in order to “take up your cross” and follow Christ? How has your life changed by giving yourself entirely to Christ? Or how do you think your life would need to change if you were to do so? Are there parts of your life that you seal off from Christ’s kingship?**

IV. Call to Action

Write down for yourself one concrete way that you are going to apply today's Scripture Study to your life.

Example:

Consider your relationship with Jesus Christ. Do you truly know him and allow him to know you, or is he mainly a historical figure or distant idea? Spend time in prayer, specifically with Jesus, asking him to reveal himself to you more and more, and asking him to show you how to grow closer to him.

V. Closing Prayer

Pray together:

*Lord God, let us keep your Scriptures in mind
and meditate on them day and night,
persevering in prayer, always on watch.
We beg you, Lord, to give us real knowledge of what we read,
and to show us not only how to understand it,
but how to put it into practice,
and to obtain spiritual gifts
enlightened by the teaching of the Holy Spirit,
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
whose power and glory will endure throughout all ages.
Amen.*

MESSIANIC EXPECTATION

A supplemental note for further study

To understand how Jesus went about his mission, it helps to see him in the context of God's dealing with his people. From the beginning of Israelite history, and growing in strength over time, was the belief that God would send a savior to redeem the fortunes of Israel. This person would be specially anointed by God for his special task; hence the name "Messiah," or "Anointed One." Especially in the Psalms and the writings of the prophets, God filled in a picture of who the Messiah would be. He was to be a prophet like Moses who would speak to God face to face. He would be a member of the royal line of David and would establish a great kingdom, not only over Israel, but to include "the nations," Gentiles who did not know God. His coming would be a world-shattering event that would establish the truth and authority of God as ruler of the human race.

At the time Jesus was born, this hope and longing for the Messiah had grown very strong among the Jews. It had been six centuries since a member of David's royal line had ruled over Israel, and the Temple of Solomon had disappeared for many centuries and was only recently rebuilt. Yet the children of Abraham had not forgotten the promise of the Messiah. Some groups of Jews like the Essenes believed he was soon to come, so they gathered together in communities to await him. Others such as the Zealot party formed cadres of fighters who planned to overthrow Roman rule and to regain Jerusalem and Israel by force under a Messiah-general. Others, like the Pharisees, attempted to lead the Israelites into strict rules of priestly purity, thinking that a purified people would be ready for the Messiah's coming. All of Israel was in a ferment of hope and expectation, wondering when the Messiah would come. There was a Messianic uprising in Galilee around the time of Jesus's birth. John the Baptist stirred all of Israel with his preaching, and many thought he was the Messiah. This explains why Jesus was so careful about the way he spoke of his identity. He knew himself to be the Messiah, but he also knew that there were many mistaken understandings of what the Messiah would do. His own disciples often misunderstood his mission. He needed to teach them that he would establish the kingdom of God in a way that none of them were expecting.

FIRST CENTURY JUDEA – HISTORICAL CONTEXT

A supplemental note for further study

Without pretending to give a complete picture of the historical context into which Jesus was born and lived, it can help to keep a few basic things in mind.

- 1. The strategic geographical importance of the area called Palestine.** The “Promised Land” given by God to the Israelites was a small but highly strategic bit of territory. Bordered on the west by the Ocean, and on the east by the Arabian desert, it was the only road between the great civilizations that surrounded it: Egypt to the south, the Assyrians, Babylonians, and Persians to the east, and Greeks and Romans, among others, to the north and west. It was a crucial piece of land to control for both trade and warfare. This strategic importance helps to understand why the land of Israel was so often dominated by more powerful neighbors, and why so many armies marched through its borders.
- 2. The coming of the Romans.** Jesus was born during the reign of Augustus Caesar, the man who established the growing power of Rome as an empire that controlled virtually all the lands around the Mediterranean Sea. The Romans were also very interested in the land of ancient Israel, which was now divided between the three regions of Judea, Samaria, and Galilee in the north. The Romans were effective governors who preferred to rule through local elites. As long as it was clear who was ultimately in charge, and as long as taxes were paid, the Romans were happy to leave people to arrange their internal affairs more or less as they wished. Herod the Great, a boyhood friend of Augustus Caesar, was king at the birth of Jesus, and various members of his family ruled portions of the kingdom when he died shortly after Jesus’ birth. In addition to the king, there was a High Priest who was responsible for the worship of the Temple, and a ruling council of elders called the Sanhedrin who met daily and gave judgments concerning many matters of religion and daily life. Jesus will have encounters with all these overlapping centers of authority.
- 3. The Jewish religion.** The Romans were quite tolerant concerning religious customs of the people they ruled. They only insisted that in addition to their own gods, they also offered worship to the Roman divinities that upheld the state, since they believed that the health of the empire depended on pleasing their gods. The Jews were unique among ancient peoples in refusing to worship any divinity except the one God who was Lord of all. As a result, they presented the Romans with a problem. On the one hand, the Romans had great respect for ancient traditions, and recognized in Jewish religion a very ancient and established tradition. On the other hand, they were in constant conflict with the Jews about their refusal to acknowledge the divine Roman state. To control the Jews, the Romans made Judea a Roman protectorate and

established a prefect – Pontius Pilate – to rule it. Eventually the unwillingness of the Jews to submit to Roman religious demands led to very bloody conflicts, first in 68 - 70 AD when the temple built by King Herod was destroyed, and then in the Bar Kochba rebellion (132-5 AD) when the Jewish state was destroyed, and Jerusalem was declared a pagan city where no Jews could live. Thus, when the Gospels speak of the fear of the High Priest that Jesus could be sparking an uprising that would destroy the Jewish homeland, this was an understandable concern.

4. Messianic expectations. Add to this picture the growing Messianic expectations of the time (see sidebar), and it becomes clear why Jesus was watched so closely by the authorities, and why he handled himself so carefully in all matters that dealt with the authorities. He wanted to be sure that his real message concerning the coming of the kingdom was heard and understood rightly.

Additional Readings from Scripture

These optional readings build on the themes discussed in this session. You are encouraged to read and pray with them on your own in between this meeting and the next.

Isaiah 9:1-7 *“Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government will be upon his shoulder.”* This passage, written some eight hundred years before Christ, is one of many that foretell the coming of the Messiah as a great king.

Mark 3:7-12 Wherever Jesus went, he taught, he healed people of their diseases, and he cast out evil spirits.

Matthew 14:13-21 This account of Jesus feeding the five thousand from a few loaves of bread shows him to be the fulfillment of the gift of manna in the desert during the Israelite wanderings. In John’s Gospel Jesus says of himself: *“Truly I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven; my Father gives you the true bread from heaven... I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst”* (John 6: 32, 35).

John 10: 24-39 *“If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; but if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.”* Jesus has been accused of blasphemy because he makes himself equal to God. This passage points to the fundamental point of conflict between Jesus and the Jewish authorities.

Matthew 10:32-36 *“Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”* Jesus has come to do battle against the enemy of the human race.