

Notes from **JESUS – An Historical Approximation** by Jose Pagola.

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“Many good men and women live on the epidermis of faith, nourished by a conventional Christianity. They find religious security in the belief and practices that are within their reach, but they do not live in joyful relationship with Jesus Christ. They have heard of him since they were children but they are not seduced or enamoured by what they know of him. Meeting Jesus can transform their lives. I know how tempting it is to live correctly within the church without worrying about the one thing Jesus sought; the kingdom of God and its justice... We have to return to the roots, to the experience that set off the long chain reaction. It does no good to confess Jesus as God incarnate if we never try to find out what this man who revealed God to us was like, how he lived and acted. Nothing can be more important to the Church than knowing, loving and following Jesus Christ more faithfully...”

“An encounter with Jesus is not the fruit of historical research or of doctrinal reflection. It happens only through personal commitment and faithful following.

We begin to encounter Jesus

- when we begin to trust God as he did,
- when we believe in love as he did,
- when we look at people as he did,
- when we confront life and death with hope as he did,
- when we pass on the contagion of the Good News as he did” (p. 27,8)

Lower Galilee was beautiful with a gentle climate, with moist sea breezes, a fertile soil, vineyards everywhere, an agrarian society producing wheat and barley with greens and vegetables and an excellent wine,. Fishing took place around the lake. Large landowners who mostly lived in the cities of Tiberias or Sepporis and rented the land to the peasants were expanding their holdings in Jesus’ time. Many tributes, fees, taxes and tithes were heavy burdens on the peasants.

Nazareth was an unknown town 340 metres above sea level on a hillside with about 300 inhabitants with birds, red lilies, fig trees, sun, rain, storm clouds and unpaved dirt streets. Some lived in caves but most had houses of unfinished stone or adobe with roofs made of branches. Houses had mostly one room where all lived and slept, including animals. Everything was visible and there were no secrets in the village. Family was everything, including the extended family, tools and tasks were shared, and authority was patriarchal. Wives could be repudiated and daughters sold to repay a debt. Infant mortality was high. The diet was bread, olives, wine, greens, figs, cheese and lentils. Salt fish was served on big occasions. This was where Jesus gets his vocabulary. They ate twice a day and prayed morning and evening – the Shema ‘*Hear o Israel.. and with all your might*’. They looked towards the temple in Jerusalem where God was present and they rested on the Sabbath. There were no books in Nazareth and we don’t know if Jesus could read or write, but people’s memories were well developed. He would have known many of the Psalms by heart. Life expectancy was 30-40 but some lived until 50, 60. Survival and honour were the main concerns. Droughts and bad harvests made a hard life harder. Goods were bartered. The main occupations were potters, tailors, shoe menders, craftsmen on wood and stone like Joseph & Jesus. Religious festivals to Jerusalem were a sort of holy vacation.

Jesus's name was Yeshua (Yahweh saves) and he called his parents *Imma* and *Abba* – Mum and Dad. He had four brothers and some sisters*. Aramaic was his maternal language. He probably had some knowledge of Hebrew which the Scribes knew well. If he worked in the nearby city of Sepphoris he probably knew some Greek.

To leave one's family was very serious and a possible dishonour to the family. At one moment *'They thought he was out of his mind'* (Mk. 3,21). Family was everything. He is not moving to a new trade or place of work, or to seek out a teacher of the Torah, or to visit the Qumran community. He does not go to Jerusalem, but into the desert. He later takes up residence in Peter's house in the fishing village of Capernaum (about 1,000 inhabitants) on the lakeshore, and he goes from town to town into synagogues along the shore. His single life would have been a puzzle and yet he does not live an ascetic life like the desert hermits, the Qumran community or the Baptist. His festive lifestyle shocks people. He is called a glutton, a tippler, a friend of sinners, a Samaritan, a crazy man and a eunuch. There is no indication that he preached in the cities of Sepphoris or Tiberias where the powerful lived. Their tragedy was that their wellbeing – power and wealth – was incompatible with the reign of God.

John the Baptist (*submerger*) left the Temple religion to roar out his message in the desert against Israel's sinfulness which was frustrating God's plan. He insisted that sacrifices of atonement were no longer effective. The Temple was corrupt. The Covenant was broken. A total purification was necessary to re-establish the Covenant. One thing was decisive and urgent: to be converted and embrace God's forgiveness in order to prepare for God's arrival. His baptism – a full body bath – was new and unique. The priests were scandalized at his action outside the temple. He did not have a closed community – like Qumran – in mind. He said that someone whose sandals he was not worthy to untie was coming after him to make God's judgement and salvation a reality.

Around 27 AD, in his search for his mission, Jesus is baptised by John and has a powerful experience of God's Spirit – *'You are my beloved Son.....'*. Later he leaves John's group to take up John's mission with a group whom he invited to join him in preaching the irruption of the reign of God. Jesus invites everyone into total trust of a Father God. He touches, heals, people whom no one else would approach. He embraces children and welcomes their mothers. Israel's present situation is hopeless, but conversion was not a preparation for judgement as John thought, but for entering the reign of God and accepting God's saving forgiveness; God comes to everyone as a Saviour. Jesus is totally dedicated to 'the reign of God' – 120 times in the Synoptics; (church is mentioned twice) and to the universal family of the marginalized. This motivates his leaving home, his celibacy and his preaching.

The reign of God is already here – *'among you'* (Lk. 17.21). Jesus experiences it. It is not an intimate spiritual reality, but a transformation which involves the whole of life and of society. It liberates people from whatever dehumanizes them or causes them suffering. The reign of God has no centre of power or control; it exists wherever good things happen. God is coming not to destroy people but to destroy evil. Yet, Jesus never calls God 'king' which might have suggested force; it is a reign of gentleness and of goodness. Jesus is communicating his own experience of a compassionate God who cares more about people's lives – *'go and tell John what you hear and see....blind, lame, lepers, deaf, poor have good news brought to them'* than about 'religious'

issues which lay beyond their understanding. Where the weak and the marginalised are brought to the centre, there is the reign of God. He is offering *shalom* ie. total wellbeing. God defends those who most need it. Jesus is calling people to change their way of thinking and acting, not just to expel the Romans or to live in a desert community or to live ritual purity as the Pharisees suggested. He saw the growth of an inequality which favoured the minority in the Temple and in the cities of Tiberius and Sepphoris, and he opposes it – ‘*You cannot serve God and Mammon*’. He is calling for a new kind of personal and social behaviour.

Yet, the reign of God is still only a seed or yeast. He tells them to pray ‘*Thy kingdom come*’. Its triumph would finally be a celebration, drinking new wine in a heavenly banquet.

Jesus is not a mystic in search of personal harmony. He is seeking God’s power as ‘*the power of salvation*’ for his people. Like God, he suffers at the suffering of his people. He experiences total trust in the nearness of God who would bring justice and salvation – the reign of God – to suffering people. He parts company with the Temple and joined the Baptist who had already said that sacrifices of atonement would no longer be effective. There is no sacred place in which we can encounter God alone apart from his suffering people. He is not a teacher of the law, nor does he tell people to return to the law. He calls everyone to go beyond the law and to become like little children (simple, sincere and spontaneous*). What God wants is the good of the people. Jesus never invites people to do penance with the ascetic rituals and actions that the prophets called for. The Temple is corrupt and it is not necessary to go up to offer sacrifice there. All must be purified and come back to God seeking his forgiveness and to re-establish the Covenant. The priests continued to be scandalized that Jesus was acting outside the Temple. His rite of initiation is not forming a closed community like Qumran, but is an invitation to all to welcome the imminent arrival of God and God’s reign.

His message is that God is good and that his goodness fills everything and it erupts in human life. But people were expecting something more spectacular – the arrival of God as a great a powerful event. But, Jesus says that God is acting in small and insignificant ways like seeds or yeast or a widow’s coin or hidden treasure or in a forgiving father or in good food, in music and dancing or in rewarding latecomers, or in a boy’s gift of small cakes, or in welcoming corrupt tax collectors, or in eating with the rejected, or in a healing Samaritan, or in a caring shepherd, or in a woman finding a lost coin, or in a forgiving employer, or in visiting the sick and the imprisoned, or in a drink for the thirsty, or in food for beggars, or in touching lepers, or in eating-fellowship with everyone, or in giving sight to the blind, or in constant mutual forgiveness, or in hugging children, or in defending mothers, or in a foot washing prostitute or in enjoying Springtime. He asks them to give up the image of a great, powerful and terrible God. (When asked by his followers to teach them prayer, he does not say, ‘pray like this, Almighty God who are in heaven...’.**))

Something mysterious is happening at the heart of human existence, expressing itself in compassion, not in law or ritual or in a holy community living apart. God is quietly and secretly acting at the inner core of people’s lives. His parables are meant to continually awaken the experience they provoked when he spoke them. Jesus is calling all to accept a new way of doing things under the reign of God where compassion is the normal way to live. He tells about the God of compassion not the God of holiness of purity. When Jesus touches the leper, he does not

become impure; the leper becomes pure. Holiness is compassionate love, not of separation from everything impure. Mercy takes the place of holiness as then understood.

A God of vengeance, who had been punishing his people for their sin through the Romans, was expected by all at that time, to rescue them. Everyone was expecting God to act against the colonizers. Even the Psalms prayed for a God of vengeance. Jesus is rejecting the psalms of vengeance and his teaching is completely unsupported by much biblical tradition. He is against the ideology of the Essenes who prayed for the future victory of the sons of light against the sons of darkness. He sees love of enemies as the way back to God.

Jesus is thinking of a few, of minorities acting as sons and daughters of God, of authentic witnesses to God's kingdom in the midst of an unjust and violent world.

He is not thinking of large institutions (not 'Where two or three hundred are gathered in my name'). His followers are mustard seeds or yeast or grains of salt, but their lives will **always be on a cross** – '*You must take up your cross daily and follow me*'. Jesus' disciples are to be a light that proclaims God's new world in a clear and credible way. (p.257)

God is coming as a God of suffering and of healing, not as a God of righteousness. (A God of powerless defenceless loving, of suffering love) Jesus does not look first at sinners who needed to be called to conversion but at those who suffered and who yearned for a healthier, happier life. At that time, illness had been seen from the religious viewpoint, not from the medical. For the Semites, health and sickness came from God and the sick were not allowed into the temple. (Jesus first says to the paralyzed man 'Your sins are forgiven' before he heals him)**. Jesus gives the sick something the doctors could not offer – a new relationship with God. His healings are not isolated acts but part of his proclamation of the reign of God. They are signs of the new world. His followers must go on bringing God's compassion – '*as your Father is compassionate*'(Lk.6.36) – into the world.

Jesus' surprising approach to sin is different from that of the Baptist's who did not scandalize anyone in his condemnation, Sin was more than an individual activity; people absorbed it from the social and religious environment. And there is room in the reign of God for sinners. Jesus does not address them as a judge but with a father's compassionate love. He had meals with them. Sinners were people who deliberately violated the Covenant and did not repent. Sinners were not those ignorant of the law, or those who did not purify themselves or those who had despised occupations. These groups were despised but not regarded as sinners***. Jesus offers forgiveness wrapped in friendly acceptance to all. For the Pharisees, sinners must offer expiatory sacrifice in the temple, return to the law and make reparation. But Jesus accepts sinners without first requiring repentance as traditionally understood. and without submitting to baptism as the Baptist demanded. (Zaccheus** got acceptance and forgiveness – communion and companionship – before he confessed his sins) Forgiveness motivates love.**** Jesus accepts people as they are. He offers them face-to-face compassion, not tablets of the law. Prostitutes, he said, were getting into heaven before the law-observing Pharisees.

Jesus rejects the stereotypes of woman – property of men, sources of temptation, impure etc. They were marginalised in many ways – not obliged to recite the *Shema* or make pilgrimages, to join men in the temple, and were forbidden to speak to men in public. Mostly they were enclosed in the house, defenceless in court – profoundly marginalised. (Rabbis prayed 'I thank

thee Yahweh, thou hast not made me a dog, a Samaritan or a woman')**. Jesus never warns men about seductive women but about their own lust. Women are his friends: Mary from Magdala, Martha and Mary from Bethany, a sick Syro-phoenician woman, despised prostitutes, faithful followers like Salome. They were not called *disciples* because the Aramaic word was always a masculine noun.

Jesus does not confuse love of God with love of neighbour; they are not the same thing.(p.249) Love of God cannot be reduced to love of neighbour. The love of neighbour is not in itself love of God. The love of God and his will holds primacy. We pray to God, not to our neighbour; we await the reign of God, not that of our brothers and sisters. The first commandment does not dissolve into human solidarity. However, in God's reign the neighbour takes the place of the law. The reign of God is not a metaphor. It simply means living compassionate – (*cum patiar* Latin to suffer with**) – love of neighbour in every situation. For Jesus the family does not come first. Service to the reign of God – for a universal community – is first.

Jesus had four kinds of followers: 1) The curious crowds, 2) those who welcomed him into their homes 3) those who travelled with him, and finally 4) his closed circle of apostles (Jesus never used the word). Jesus chooses twelve men with whom he would start the movement that gave rise to Christianity. There are no Scribes or priests among the 12, and they were probably all Galileans. Peter stood out. Jesus' close followers do not come for admission into a school. He calls them out of their homes but he does not lead them like a rabbi expounding the law, rather as a prophet filled with God's spirit. Their goal is not to achieve the status of a Rabbi, but to share an uncertain future while he tells them frequently '*Do not be afraid*' (*metanoia* /v/ *paranoia*)** and '*Do not be anxious*'. Neither are they with him to learn or study his ideas, but rather to follow him, to live as he did, accepting, living and building the reign of God. Their relationship is a personal bond with someone who is initiating them into God's plan. In his movement, no one lords it over others; there is no priests-laypeople division. *I am among you as one who serves*'.

Jesus teaches clearly that everyone has direct, immediate access to God the Father of all.. Jesus is not their father, but their brother – '*Go and tell my brothers....*'. He does not lead them into the desert nor try to form a ritually pure group, nor start another Qumran nor ask them to start a war against Rome like the Zealots did. As a group they are to be a symbol of God's reign. And they are to fear no one, the Romans or the Temple. Living with him was a feast and they were to be '*fishers for people*' travelling in supportive twos, without money, even barefoot, without a bag in which to store possessions, inviting everyone into the feast.

Jesus never explained his idea of God or a doctrine about God; for him God is not a theory. God was an experience that transformed him to encourage a happier life for everyone. Jesus was born into a nation of believers. God was Israel's friend who had liberated them from Egypt. But religious leaders had identified God with their religious system rather than with the happiness and life of his people. For these leaders, the first and most important things were to worship God by observing the law, to keep the Sabbath, to honour the temple worship (and to bow to them in the street**). Religion had become an oppressive force rather than a principle of life. For Jesus the most important thing is justice and dignity for God's children. Jesus feels sent

to promote the justice and mercy of God. His experience of God compels him to liberate people from fears and enslavement. His name *Yahweh saves* says it all. He is not interested in what God did in the past. He senses God encouraging life here and now in people, in lilies, in birds and wherever it was stunted as in orphans, widows, or in those who were in any way poor like the hungry, the sick or in any way marginalised. He made no reference to God's anger or to the Baptist's threatening message. God does not tell Jesus

'I am who am' as he did to Moses, but *'You are my Son'*.

The God of Jesus does not reveal himself as mystery, but as a father, and his' life is one of total trust, seeking God's will without reservation despite real temptations not to do so. The word obedience never occurs in Jesus' sayings. Rather than obeying God's law, he identifies with God and seeks his will. He seeks intimacy with God in silent prayerful encounters. His experience is *Abba.*, not 'Yahweh', 'the Heavens', 'the Power', 'the one living in the Temple', or 'the Lord' – words commonly used for God. In the Old Testament, 'Father' had been in use for God to emphasise his authority but *Abba* was seldom used. For Jesus what defines God is not his power, nor his wisdom which could produce a religion of rules, harshness, merits and punishment, but his care which seduces and invites to closeness and which steps into the world to humanize it. His reign is an energy for transformation. Suffering, disease, misfortune, punishment, tests and purifications are not God's will. That is why Jesus unmask a false religion that is not at the service of life. God cannot be monopolised by a religious elite, by any religious system or priestly class. Authority is not to rule, but to serve, to do good. *c.f Pagola's comments on the Our Father (p.313-6)*

The freedom Jesus offers was disturbing & dangerous to religious, political & economic power at the time – the educated Pharisees, the aristocratic Scribes, the ascetic Essenes, the controlling Priests (and the dagger carrying Zealots**). The Pharisees interpreted, explained, applied and policed the law but they did not instigate Jesus' execution. The Jerusalem aristocracy was a rich minority, many of them priests, some were Sadducees. Caiaphas, the High Priest held ruling power in the city and in Judea, and full autonomy in the temple. Jesus is a challenge to the Temple which claimed to be the exclusive source of salvation of the people. This was much more serious than his disputes with the Scribes and Pharisees over practical issues of behaviour. His solidarity with the excluded is a central issue but he did not plan a suicidal uprising against Rome. He speaks ambiguously about tribute to Rome. (p.330). He proclaims the reign (empire) of God; he is clearly against all that is evil. Jesus knows that the odds of a violent end were strong; he is not naïve as the hostility builds up. But he is ready to die rather than to betray his mission. How could God fail him ?

In the month of Nisan (Mar-Apr) he freely goes up to Jerusalem where pilgrims were singing their way into the city. Rome is aware of danger; Pilate has come to Jerusalem for the event. Jesus finishes his journey on a donkey and a crowd cheers him on. This is a mockery of triumphal processions of Romans into conquered cities. Jesus is proclaiming a non-violent kingdom. A few days later, Jesus is driving out traders from the temple which was supposed to be God's presence in their midst. This is an attack on the heart of the Jewish people. But is this temple with its corrupt priestly aristocracy what God wanted,? Jesus is denouncing the roots of the prevailing system. He was attacking the institution itself, not just aiming at liturgical reform. The temple

had become a symbol of everything that oppresses the people and it was not serving the Covenant. Jesus now knows that his days are numbered.

He arranges a farewell dinner. It was not a Passover meal or the Passover night. This meal reminds Jesus of the final banquet in the reign of God. *'This is my body (I myself in Aramaic)*. He invites his disciple to drink from a single cup, his cup, the cup of salvation shed *for all*(best translation). In repeating this meal later in christian communities, they will be nourished by his memory and his presence. He washes their feet – unthinkable from a host or from anyone at a festive meal – and told them to do the same as slaves of one another.

It was the temple police who arrested Jesus and who took him to Caiaphas' house where the Sanhedrin presided over the trial. He dominated the religious and politician scene in Jerusalem. Jesus' disciples, but not the women, fled. Caiaphas was selected to lead the Sanhedrin by the Roman governor, not for his religious piety but for this willingness to collaborate with Rome. Jesus does not die on a charge of blasphemy. His attack on the untouchable temple was the main reason for the leaders' hostility to him. This could also upset public order, and the Romans knew it. So Caiaphas' Council can safely hand him over to Pilate. Thus, Jesus was a problem for and an enemy of these two friends. Pilate condemned Jesus to crucifixion. His followers were not condemned; they were not an insurrectionist movement.

Crucifixion, although common, was a terrible experience (450 slaves in Sicily and 6,000 along the Appian way after the defeat of Spartacus Crasses. Alexander had crucified 800 Pharisees but Herod the Great ended the practice). Jesus dies as the poorest and most despised ? Jesus does not see his death as a sacrificial atonement offered to the Father. He does not connect God's reign with the cultic practices in the temple. Nor is his life an immolation to the Father. His death is his supreme service to God's plan to establish his reign. (We are saved not because of his death, but in spite of it**). It is Jesus' supreme contribution to the salvation of all. He was first scourged. Flavius Josephus describes a scourging as 'skinned to the bone because of the lashings', and the Roman soldiers were strongly anti-semitic.

How does Jesus feel when he sees the failure of his plan for the reign of God, the abandonment by his closest, and the hostility surrounding him ? In the end, he comes back to his original experience of God – *Abba* ? But his final words, *'Father, into your hands...'* are probably reflections by the Christian community who put a psalm on his lips. Yet the *'Eloi, Eloi...'* may have come from Jesus.

Will God leave this man in the land of the dead ? (p. 387+) Something happens to the disciples which is hard to explain. Despite their flight, fear and locked doors, they now leave the safety of Galilee and return to Jerusalem. They have changed from cowardice and confusion to conviction and audacity. They say that God raised Jesus from the dead and that the crucified one is among them. Their hymns acclaim God for having exalted and glorified Jesus as Lord after this death eg Phil.2.6 To be raised, is already to be exalted, that is to be pulled away from the power of death and to be introduced into God's own life. *1 Thes.4.14, 1 Col. 15.3-5, Phil. 2.6-11, 1 Tm. 3.16, Epes. 4.7-10, Rom.10.5-9.*

Jesus 'risen': When they speak of the risen Christ, it is more than saying that their faith has been awakened. It is the event which pulled them out of confusion, and it forms their new

relationship with Jesus. Neither is the resurrection the reanimation of a cadaver like Lazarus or Jairus' daughter or the young man at Naim. Lazarus returned to his everyday life but the risen Jesus enters into the land of freedom and light. Jesus does not return to this life; he enters definitively into the life of God never to die again. It is the same Jesus but in a new existence. Jesus is raised with a body that expresses and gives fullness to his whole earthly life.

For Semites, **the body** is the whole person. They cannot imagine Jesus risen without a body, but it is not a physical flesh-and-blood body, subject to the power of death. It is a glorified body that expresses and gives fulfilment to his whole earthly life. It is a spiritual body that is enlivened by the vital and creative force of God. He is now filled with God's creative power. God is beginning a new creation in the risen Jesus. Paul says that he is filled with divine power and can be called *Lord* – the word used by Greek-speaking Christians for Yahweh.

We cannot penetrate the meaning of the disciples' new experience by using historical methods, but their faith did not come from nowhere. The resurrection opens them to a new and surprising experience of his presence in their midst. The process is rich and complex, made up of questions, reflections, unexpected events and amazing experiences of faith. All this awakens in them a new faith in Jesus, their growing sense of his presence with them and in them after his death.

There was an ancient Jewish belief in life after death, but a relatively new faith in resurrection, was emerging at this time. They believed that martyrs and people of good will change from being dust to being like stars. Jesus and his disciples certainly shared this faith. But the early resurrection of one person before the end of time was something new. A resurrection that would only affect each one individually had little to do with the salvation for the rest of humanity. But now the disciples were experiencing God's liberating irruption to establish the reign of God here and now. God was making the risen Jesus present in their hearts. Words also cannot tell us how the disciples perceived this presence. The message is not that Jesus appeared but that he is acting within his disciples. Paul discovered '*the power of his resurrection*' and said '*I live now, not I but it is Christ Jesus living in me*' (Ga. 2.20).

1 Co.15.8-11m & 9.1, Ga.1.13-23, Phil. 3.5-14 all tell us that Jesus' life and death must be understood in a new dimension. They all try to evoke the experience of the risen Christ which transforms them at their very roots. It impels them to communicate this and to share it with others.

The empty tomb does not play a significant role in the birth of faith in the risen Christ. It is mentioned first in the 60s. It is unclear if the empty tomb story is history or a literary composition, but there are ample reasons to affirm it. The faith of the disciples is inspired not by the empty tomb but by their encounters with him, full of life after his death. They now feel empowered and motivated to return to Galilee, and to continue Jesus' life, message and activities. God had vindicated Jesus; he had not abandoned him. Jesus died trusting the Father, but God did not save him *from* death but rather *in* his death. What happened to Jesus was death-resurrection. God did not will the death of his innocent Son. He willed that his Son remain faithful to the end, in his identification with the world's unfortunate people and to seek God's reign and his justice for everyone. The Father and Son are united in confronting the ultimate consequences of evil. On the cross Jesus is not making an offering to God so that he will forgive humankind. It is God who is offering what he loves most – his own Son. Jesus'. God is *with* us, thinking *about* us, suffering *like* and dying *for* us. It is love, not suffering which gives redemptive love its value to the cross.

Who is this Jesus ? Out of the experience of resurrection, the disciples look back on his life. The Gospels reveal more than Jesus' words; they tell us about his actions and his life which reveal the saving presence of God living in the flesh of his Son. The disciples are so sure that Jesus is alive, that they feel free to attribute to him words that express his spirit, even though they are not the exact words he spoke.

MARK writes a suspenseful gospel asking 'who is this man ?' He answers that it is in the abandonment of the crucifixion that one can confess Jesus, not as the powerful Son of an omnipotent God He is not the powerful and glorious Messiah they expect, but a crucified Son given by his father, out of love to humanity. Disciples will understand who he is when they take up his cross. They will learn to be servants of all and follow him to crucifixion. Filled with the Spirit, his life becomes a source of life, healing and forgiveness for true disciples. Jesus is God's Son and God's good news bringing salvation, in contrast to the Roman emperor who called himself 'divifilus' (divine son).

MATTHEW was written after the destruction of the temple when the rabbis were trying to restore Judaism and the Law of Moses. At the same time the Christians were establishing Christian communities among the diaspora. These communities are identified with the risen Jesus who is not a false prophet but the new Moses, the Messiah. He is God's Son giving birth to the New Israel. He takes the place of the temple and is Emmanuel – God with us – until the end of ages. Jesus is the saving presence of God in the world forever. '*Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among them*' (Mt. 18.20) Perhaps it came from an old Jewish text which says '*Where two or three are gathered to study Torah, there is the shekina(presence) of God*'

For Matthew, the law of Christ can be summarised:

- 1) Do to others what you would have them do to you.
- 2) Love the Lord your God and your neighbour as yourself.
- 3) Justice, mercy and faith are the weightier things of the law.

For him, **The Church** is the community formed by those who hear Jesus' call and keep it. It is built on Peter, and everyone is a disciple, a brother or sister. Everyone in the church must care for those who need it most, '*the little ones*', the neglected, the marginalised, and practise loving correction and forgiveness of one another.

LUKE also tells us that Jesus is the Messiah and Lord, but he stresses that he is Saviour, the salvation of God. The Saviour spreads joy, and his healings inspire praise. He is God's compassion. Jesus is *the today* of salvation. He is the incarnation of God's mercy for anyone who is 'lost' or 'poor', with special care for women. Jesus is the bearer of the Spirit of God. He was raised by God's Spirit, and Luke encourages all to see that same Spirit always giving him life.

JOHN shows that the disciples are remembering Jesus words and action in the light of the resurrection. The Paraclete is reminding them of '*all that I have said to you*'. It is not the story of another prophet, but of the Word of God made flesh in Jesus. He is the messenger and the revealer of the Father, showing us the mystery of the God whom no one has ever seen. Love alone motivates the gift of God in Jesus. His miracles are signs revealing the power and compassion of

God. His commandment to love as God loves says everything that Jesus has to convey from his intimacy with the Father. (*Jn. 15. 4-9, 10-12*) Now disciples are not servants but friends of God. Jesus is bread, light, gate, good shepherd, the way, truth, life and the vine in which they must live.

NAMES FOR JESUS are looked for after the resurrection experience.

Messiah or Christ is used from the beginning. They were called Christians (Messianists) first in Antioch. Jesus never called himself and was reluctant to be called Messiah, so it must have come after the Resurrection. He is not a victorious Messiah but a crucified one (*1 Co.2.2*). Unfortunately people began to forget the real meaning of the word Christ.

The Son of Man, the New Man was used by Jesus to emphasize his human nature. No one else called him this. He also spoke about the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the power, with a probable reference to Daniel 7.13,14. Paul refers to Jesus as *the New Adam* where grace abounds over sin. This title soon fell into disuse.

High Priest in Hebrews was used to encourage converted Jews (priests ?**) probably in Alexandria. But Jesus the priest does not get close to God by separating himself from others. He accepted sinners who were banned from the temple. He does not offer any ritual sacrifice. His offering is his own life. He is in total solidarity with humans and was tested as they are, and had to live by faith.

Lord was used of Jesus from the beginning. It is not only an honorific title. God made him Lord from the moment of his resurrection. Foreign Gods were called Kyrios(lord) but no one can call Jesus Lord except by the power of the Holy Spirit. He is not Lord in order to dominate, rule or control but to enliven, to give life. Christians must live for and die for him (*Ro. 14.8,9*). They prayed '*Come, Lord Jesus, come*'

Incarnate Word of God is in John's prologue where it echoes the Greek word '*logos*' (meaning). The Jews however said that God has no image, only a voice. It was the '*sophia*' Wisdom of God which gives meaning to life. God looks at people as Jesus does; he accepts, heals, defends, loves, forgives as Jesus does. Jesus is God, speaking to us in the frailty & vulnerability in this one human being.

Son of God was used very early on in all communities, and it surely came from their memory of Jesus who called God his *Abba*. At the same time it suggested the ineffable mystery of God who had raised him by infusing his own life in him. In the Old Testament, the people of Israel, the king and some holy individuals were called 'sons of God'. But Jesus is not just another son; he is *the Son*, the one whom God loved most and whom he sent into the world. Jesus is truly man and he is truly God, making present the God of the victims and of crucified ones, the God who is love.

In seeking the risen Lord today, the Emmaus story guides us. After the resurrection the disciples began to explore the mystery of Jesus in the light of faith, often with difficulty. What can people who did not live with Jesus do to meet him today ?. The Emmaus story tells us that to meet Jesus today, one needs to 1) come together with a few others seekers, in his name 2) to read the Gospels and to remember his crucifixion – listening from within. But that is not enough. 3) We also need to experience the Eucharistic meal in order to recognise the presence of the risen Lord, not only as one whose words shine a light on our lives but as one who feeds us at his Table. After the crucifixion Mary Magdalene was sad and desolate and looking for Jesus. She cannot live without him. We need to undertake an inner search also. But that may not be enough. Like her we have to hear our own name on his lips, to be called by him in person. Then our life changes from

the bottom up. We discover like Mary, that Jesus is more than a teacher. He is the Son of God going to his Father and to ours. She has to learn to live with the risen Lord but without his physical presence, and to embrace him in her brothers and sisters. Together we all make up the family of God. Jesus Christ is our hope. With him and through him we will come one day into the bosom of the Father.

Here is what we must do, the journey we must take:

When Jesus asks *'Who do you say I am ?'* he is not asking for christological dogma, or explanations of theologians or the results of modern research.

We must put Jesus at the centre of Christianity. Everything else comes later. We Christians must confess Jesus as Son of God. Doctrine alone will not nourish our faith nor can we live by a set of truths as our only motivation. We need a living connection with him and to continue to know him better. We are in danger of turning Jesus into mere object of worship, an icon with a majestic face to venerate. Instead, we need to see and meet him up close.

- If we have inaccurate, poor or partial images of Jesus given to us in childhood or later. it can distort our way of living the Christian experience. We must purify our image of Jesus who affirmed the God of life, who cares about us and seeks us out. If there is a God, he is like Jesus. What God cares about is not religion but a more human and friendly world, a more abundant, healthy and happy life for all, beginning with the least. What makes God happy is to see us happy, now and forever. For Jesus 'Only the kingdom is absolute and it makes everything else relative' (Evangeliū Nuntiandi no.8) God did not send Jesus to organize a new religion but to proclaim and to promise the reign of God where God's compassion is central. Nothing is more important than to reactivate a faithful following of Jesus in the Church again and again. This means:
- Focusing our lives on the 'poor', seeing life through the eyes of those suffering, taking their side. (Those living with us, those we meet, those in our society and those far away**)
- Living with compassion, shaking off our indifference, coming near to people in their concrete situations.
- Developing acceptance, inclusivity. We must bring down walls, build bridges and eliminate discrimination.
- Accepting personal crucifixion as we build God's reign, carrying the weight of the anti-kingdom.
- Trusting the Father of all, calling on his holy name, praying for the coming of his kingdom, and sowing Jesus' hope sometimes against hope.

(By Desmond O'Donnell omi in <http://www.associationofcatholicpriests.ie/2011/06/notes-from-jesus-an-historical-approximation-by-jose-pagola/>)