

INTRODUCTION TO some themes in CHRISTIANITY

The teaching of Jesus

1. Data

6 BCE, probable date for birth of Jesus

30 CE, probable date for death of Jesus

Mother: Mary, husband: Joseph, no father, “virgin birth”

Early life unknown except few possible episodes, e.g. Temple visit

Heralded by John “the Baptist”

Public ministry approx. last three years of his life

2. Times

Associated with Palestine and the Jewish people only (some Greek-speaking Jews).

Palestine under Roman occupation, therefore Romans try and execute him

Few Roman references to him but almost all is internal Christian record

3. Christian record

Growing group of followers: disciples

Inner group that used to travel with him: apostles plus “the women”

Oral Tradition: the accumulated recollections of the life and teaching of Jesus

Gospels: theologically edited works of gospel writers (evangelists), drawn from oral tradition plus possibly some written sources (now lost)

References and reports in the writings of the apostles, e.g. Paul, Peter, James, John, and Acts of the Apostles (almost certainly Luke)

4. Not a simple message: plurality of meanings

- Food laws:

Mark 7:14-23

14 Then he called the crowd again and said to them, ‘Listen to me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.’

17 When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. ¹⁸He said to them, ‘Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, ¹⁹since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?’ (Thus he declared all foods clean.) ²⁰And he said, ‘It is what comes out of a person that defiles.

²¹For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions

come: fornication, theft, murder, ²²adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. ²³All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.'

Note

- Public teaching; private explanation
- "All foods clean" therefore break with Jewish food laws
- Stress on inner intentionality rather than external law

Matthew 5:18

17 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. ¹⁸For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.

- Divorce:

Mark 10: 11-12

¹¹He said to them, 'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; ¹²and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.'

Note: all divorce prohibited (general Catholic position)

Matthew: 5: 32

31 'It was also said, "Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce." ³²But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Note: divorce permitted on limited grounds of infidelity (Orthodox and Protestant position)

1 Corinthians (Paul): 7: 12-15

12 To the rest I say—I and not the Lord—that if any believer has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. ¹³And if any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. ¹⁴For the unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through her husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. ¹⁵But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so; in such a

case the brother or sister is not bound. It is to peace that God has called you..

Note: If unbelieving partner divorces a convert to Christianity, the Christian is divorced and allowed to remarry (“Pauline privilege” Catholic position)

5. The Kingdom of God is at hand!

A key teaching of Jesus but what does it mean?

- “Kingdom of God” is like the dawning of the Jewish Messianic Age. Rise up and throw the Romans out of Palestine.
- “Kingdom of God” is like the End of the World. Await a cataclysmic event that will bring in the Day of Judgement.
- “Kingdom of God” is a metaphorical usage referring to the “Rule of God” in the hearts of people made possible by a new relationship with God in and through Jesus Christ.
 - Stress on “the law written in the heart” and not on tablets of stone
 - A spiritual understanding of the divine-human covenant, in which the believer is “in Christ” and “filled with the power/spirit of God”
 - A new community is formed of those who are “spirit-filled”, called the Church, which is itself “filled with the power/spirit of God”

The “Kingdom of God” is a spiritual state into which the believer enters by faith, baptism, and life in the community of the Church, marked by:

- Renunciation of pride and the love of money
- Cultivation of purity of heart and innocence of mind
- Compassion for all human beings: both friends and enemies
- Primacy of the love of God above even love of family and of one’s own life
- No anxiety about possessions or provision for the future
- Righteousness comes through a change of heart not by keeping the letter of the law
- Jesus does not give a list of commands and proscriptions; human need rises above the acontextual keeping of rules
- “The love of God and love of all human beings” becomes the moral compass by which the believer is to resolve all moral questions

Matthew 22: 34-40

³⁴ When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵ and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶ ‘Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’

³⁷ He said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” ³⁸ This is the greatest and

first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” ⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

6. Case study: The Sermon on the Mount

The most extensive block of Jesus’ teaching contained in Matthew chapters 5-7. Three different lines of interpretation:

1. Heroic moral rules

- The Sermon contains a set of moral rules that should be interpreted literally
- These prohibit:
 - Anger and contempt
 - Lust
 - Divorce
 - Swearing of oaths
 - Revenge and hatred of enemies
 - Concern for food and clothes
 - Judging others
- These command:
 - Seeking reconciliation with those who have been offended
 - Faithfulness and truthfulness
 - No resistance to evil: “turn the other cheek”
 - Giving to those who ask
 - Going beyond what is required or demanded inspired by love: “go the extra mile”
 - Love enemies and do good to all
- How to implement this teaching?
 - Taken literally this could end up with Christians penniless and enslaved by tyrants
 - Taken as a *modus vivendi* this would see the Christian community as an instrument for change in society, like yeast in dough, slowly bringing about a transformation, e.g. transforming violence and conflict with self-sacrificing love
 - Involves Christians becoming “fools for Christ”, i.e. being counter-cultural and seeking to transform through poverty and pacifism
 - Requires that death is not seen as a defeat but something to be embraced in the trust that God will vindicate the believer
 - Stresses the paramount importance of unconditional love above all else

2. Counsels of perfection

- This interpretation distinguishes between the mandatory concepts of morality, e.g. not to murder or steal, and the optional “counsels of

perfection” to which some are called but not all, e.g. renouncing personal property and violence.

- This leads in the Catholic and Orthodox tradition to monasticism, the celibate life, voluntary poverty. Could also be open to small groups of married people. Potential of leading to “two tiers of spirituality”.
- Martin Luther saw this differently. He saw all called to perfection but this is an impossible attainment, therefore “we ought to do it” but “we can’t”. This leads to a view of the morally corrupt nature of the human condition in which we are incapable of living good lives, therefore the need for God to step in and forgive, redeem and sanctify “those who are lost in moral depravity”. Hence the idea of being “saved by grace” – the power of God. Those thus saved should bear the fruits of that redemption: love, peace, patience, joy, goodness etc. in every way.

3. Ideals of the heart

- The Sermon should be interpreted as a piece of hyperbole. Jesus often uses hyperbolic teaching:
 - Matthew 5: 29-30
 - ²⁹If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ³⁰And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

Note: hyperbolic, interpretation: do not allow lust to enter into your heart, take care over that on which the eye looks

- Matthew 19: 24
 - ²⁴Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.’

Note: hyperbolic, interpretation: riches are spiritually dangerous, they lead to pride and arrogance, counsel to humility

- If the Sermon is to be interpreted as a piece of hyperbole, then it can be seen to set out guidance for the ideals of personal living rather than rules to be obeyed in a social life. Each individual should strive for these ideals but each attains only to their own capacity
- This shifts the focus from “laws to be obeyed” to “guidance for living as a Christian in a relationship with God through Christ” based on God’s initiative of unconditional love and thus a life transformed through God’s grace.

7. The text of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chaps. 5-7)

5 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

3 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

4 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

5 'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

6 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

7 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

8 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

9 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

10 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

13 'You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

14 'You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

17 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. ¹⁸For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these

commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

21 'You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not murder"; and "whoever murders shall be liable to judgement." ²²But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, "You fool", you will be liable to the hell of fire. ²³So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. ²⁶Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

27 'You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery." ²⁸But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ³⁰And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

31 'It was also said, "Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce." ³²But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

33 'Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord." ³⁴But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷Let your word be "Yes, Yes" or "No, No"; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

38 'You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." ³⁹But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you

on the right cheek, turn the other also; ⁴⁰and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; ⁴¹and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. ⁴²Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

43 ‘You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.” ⁴⁴But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. ⁴⁶For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? ⁴⁷And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

6 ‘Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

2 ‘So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

5 ‘And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

7 ‘When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

9 ‘Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
¹⁰ Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread.

¹² And forgive us our debts,

as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.

¹⁴For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; ¹⁵but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

¹⁶ ‘And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

¹⁹ ‘Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

²² ‘The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; ²³but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

²⁴ ‘No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

²⁵ ‘Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁸And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ³⁰But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?

³¹Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we

drink?” or “What will we wear?”³² For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.³³ But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

34 ‘So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.

7 ‘Do not judge, so that you may not be judged.² For with the judgement you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.³ Why do you see the speck in your neighbour’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?⁴ Or how can you say to your neighbour, “Let me take the speck out of your eye”, while the log is in your own eye?⁵ You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbour’s eye.

6 ‘Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you.

7 ‘Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.⁸ For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.⁹ Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone?¹⁰ Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake?¹¹ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

12 ‘In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.

13 ‘Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it.¹⁴ For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

15 ‘Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.¹⁶ You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles?¹⁷ In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit.¹⁸ A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.²⁰ Thus you will know them by their fruits.

21 'Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord", will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only one who does the will of my Father in heaven. ²²On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?" ²³Then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers."

24 'Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. ²⁵The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. ²⁶And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ²⁷The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!

28 Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, ²⁹for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.