

Who Do You Say I Am?: a Jewish Cynic

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21 Mark 8:27-29

February 21, 2010 1st Sunday of Lent

Who do you say that I am?

On the way to Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked his disciples,

"Who do people say that I am?"

And they answered him,

"John the Baptist; and others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."

He asked them,

"But who do **you** say that I am?"

Peter answered him,

"You are the Messiah."

Peter, may have answered,

"The Messiah,"

but the scriptures give us many different images of who Jesus was,

and actually none of them resemble the messiah that folks were expecting,

that is a military leader who in the model of King David would unify the people and obliterate Judea of the occupying Roman forces.

Over the next 6 weeks of Lent we are going to examine some of these images and complete our examination, not with who Jesus was, but with who Jesus is.

So today we start with our first image of Jesus that is brought to us in the scriptures – Jesus as a Jewish Cynic.

How many of you would describe yourselves as cynical?

We often see cynicism as a less than attractive quality in a person.

For instance, cynicism is not something you would usually want to emphasize in your personality on a first date.

I think it's often seen as whinny and just annoying.

And none of you want to be seen in that light, now do you?

So you're probably wondering why I think Jesus cynicism is one of his most important and attractive qualities.

A cynical Jesus?

Well, yeah – but it's a lot deeper than that.

Let's start with what we mean by the word "cynical" and to do that I'm going to give us a simple dictionary definition.

A cynic is distrusting or disparaging the motives of others.

A cynic showing contempt for accepted standards of honesty or morality by one's actions.

A cynic is bitterly or sneeringly distrustful, contemptuous, or pessimistic.

**Clearly, that described Jesus – that is Jesus' relationship to the existing Jewish religious authorities and conventions.
But as I said it goes deeper.**

So what was a Cynic?

**You see a Cynic was not just somebody who was cynical;
but rather a Cynic was an adherent to a Greek philosophical school of thought known as the Cynics.**

And yes, this is the basis for where we get our word cynical.

What I want to show you is how the Gospels all display Jesus as a Cynic, but not a Greek Cynic, but rather a Jewish Cynic.

But before we get to Jesus as a Jewish Cynic, let's take a short look at the thoughts of the Greek Cynics.

Their philosophy was that the purpose of life was to live a life of Virtue in agreement with Nature.

This meant rejecting all conventional desires for wealth, power, health, and fame, and by living a life free from all possessions.

They were extreme egalitarians believing that the world belonged equally to everyone, there was no place for private possessions and that suffering was caused by false judgments of what was valuable and by the worthless customs and conventions which surrounded society.

[Wikipedia – Cynics]

As reasoning creatures, people could gain happiness by rigorous training and by living in a way which was natural for humans. What Christians would later refer to as “The Way.”

Also, the Cynics scoffed at the customs and conventionalities of others, but were rigid in observance of their own.

[Crossan p. 115, “Jesus: a revolutionary biography”]

Now I suppose that you never thought that one of Jesus injunctions to you would be to

be cynical but that was exactly what a great deal of what he taught.

The scripture that we read this morning is a good example.

[Jesus said:] “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them.

“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.

“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.

“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.

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Then there are the teachings that clearly rebelled against established rules.

[**Mat 8:19-20**] A scribe then approached and said, “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.”

And Jesus said to him,

“Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Humanity has nowhere to lay his head.”

To follow Jesus you much become homeless.

[**Mat 15:1-2, 16-20**] Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said,

“Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they

eat."

Then he said, "Are you also still without understanding?"

Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?

But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles.

For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander.

These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."

And beyond that he told his disciples not to even worry about what they ate, but when they entered a house they were to eat whatever was offered them. Aurgh – how un-Jewish.

And we all know too convictingly well his teachings about giving your riches to the poor, and living a simple life of charity and compassion.

Interestingly, Jesus was even apparently aware of the uniform of the Cynics.

You see, the Cynic would not appear anywhere without his wallet, staff and cloak...He never wore shoes and his hair and beard were long and unkept.

While not duplicating the Cynic uniform, Jesus instructions to his disciple clearly indicate, even by the dissimilarities, his awareness of the Cynics uniform.

Jesus told his disciples, Do not carry money, or bag or sandals, or staff; and do not greet anyone on the road.”
(Luke 4)

The most important way Jesus broke with social custom in the way of a Cynic, was in his eating and healing habits.

As we are often reminded at Communion, Jesus ate with everyone, but he also healed everyone and without charge.

Yes, Jesus’ dining habits were certainly cynical. He loved breaking all the social taboos about who you should socialized with.

In Jewish culture the cast system was not as clearly defined as in India and the Hindu faith; but it was very real and very powerful none the less.

There weren't the untouchables, as in India, but there were the invisibles – the people you just didn't see or made an effort to ignore.

But, Jesus spit in the face of all social decorum and he broke all the boundaries and ignored all the social and even national borders.

Then there was his cynical healing practices – Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free, rich and poor – he even healed a Canaanite woman, a Samaritan, a prostitute and even a centurion's slave. And he didn't charge. And he didn't charge, The great physician and he didn't charge – how insane.

So what does all of this mean for us?

First of all, seeing Jesus as a Cynic forces us to re-examine our image of Jesus.

Jesus didn't just drop out of heaven, he was born into a particular historical context and that context was a Jewish culture that was highly Hellenized by centuries of Greek and then Roman occupation.

Sepphoris, the town right next to Jesus' home town, was a haven for 1st century Greek Cynic philosophy.

But Jesus was not a Greek cynic, he had his own version of Cynicism and it was a Jewish cynicism reacting not to Hellenistic culture, but Jewish culture, and not within an urban setting but within a rural setting.

More importantly, Jesus clearly expected his disciples to adhere to his cynical teachings. And I have to be honest, that's a lot harder for us to do today than it was for his disciples.

How can we live a life of a 21st Century Christian Cynic?

Well unless you voluntarily become homeless, it's almost impossible.

If it was hard for Jesus disciples, it is almost beyond our imagination.

First we would need to simplify, simplify, simplify.

Give your wealth to those who need it. Get rid of all your possessions that weigh you down.

Now, think of the relatively insignificant amount of possessions his disciples had to get rid of and compare that to our culture where you feel lost, naked, vulnerable and insecure if you accidentally leave your cell phone on the kitchen counter.

Most people, including his disciples, lived a life of extreme subsistence poverty that we would now equate with the poorest of third world countries; while we all live amazingly possession dependent lives.

So we clearly have our goals set out for us. Simplify, simplify, simplify.

Here's a little Lenten challenge for you.

Instead of giving something up for lent; this year for lent give up something.

Do you catch the difference?

This lent give up something forever.

Simplify your life.

I warned you that it was hard for us.

But there is another way we can follow some of Jesus' most important cynical teachings – we can share God's love with everyone – without concern for who they are or where they are on life's journey.

We can open up our lives, not just our church doors, but our lives to those who aren't like us.

We can be a healing presence to all and expect no reward.

We can recognize that our true treasure is not found in our possessions but in our relationships.

Now isn't it fun being a Cynic?

While Jesus was not an exact copy of a Hellenistic Cynic, he definitely had cynical tendencies that are clearly revealed in all the Gospels; but that is just a beginning for the complex and rich images of Jesus that are given to us in the Gospels.

In the coming weeks we will also see Jesus in the image of an apocalyptic preacher, healer, prophet, host and Christ.

And when we are done hopefully you will be better able to answer Jesus' question:
Who do you say I am?
AMEN.