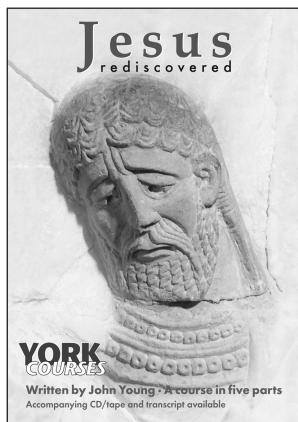


SESSION 1



JESUS' LIFE AND TEACHING

What a tremendous relief ... to discover that we don't need to prove ourselves to God. That is what Jesus came to say, and for that he got killed ... That is tremendous stuff – that is the Good News. Whilst we were yet sinners, says St Paul, Christ died for us. God did not wait until we were die-able for He could have waited until the cows come home.

Archbishop
Desmond Tutu

Recently I attended Cathedral Evensong. The experience had 'Made in Britain' running right through it, like the proverbial stick of rock. Until that is, in measured, cultured, cathedral tones, the Bible reader announced: 'For where the body is, there will the eagles gather'.

They were, said the Lesson reader, the words of Jesus Christ. They sounded very foreign and very enigmatic. What on earth did they mean?

Most cultures have tried, often through paintings and sculptures, to represent Jesus as 'one of us'. It is not at all unusual to find a Chinese Jesus, an Indian Jesus, an African Jesus – and a British Jesus. This is a deep instinct which captures the truth that Jesus relates to every human being and every culture. He has disciples in every continent and his teaching speaks to every nation.

But it remains true that he was born into one particular nation and brought up in one particular culture. Jesus was aware of standing within the flow of Israel's rich tradition and history, and he used its language and thought forms. Hence that strange-sounding sentence about corpses and eagles. His nationality accounts for some of the key aspects of his teaching.

1. Jewish culture places great emphasis on learning, based on the Hebrew Scriptures (our Old Testament) and explanations and expositions which have developed over the centuries.
2. The Jewish people delight in riddles, stories, humour and exaggeration. The Gospels are peppered with statements whose meaning isn't at all clear. Jesus painted vivid word pictures. Sometimes he used just a few words; on other occasions he told longer stories – usually with strong human interest – which often turn the tables at the last minute.
3. Jesus' contemporaries revelled in argument and debate. He was a keen observer of life and nature and no doubt thought up many of his stories as he and his disciples trudged around the countryside (walking and sermon preparation go well together in my experience). But a fair amount of his teaching was quickfire response to a heckling audience. It was more like Speakers' Corner than Sunday Worship!

So the teaching of Jesus is not the measured teaching of a wise philosopher. It is much more immediate, much more intriguing, much more intuitive, oblique, enigmatic and downright infuriating – deliberately so, for he wanted to provoke deep thought. ('He could not possibly mean *that*, so just what *does* he mean?')