

## Jesus, a man surrounded by others but terribly alone

Here is a map of Galilee in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD: it is a poor region. Yes, there are two or three rich towns: Sepphoris, Tiberius, Caperneum. But mostly it consists of poor villages. People possess hardly anything of worth: none of the gospel writers mention the presence of a television set in the houses that Jesus enters.

So, since the population doesn't have a small screen on which to see their opinion leaders expressing their opinions, they go and listen to them in person. This results in huge popular gatherings. And indeed, we see a considerable crowd of people surrounding Jesus on contemporary illustrations. One might even characterize it as a mob: Jesus is not alone! '*Large crowds*' (Matthew 4, 25) press upon Jesus so much that sometimes, according to the gospel, he and his disciples '*were not even able to eat*' (Mark 3, 20).

Even today, that image of Jesus attracting a multitude of people is one we carry with us. This is why we find it difficult to conceive that Jesus could be alone and neglected. Nonetheless, it would seem that he was.

The solitude of carers and patients is the theme of our meeting in 2022: let us try and see, therefore, if Jesus – who was after all a carer – was able also to be alone. Viewed from this perspective, I propose that we go through the gospel, principally Matthew's gospel, written around AD 75.

### A) Jesus, popular and surrounded by people

At first sight, there are good reasons why Jesus would have been surrounded by people: he was an attractive personality. Here are four illustrations:

- It just needed a short cryptic phrase, '*I will make you fishers of men*' (Matthew 4, 19), for several young people to follow him: fascinated, they abandon their jobs, their families, their village and probably their fiancée.
- Jesus makes wonderful use of a very effective way of capturing the attention of his listeners: he invented 43 parables. He does the same as any of you telling stories to your grandchildren which they don't completely understand, but which hold them captivated.
- To cap it all, Jesus is well-reputed as a healer: '*he was known throughout Syria*' (Matthew 4, 24). Those of us, also healers, know that it is a good reputation which fills our waiting rooms!

The gospels describe in detail 14 complete healings: most of them concern chronic incurable diseases; paralysis, epilepsy, congenital blindness, menorrhagia, etc. We see that our thirty-year old miracle worker is a generalist: he can heal everything. Even bipolar disorder (Matthew 17, 15), increasing so much in incidence nowadays. Even chronic fatigue syndrome, which remains incurable today: '*Come to me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest*' (Matthew 11, 28).

The case reports don't mention any side-effects of the treatment, no late relapse. What is more, three resurrections in three years are also reported. Few healers have such a success rate: of course, this will attract crowds.

- And Jesus doesn't only attract the ill: those who are hungry also congregate, when they hear '*He who comes to me will never go hungry*' (John 6, 35).

Consequently, of course, Jesus is popular. People follow him, listen to him, thank him, give him a warm recommendation. It would be surprising if he were at the same time neglected, challenged, held at a distance.

And yet he is: Matthew shows us...

## **B) Jesus, rejected and isolated**

Is this isolation surprising? Not as much as all that: Jesus displeases various categories of people. Which of these?

### **1) Jesus rebuffs those who are rich**

One day a rich young man comes to find the teacher. There is immediately a reciprocated and affectionate connection between them: '*Jesus looked at him and loved him*' (Mark 10, 21). If you had been in Jesus' place, you would have put a friendly hand on the shoulder of this well-dressed boy, to show him your liking for him. He would have been overwhelmed; he would have joyfully joined the apostles!

But instead of showing affection, Jesus challenges him: '*Go, sell all that you have and give to the poor (...) and follow me*' (Mark 10, 21). It's rather demanding, as a command... evidently, the privileged young man hesitates: which of us would give up all our possessions? The young man turns on his heels. Jesus finds himself alone. One could say, he asked for it.

### **2) Jesus challenges the self-righteous**

Jesus holds those on the margins in high esteem: he affirms without blinking that God particularly holds dear rogues, girls of easy virtue, and prodigal sons who dissipate their inheritance in wild living (Luke 15, 13). He dares to say to the 'elders of the people' tongue in cheek '*the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you*' (Matthew 21, 31). The worthy old men choke with indignation. I have to say that as a worthy old man myself, attracted to the idea of meritocracy, it makes me choke too: what does this obscene bias of Jesus mean? Is he encouraging corruption and kindly disposed towards debauchery?

In every society, praise for scoundrels annoys 'honest folk': it is possible that they are generous towards the under-privileged and in favour of the Welfare State. But that doesn't stop them being exasperated by delinquency, and by the waste linked to social service payments.

And so, the self-righteous distance themselves from Jesus, who is himself non-productive and whose extremist talk devalues traditional morals.

### **3) Jesus irritates the ordinary workers**

Around the age of thirty, Jesus gets to know an eccentric and disturbed person who lives off locusts: meeting John the Baptist is such a shock that Jesus abandons the family business left to him by his father. He chooses to live by public donations.

To thus renounce a profession which is both useful and a valuable qualification is not viewed as a good thing in the world of work. How many craftsmen or employees must have said to Jesus: '*you make beautiful objects! You have a family to feed! You should return to your timbers and to your plane!*'

In the past, just the same as nowadays, those who work for a living are annoyed by lazy young people who go travelling and beg for money while preaching '*Peace and Love*'.

One could also think that Jesus' miracles are disapproved of by social and professional organizations mindful of the need for the economy to run smoothly:

- The miraculous catch of fish infringes the rule of free and fair competition
- Free distribution of bread eats away at the bakers' profits
- Changing water into high quality wine will certainly have caused the local wine-producers to break out in a cold sweat

- Paying the workmen who turned up at the last minute the same as their colleagues who worked all day, breaches the rules about fair pay. Absolute anathema for the unions.

#### 4) Jesus makes healers suspicious

One might suppose that miraculous healings, also, would cause a difference of opinion: all of us here hold dear the principle that the right to treat sick people is framed by the law and by the evidence of recognized qualifications; this guarantees the quality of care; it protects medical and paramedical professions. 2000 years ago in Galilee, there must have been all sorts of accredited healers: osteopaths, chiropractors, pain specialists, herbalists, and others. Suddenly, they see that they have competition from a young self-proclaimed generalist, an itinerant healer, with no experience, but prodigiously effective. The competition is unfair since Jesus is doing it for free.

How do these other therapists react? If they are like us, they cry foul and call him a charlatan. They report clients who are being poached. Perhaps they go and complain to the occupying Romans? The gospels don't mention this, but either the therapists of the time were more disinterested than we are in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, or Jesus unavoidably ended up putting the backs up of some of the other healers.

Another possible difference: when he was successful in healing someone, Jesus considered the psychic energy of the patient: thus, he said to the woman who had been bleeding for twelve years: *'Take heart, daughter, your faith has healed you'* (Matthew 9, 22). Here is a clear acknowledgement of the power of the placebo effect: faith moves mountains (Matthew 21, 21). We do not know if that psycho-somatic approach shocked certain healers who were around at the time and who wanted their healing powers to be attributed instead to the power of their potions. But 2000 years later, I am sure that Jesus would make enemies if he said that healing was a matter of faith and not of pharmacology: let us remember the all too recent battle fought over medications that were supposed to be effective in treating Covid-19: the doctors who believed in hydroxychloroquine, azithromycin, zinc and vitamin D were furious with their colleagues who were convinced that these molecules were nothing but placebos. The intensity of this contemporary controversy allows us to imagine that Jesus was also himself a therapist who was criticized, reviled, and hence isolated.

#### 5) Jesus is disapproved of by defenders of the traditional family...

Jesus was born to an unknown father. In Jewish culture, that was a matter of dishonour. Certain Jews held it against him: *'We are not illegitimate children.'* (John 8, 41), *'Where is your father?'* (John 8, 19).

We mustn't doubt that plenty of gossips will have spread this rumour about his birth out of wedlock. As a consequence, many pious people will have turned away from the teacher.

But there is worse yet: Jesus dares to declare that he is indifferent to his family: *Someone told him, 'Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.'* *He replied to him, 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?'* (Matthew 12, 47-48). Of course, he said this to highlight that his love, which is universal, extends far beyond the immediate family. But do people understand him? Probably not. They take offence at his ingratitude. They distance themselves from this disrespectful son, who rejects his own mother.

#### 6) ... but his isn't any better thought of by those who espouse more liberal morals !

Across all ages, adultery, infidelity, divorce, and remarriage are commonplace. We accommodate it or pretend to. Just as well, since Abraham practiced polygamy with his servant Hagar (Genesis 16, 4), since King David had the too beautiful Bathsheba brought to his palace (2 Samuel 11, 4), since another head of State, more recently, himself a catholic, had the too blond Marilyn brought to his palace.

Jesus, as for him, does not make allowances for this and doesn't pretend to: did Moses allow divorce? Jesus says he was wrong, and firmly forbids it *'except for marital unfaithfulness'* (Matthew 19, 9). No doubt this radical morality resulted in a certain isolation for Jesus.

#### 7) Scathing in his words, Jesus wounds those he talks to

Our catechisms paint a Jesus who is gentle and merciful. The Jews who Jesus reproached in an offensive manner would certainly not agree! For even if Jesus is tender with the children, appealing to his disciples, a source of help for the sick, full of pity for the little people, to sum up, showing a great gentleness towards people who mean well, he pours ridicule on others...

He offends them, he speaks ill of them, and sometimes he insults them: *'You brood of vipers!'* (Matthew 23, 7), *'Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! (... ) blind fools! (...), You blind guides! You*

*strain out a gnat but swallow a camel. (...) you clean the outside (...) but inside you are full of greed and self-indulgence (...), whitewashed tombs'* (Matthew 23, 13-27)

When Jesus is beside himself, he issues threats: you deserve to be thrown in the water with a millstone round your neck (Matthew 18, 6); You are the children of assassins, *'descendants of those who murdered the prophets (...) You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?'* (Matthew 23, 31-33)

Some of Jesus' invective is humiliating: he goes as far as to say, *'You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your eye!'* (Luke 6, 42); *'what comes out of a man's mouth, that is what makes him unclean'* (Matthew 15, 10), explicitly targeting the pharisees' sayings.

If only Jesus spoke harsh words just to badly intentioned officials ...but no: there is that day where he bad-mouths all old people; *'Neither do men pour new wine into old wineskins'* (Matthew 9, 17). In other words: I'm only speaking to the young, the elderly are not sufficiently nimble in spirit to understand my novelty. There is also that day where his words are piercing because they bring to him the bipolar child that his disciples haven't succeeded in curing: *'O unbelieving and perverse generation, how long shall I put up with you?'* (Matthew 17, 17). We don't quite know if Jesus was addressing the child's family because they were scrounging, or his disciples because they had too poor a faith, not even big *'as a mustard seed'* (Matthew 17, 20), which made the treatment fail; or all of them. In any case, that day, Jesus even reproached good people, and those close to him.

We can see that when he is furious, Jesus really doesn't mince his words. He is capable of delivering stern words. Hardly surprising if in return he finds himself isolated.

## 8) And that isn't all...

We could easily add to the list of reasons why, despite periods of huge popularity, Jesus, in fact, often found himself alone.

- His rigorous morality sets the bar so high that many people probably decided not to follow him: he asks them to do impossible things:
  - Observe *'the least of these commandments'* of the law (Matthew 5, 19),
  - Do not be *'angry with your brother'* (Matthew 5, 22),
  - Never *'look at a woman lustfully'*, which is equivalent to committing adultery (Matthew 5, 27-28),
  - Always be sincere, even abrupt; *'Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes' and your 'No' be 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.* (Matthew 5, 37),
  - And even *'do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also'* (Matthew 5, 39).

All these precepts are well-nigh impossible to put into practice.

- Jesus also says that people must pay taxes to Caesar (Matthew 22, 21): this kind of recommendation has never allowed someone in opposition to go up in the opinion polls. Besides, Jesus disappoints his followers by refusing to allow them to bring him to power.
- He doesn't try to look serious; it doesn't bother him being taken for an eccentric as he talks in an exaggerated way which no-one understands, for example, *'I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.'* (Matthew 26, 61). Besides, it isn't essential to him that he be understood. He is content to sigh: *'the one who can accept this should accept it.'* (Matthew 19, 12): how discouraging is that!
- He isn't bothered about his reputation, to the point where it is said of him *'The Son of Man came eating and drinking (...) here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners'* (Matthew 11, 19).
- He isn't afraid of shocking people: for example, putting himself in the delicate situation of going to talk with a woman on her own, with a reputation for going through men like nobody's business, near a well: the perfect spot for chatting someone up (John 4, 1-30)! Jesus also scandalizes people by praising those who are usually ill thought of, such as the Samaritan who helps and rescues (Luke 10, 33). He again causes a scandal by giving his approval to a woman who anoints his hair with a very expensive perfume (Mark 14, 6).
- He is also not afraid of overturning important spiritual taboos, like the Sabbath: *'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath'*. (Mark 2, 27). Or even, respect for the dead: *'let the dead bury their own dead'* (Matthew 8, 22).

If one visualizes to oneself all these scenes, it is no exaggeration to think that even if Jesus devoted his life to meeting those around him, he was frequently rejected and alone.

Many people have asked themselves this futile and yet illuminating question: *'And if Jesus came back today, how would he be received?'* Probably for a while some of us would find him attractive, but we would end up leaving him alone and preferring Barabbas to him.

Etienne Robin, nephrologist, Dijon