

## Jesus as Typical first-century Teacher with Disciples:

A key to understanding Jesus' teaching and activities is knowing details about his role as a first-century itinerant teacher/rabbi/sage:

- In the first century there were hundreds, perhaps well over a thousand, local teachers with disciples. They were well educated in the Hebrew Scriptures and the written and oral Torah. They were held in high esteem and were called “master”, “teacher”, and sometimes “rabbi.” The term “rabbi” literally meant “my master” and referred to a wise teacher or sage, but did not hold the same role and authority as rabbis were given after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE.
- A common profile of a first-century sage or rabbi includes:
  - Traveled from place to place, depending on local hospitality
  - The venues for teaching were homes (Luke 10:38-42; Mary and Martha), outdoors (Mark 2:13-14; by the lake at Capernaum & Luke 6:12-26; a mountain and level plain), public sites within or near villages (Luke 5:1-11; on the shore of Lake Gennesaret & Matthew 9:1-8; in public at Capernaum), synagogues (Matthew 4:23), and the Jerusalem Temple (Luke 20:1-8). A sage and his disciples would stay for a day, a week, or sometimes a month in one place.
  - The usual posture for teaching was sitting (Matthew 5:1 & 26:55; Luke 5:3)
  - Each venue (a boat, field, vineyard, lake, path, or home) provided visible and common examples to use in teaching, especially parables.
  - An inner group of disciples traveled with their master/sage/rabbi and shared meals and a common life; some “followers” traveled temporarily and then returned home. In Jesus culture a teacher created a “faction” to promote a specific purpose for a specific period of time (i.e. for Jesus to promote the kingdom of God)
  - The purpose of becoming a “follower” was to learn a specific way of life; the teaching was not limited to “knowledge” or “wisdom”; the teaching was

primarily being close to and sharing the life of the master/sage; teaching was by example and learning was by experience.

- Jesus' followers included women and children (a scandalous innovation). Some women were single (Mary Magdalene) others were most likely wives of male disciples.
- Methods of teaching included:
  - Asking and answering questions: (Luke 2:46; Jesus in Temple & Luke 22:67-68)
  - Challenge and response : one way of seeking truth (what God desires) was to question a behavior or raise a hypothetical situation and demand a response (Luke 6:1-11 describes two incidents where Jesus eating and healing on the Sabbath is questioned by some Pharisees and experts on the Torah, i.e. scribes)
  - Parables: there were thousands of parables told by sages in Jesus culture; Jesus uses parables, sometimes on the spur of the moment, to challenge an existing situation, describe an inner meaning, to make people think “beyond the box of the status quo”, to make people see themselves more clearly, etc. Parables were never meant to be “parsed”, as so often happens in modern sermons and bible studies. Parables almost always had only one point to either demonstrate or have the hearers discover by reflection. Hyperbole is often used by Jesus to get attention as well as show the life/death implications of what he is saying.
- Jesus' demanded total commitment from his disciples; it was not a “part-time” relationship: (the young lawyer who could not give up his wealth; “you must ‘hate’ your family (i.e. not give them priority) if you follow me...”; “let the dead bury the dead”; “take up your cross and follow me...”; “the person who is willing to lose one’s life is the person who will find life...”. (Rowan Williams recently wrote: “There is all the difference in the world between having a ‘spiritual life’ and walking in the way of Jesus.”)

- Rabbis/sages collected lots of dust! Traveling in first-century Palestine was along dusty roads; feet got sweaty and caked with dust. This is why the first act of hospitality was to wash someone's feet. At the same time "dust" was a rich metaphor. A rabbinic saying from the century before Jesus exhorts: "Let your home be a meeting house for the sages, and cover yourself with the dust of their feet, and drink in their words thirstily." (M. Avot 1:4) This is why when Jesus visited the home of Mary and Martha, Mary is described as "sitting at Jesus' feet."
- Brad Young, a scholar of Rabbinic thought in relation to Jesus' teaching describes six similarities between the traditional sages and Jesus:
  - Jesus gave a radical call to persons who would be his "inner" disciples
  - Jesus demanded that they not only listen to him, but put his teaching into action
  - Jesus disciples learned through observation
  - Jesus' disciples learned to be like their master by being apprentices
  - Jesus disciples were sent out to manifest what he had taught and were asked to "report back" what took place
  - Jesus evaluated their "mission" and place their activities in the context of God's kingdom.

### **How can the Kingdom of God be recognized? When Is It "Here"?**

Jesus used two images to describe the presence of the kingdom. His words were directed to those closest to him as they walked throughout Galilee:

*"Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it." (Matthew 13:16-17)*

In another context, possibly when the inner disciples returned from their healing and preaching mission and said, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!", Jesus replies: "I was watching Satan fall like the lightning from heaven!" Then Jesus adds: "To you it has been given to know the mysteries of God, but for others they

*are in parables so that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not hear.” (Luke 8:10)*

What is going on here????

- Jesus is making it clear that the Kingdom of Heaven is not an abstract or philosophical concept or esoteric place. It is real and can be experienced in time and space by human senses and experience! At the same time a person must be able to see and hear into the words and actions that are taking place before their eyes. T.W. Manson, a NT scholar in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, pointed out that “The blessedness consists not in the fact that their eyes are open, but that there is something to be seen by the open-eyed, the manifestation, namely, of the kingdom of God.”
- The Hebrews awareness of God’s presence was not in theological statements or in wisdom sayings. They saw “into” what was happening before their eyes. Commenting on the miracle of the parting of the Red Sea Rabbi Eliezer (in the first century) said: *How does one know that at the Red Sea even the maidservants saw what Isaiah and Ezekiel never were fortunate enough to see? Because Scripture says about them, ‘And through the prophets I gave parables.’”* David Biven, a modern scholar of the life of Jesus in his own Jewish culture says that *“God did not reveal himself even to the prophets in the same mighty way that he did to the whole people, great and small, at the Red Sea. What did these humble servant girls see? They witnessed a great demonstration of God’s power, the dividing of the Red Sea. They saw God’s kingdom.”*
- A powerful example of Jesus’ declaration that God’s kingdom is present in his words and actions is in his reply to the disciples of John the Baptizer. John is no longer certain that Jesus is the agent of God who is to come to establish John’s vision of the kingdom. They ask: *“Are you the Coming One?”* Jesus’ reply is simple: *Report to John what you have seen and heard.”*

- Jesus was aware that in his healings, bringing the dead to life, feeding the hungry, and his teaching people had the opportunity to see and hear the Kingdom of God in their midst.
- *But Jesus was aware, also, that just being present or listening to words is not enough. A person had to be open to God's presence, to let go of control of what he or she wanted to see or hear or already believed or knew. That is why he said that he spoke in parables so that they would hear, but not understand, and see and not comprehend. The self-righteous and self-assured will not see or hear what they, themselves, refuse to hear and see.*
- *Once again, Jesus points to the need for an attitude of listening and discernment; he knows that intimacy with God enable a person to see God and hear God in every-day life when they have first see and heard God within their heart in prayer.*