

The Quest for the Historical Jesus

From the series: Q & Q: The Religious Quest and Question

Text: Mark 3:20-21; Luke 4:23

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

The book, *The Historical Jesus*, by John Dominic Crossan, is rather thick, 500 pages, and it became a bestseller. In a conversation, Crossan said, "I never intended it to be a bestseller, for popular consumption. I was trying to get a discussion going in the scholarly world." But he said it became a bestseller, and he said, "I think all kinds of people didn't really get it." So he wrote *The Birth of Christianity* to try to explain what he was trying to do in the last one. This has 640 pages.

Since I won't have an opportunity to speak with you prior to the weekend in which John Dominic Crossan is with us, the first weekend in Lent, February 19-21, I want to take this opportunity to say a few words about him and about his work, and the importance of The Quest for The Historical Jesus, because we have a lecture series this year which really focuses there. Certainly, John Dominic Crossan is considered one of the, if not *the* preeminent historian and researcher in this quest. And a colleague of Crossan, Marcus Borg, is widely published in the quest. We have the Jewish scholar, Amy-Jill Levine, who will talk about the break between the Jesus Movement and Judaism, and, therefore, focus again in those early years of origination. Then, of course, Bishop Spong who will deal with the larger church and the larger theological issues in light of all the biblical research that is going on. We are very fortunate to have these people come to us, and I want to say a word about John Dominic Crossan this morning. Colette will follow up with that next week, as well, because I think it is important to set a context for someone like this.

John Dominic Crossan is a preeminent scholar. He is brilliant. When I read his work, when I see the kind of material that he marshals, and how he handles it succinctly, communicating that breadth of study, I just cry and want to throw in the towel. I mean, he's just one of those brilliant scholars. But he is also able to communicate with people in a very wonderful way, with a fine turn of phrase and memorable statements. Beyond that, John Dominic Crossan is a fine human being. I've only met him briefly, talked with him a couple of times, but others of you have been with him, and I want to say this to you as a congregation that, if

you would expose yourself to this person, I am sure you will like him, because he's not only brilliant, but he's gentle. And he is a person of great integrity. That impresses me so much. In the scholarly debates, it can get rather heated at times. But Dom Crossan is a person of great integrity who seeks to set forth his presuppositions, put them on the table, set forth clearly the methods he's following and then, on that basis, does his research so you know how he is going about what he does and, therefore, the conclusions that he reaches can be judged on that basis.

He would not claim that his methods are infallible or that his conclusions are absolute. Those who work in the field of historical research know that there is always a degree of probability connected with it. We've known for a long time, and he is very quick to admit, that we will never get a photograph of the historical Jesus. From the documentation that we have in the New Testament, the canonical Gospels, and in the non-canonical materials that were written about that time, and other non-canonical gospels out there — from all of that study it is impossible to be absolutely certain that we have the exact contours of that mystical figure who stands behind it all. But, through that kind of research, it is at least possible to get a good feel for Jesus — that one of whom we confess, "the word made flesh," that one who, in the Christian story, is the concrete embodiment of God in our historical context, the Jesus who is our window to God, is the center of that story as a part of that Christian tradition for over 2000 years.

John Dominic Crossan is, then, a brilliant scholar, a fine human being, and a person of great integrity who with great passion pursues his research of the birth of Christianity, a very important scholar, and we are very privileged that he would come into our midst. As he will share with us in greater extent, we are engaged at the present time in a very vital discussion and very vital research, seeking to find the contours of Jesus of Nazareth. A quest of the historical Jesus is going on with great passion and great intensity in our day, and it's a very important engagement. The historical Jesus is that figure behind the Gospels, behind the Apostle Paul, behind the Christian communities, behind the Christian creedal tradition. Crossan and others have been criticized for engaging in this research by some who would say, "Well, you've got Matthew, Mark, Luke and John." There's one writer who analyzes twenty such scholars and their research for the historical Jesus and says, "They're all wrong." And they come to distorted conclusions because they never see the whole Jesus, they just look at parts, they fragment Jesus.

Well to that, John Crossan would say, "The whole Jesus, which whole Jesus?" "The whole Jesus of Matthew, of Mark or Luke or John?" We know that those basic four canonical portraits differ considerably, not only in nuance; even within those Gospel records we know that Jesus makes some contradictory claims or contradictory claims are made about him.

You have heard me say before that, when I was going through college and studying Bible, we studied a course on the Harmony of the Gospels, and we meshed it all together. If there was a loose end dangling here, well, we had ways of getting rid of that, so we had one uniform portrait — the whole Jesus, so to speak. But when you really research the Gospels, you have varying portraits even within the Gospel. For example, within the same Gospel, Jesus will say, "The end is imminent," "This generation will not pass away before the son of man appears," and "The end is unknown, only the Father in heaven knows the time and season." Which did he mean? Did he say one thing one time, and one thing another time? Did he change his mind? Or did he say one thing and his interpreters say another thing? Those are the kinds of questions that are asked, but, as a matter of fact, you can't just say, "Well, read Matthew or Mark or Luke or John and get the whole Jesus." You have to say, "Which whole Jesus?"

So there's work behind the scenes, because we recognize now that those Gospels are layered traditions, and each Gospel was written with a specific perspective to a concrete community in a concrete context in order to deal with certain things. What was needed to be said in John's time, near the end of the first century, was not the same as what Mark needed to communicate around 70 A.D., all the Gospels being decades after the event itself, all the Gospels written reflecting a cumulative growing tradition, in various Christian locales, dealing with various challenges and crises.

I don't preach the same Jesus that I preached in 1960 when I came here the first time. And you can be happy about that! I don't preach the same Jesus that I preached in New Jersey. I don't preach the same Jesus I preached in 1971 when I came back. Part of that is my own growth and understanding, but part of that is the fact that you're not the same, and the world is not the same. If preaching is to be in any sense relevant, the proclamation of the word of God to concrete people in the here and now, then it will be an evolving kind of message. It will be pertinent to the context, time and space, locale, community. The crises and challenges that any people face at any given time, that's what draws preaching to its focus. And so it was with the Gospel writers, and so we have this canonical foursome that represent how that mystical figure back there was proclaimed in different places at respective times.

But how do we get behind that? Well, that's the purpose of this historical research. Why is it important? Because Jesus is our window to God, and the kind of Jesus we envision will impact the kind of God we worship, and the kind of God we worship will determine the kind of people we are.

History has been replete with examples of what Crossan would say, "killer children of a killer God." If God is that way, then we are empowered and legitimized to be that way. So, it is a very critical thing. Those Gospels, when you consider them carefully and in a scholarly manner, will indicate those layers to those who are trained to do it. Colette didn't read from Mark, but I have a text

printed in the liturgy from Mark 3, where the word is out that Jesus, in the blossoming of his Galilean ministry, is out of his mind, and his mother gets his brothers and they go to bring him home because he's "gone over the edge," according to rumor. Well, that kind of material, those who research would say, "You know, that's not really very complimentary." That must have been such a hard nugget in that tradition, that they couldn't wipe it out, although Matthew softened Mark, and Luke doesn't refer to it at all. Jesus' mother going after him and saying, "Come home, boy. You've lost it."

In the Gospel of Luke we have this wonderful inaugural sermon of Jesus in his home synagogue. There he reads from the prophet Isaiah. It was the reading of the day apparently, and he read those words of the prophet, which were read here from Isaiah 61, except he left out one phrase. He said, "To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Isaiah said, as was read here, "To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, *the day of vengeance of our God*." Jesus was a teddy bear. He didn't like to talk about God's vengeance. That's why he up and left John the Baptist. John the Baptist was talking about the day of vengeance, because the year of the Lord's favor for the righteous was a year of God's vengeance on the wicked. So Jesus left that out. (Selective, huh, Jesus?) Or did Jesus read it, but Luke left it out? We can't really tell, can we? Somebody left it out. Isaiah said, "To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, the day of vengeance of our God." Either Jesus left it out because it was contrary to where he was going, splitting off John the Baptist, or when he was splitting off John the Baptist, impressed somebody enough so that in the growing tradition there was a sense that Jesus was not about vengeance.

How do you tell? Well, you ask John Dominic Crossan. It's difficult to tell. We probably can't tell, but do you see what this is all about, trying to get back as best we can to that concrete historical figure in the misty flats behind those Gospels. But if the biblical text is a problem, even a bigger problem is the growing creedal tradition of the Christian movement. Dom Crossan will tell us that Jesus was one of the dispossessed and destitute persons of lower Galilee and that his movement gathered those who had lost everything. They didn't have to give up everything to follow Jesus; they didn't have anything. They were an itinerant group that went about to proclaim — and this was the amazing thing about Jesus, he was able to say to the destitute of the world, "You can be kings and queens, you can live fully human. If you lose your life you will gain it; grasping life, you lose it." Jesus had something about him that made people stand and walk tall, from the inside out. So, whatever started as a proclamation of good news to the poorest of the poor, it was a social movement; it had political and economic implications.

Then three centuries go by and there is a Roman vying for imperial power, and his name is familiar to you all, Constantine. In 312, he said, "Give me victory, I give you the empire." He wins, and Christianity becomes the established religion of the Roman Empire. Absolutely amazing, isn't it when you think about it? Three hundred years and a leap from a peasant movement by the dispossessed to

imperial power, the religious establishment of the Roman Empire. But there were strings attached. Constantine called a church council. This is the emperor, now, calling a church council in 325, the Council of Nicaea. And like with the MBA boys, Constantine locked up the bishops and said, "Come out with a uniform statement about the nature of this one in relationship with God," and the Council of Nicaea came out with a creed, the Nicene Creed. If you are from the Catholic tradition, it's the creed recited at every Mass. On the 21st of February here, our choir will chant the Nicene Creed. It will give you goose bumps. "Light of Light, God of God, before all worlds." Now, to celebrate their victory by coming out with a creed, Constantine threw the bishops a supper. There is a marvelous statement from the Church historian, Eusebius, who shows how the bishops walk through the rows of armed soldiers, the legionnaires. They walk into the royal apartments, into the depths, into the dining room where they recline on couches and sup with the emperor. Well, that's seductive! I mean, it would be for any of us.

When Nancy and I were watching the movie version of that marvelous novel, *Thornbirds*, at the part where Father Ralph is all regaled in brilliant red robes and he prostrates himself on that shiny marble of St. Peter's, with all of the gold and glitter. I said to Nancy, "You know, I was made for glory." I mean, it's seductive. Here we are a bunch of nobodies, and somebody invites us to a royal banquet. Well, I could distort quite a few texts, as a gift in turn. The Church tradition from that point on continually elevated its Christological statements, because, if the emperor is going to bow a knee to Jesus, Jesus better be the Lord of the universe. So he became Pantocrator — the ruling, reigning Jesus Christ, Lord of the worlds.

I can understand how that happened. If it hadn't happened, where would we be today? I don't know. Could a poor, peasant movement in lower Galilee have ever swept the world without achieving that escalation? I don't know. But, can you see that you would lose something too? Wouldn't establishment take the heart out of that movement? Seems just like common sense that that inevitably is going to happen. You see, you've got layers in the text. Now you've got creedal layers in the tradition. So, how are you going to get back there? Or, why should you?

Well, let me suggest that it's important because the triumphalism of an imperial established church isn't going over so well in our world today. Don't we have a suspicion that the Church is not going to be the triumphant institution of the world? Don't we realize that the great religious traditions are vying to gain their own positions in the sun? Aren't we recognizing the necessity, the importance, the enhancement and enrichment of the interfaith dialogue?

Elsie and Hung Liang are back in town, having buried their dear daughter Priscilla, and Elsie called and told about how Priscilla, being Chinese, raised in America, then living in Singapore, was part of a network in an international community, and a young Indian was so upset with her death that he went off to Nepal for a month of prayer and fasting. Buddhist friends gathered their

community in prayers for Priscilla and for the rest of her soul. What would you say if your daughter was dying, or if your daughter had died and somebody from another tradition said, "We're praying for you." Would you say, "Could I check your creed to see if it has any credence?" Of course, you wouldn't. We know these things down here. We know that all of us in the great movements of religious faith throughout the world are reaching for rest in that ultimate mystery of things. So, we live in a time of dis-establishment. That's what Douglas Hall said to us when he was here that weekend. The Constantinian era is over. We live in a global community, in a pluralistic situation where there is mutual interfacing between the great religious traditions and a triumphalistic church, and a triumphalistic Lord Jesus Christ isn't going to do it in our world. But, Jesus still does.

The great Albert Schweitzer, concert organist, brilliant biblical scholar, theologian, by the age of thirty years had written his classic *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, had written about Paul and the kingdom, had been a pupil of Francois-Marie Voltaire and studied with Franz Liszt, and was a leading pupil who could have played the organ around the world. He was an accomplished theologian and accomplished musician, and he goes to medical school at the age of thirty to learn to be a doctor to go to Africa, where he lived his life out in that humanitarian gift to those people. Why? In his *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, from which our hymn came, because it is his poetic words, "He comes to us as one unknown." He says that Jesus was wrong, dead wrong, he got it wrong. Jesus thought the end was near. Jesus thought he could get God to act. Jesus, in a desperate action, cast himself on the wheel of history and it didn't budge . . . and then it began to move and it crushed him. Jesus, Albert Schweitzer said, was wrong. Dominic Crossan will tell that further research has said that probably Jesus did not expect an imminent end of the world, but that's another story. For Schweitzer, Jesus was wrong . . . a marvelous martyr.

But, did he leave Christianity? No! Instead, he emulated Jesus and went to Africa. He gave up promising careers in music and in theology and he became a doctor for people in Africa. Why? Because Jesus got to him, that Jesus who was the embodiment of God, by the Spirit of God, that same Spirit moving in a Schweitzer who says, "Jesus was wrong about that," therefore, certainly not this exulted creedal Christ. But, by God, he's what being human is all about. It is what following God is all about. It is about using world communities, which is what Jesus was all about. Schweitzer followed Jesus, and I want to follow Jesus. And, I believe you want to follow Jesus. That's why it's so critical that we get the best take on it we can, because the closer we look, the better he looks.

References:

Albert Schweitzer. *Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*. Dover Publications; Dover Ed Edition, 2005.