

# Life of Christ, Part 5: Who is this Man?

*This is the fifth in a [12-part series](#) looking at the life of Christ.*

That inexhaustible source of quotable quotations, G.K. Chesterton, suggests an intriguing mind game: Imagine that someone who has never heard of Jesus Christ sits down to read the Gospel with a mind open to the possibility that what is there is actually true. In that case, Chesterton says, reading the Gospel “would lead, if not immediately to belief, at least to a bewilderment of which there really is no solution except in belief.”

Something like bewilderment, focused on the question “Who is this man?” must have greeted Jesus’ sudden appearance in Galilee when he began his public ministry there. The sensation he created is suggested in a passage from Matthew’s Gospel:

“He went around all of Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and curing every disease and illness among the people. His fame spread to all of Syria, and they brought to him all who were sick with various diseases and racked with pain, those who were possessed, lunatics, and paralytics, and he cured them. And great crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis [the ‘ten cities’ region east of Galilee], Jerusalem, and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan followed him” (Mt 4:23-25).

## **Gospel of the kingdom**

As this tells us, Jesus’ message was the “gospel of the kingdom.” But what is that? Joseph Ratzinger, the future Pope Benedict XVI, points to the important theological insight that Jesus himself is the kingdom of God that he preached, now

present among us. "Through Jesus' presence and action, God has here and now entered actively into history in a wholly new way," he writes.

But even at the start it wasn't all sweetness and light. Having returned to Galilee preceded by reports of the noteworthy things he'd been saying and doing in Judea, Jesus naturally visited his hometown of Nazareth. In the synagogue one sabbath, asked to read from holy Scripture, as was the custom, Jesus selected a passage from the prophet Isaiah about the coming of Israel's redeemer: "He has sent me ... to let the oppressed go free." With all eyes on him as he finished, Jesus added, "Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing."

#### **Not meant for a privileged few**

Pope Francis's *motu proprio*, *Aperuit illis*, establishes the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time as the Sunday of the Word of God. The Bible, the pope said in the apostolic letter, contains a great teaching. "The Bible cannot be just the heritage of some, much less a collection of books for the benefit of a privileged few," he said. "It belongs above all to those called to hear its message and to recognize themselves in its words."

He offered words of unity: "The Bible is the book of the Lord's people, who, in listening to it, move from dispersion and division towards unity. The word of God unites believers and makes them one people."

Some of the listeners were impressed, but others were skeptical. "Isn't this the son of Joseph?" they said – in other words, isn't this fellow a Nazarene just like us? So who does he think he is, putting on airs as if he were somebody special? Calmly, Jesus remarked that other prophets had suffered similar rejection. Furious now, the people hustled him out of the synagogue and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town stood, intending to throw him down; but "he passed through the midst of them and went away" (Lk 4:16-30).

## **A summons**

A truly ugly incident. But the power that drew others to him can be seen in the calling of the first apostles, two pairs of brothers – Peter and Andrew, James and John. These fishermen had first met him in Judea at the River Jordan where John the Baptist was busy preaching repentance and had perhaps accompanied him during his abbreviated ministry there. When his call to follow him came to them on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, summoning them to commit themselves to a great project that he somewhat mysteriously described as being “fishers of men,” they were primed to respond: “Immediately they left their boat and their father and followed him” (Mt 4:20).

## **Healings**

These early days were a time of healings. Matthew, Luke and John record one of the more striking of these events, although they differ in details: In Matthew and Luke, the healing involves the servant of a centurion – an officer in the Roman army of occupation, whereas John speaks of a royal official and his son. In either case, the petitioner sends Jewish elders to Jesus to plead his case, something they do willingly, explaining that the man was a friend of Jews who’d even built the synagogue in Capernaum for them.

Jesus accompanied the emissaries to the centurion’s home, but as he drew near, the centurion dispatched others to intercept him with a message: “I am not worthy to have you enter under my roof. Therefore, I did not consider myself worthy to come to you; but say the word and let my servant be healed.” Jesus marveled on hearing that. “Not even in Israel have I found such faith,” he told the crowd gathered around him. When the centurion’s people returned to the house, they found the servant healed (cf. Lk 7:1-10).

Why did Jesus work miracles? As in this case, compassion and

the desire to relieve the pain and suffering of others were certainly part of it. But this act of healing, like others, points to a further reason: Jesus' miracles were a way of acknowledging and confirming the disposition to believe that he found in many of those who sought his help. In fact the miracles often seem to suppose some degree of preexisting faith, almost as a condition of their being performed.

Of course it worked the other way, too: in the face of the skepticism he encountered in Nazareth, for example: "And he did not work many mighty deeds there because of their lack of faith" (Mt 13:58); and much later, when Pilate sends him to Herod Antipas who was "hoping to see him perform some sign," Jesus does not stoop to satisfy the curiosity of this cruel puppet ruler even to save his life (cf. Lk 23: 8-9).

## **Exorcisms**

Beyond that, says Germain Grisez, the miracles are best understood as "a frontal attack on Satan's kingdom, the sin-death complex." This is most obvious with the exorcisms – the expulsion of evil spirits who have taken possession of some person or persons.

As we saw in Christ's temptation by Satan, the life of Jesus was a lifelong war against the powers of evil – not just generic "evil" observable in unjust social structures and the like, but the personified evil of Satan and his demonic followers. Jesus' exorcisms thus were encounters in this ongoing warfare.

True, some of those "possessed" may well have suffered from mental illness or epilepsy. But others just as clearly were in the grip of those demonic powers whom St. Paul calls "the world rulers of this present darkness" (Eph 6:12). Today, too, exorcists testify to the all-too-real presence of these evil beings who make their home in tortured human beings.

That plainly was the case with the possessed man (or men – Matthew says there were two of them, while Mark and Luke speak of only one) whom Jesus and the apostles encountered in the wilderness on the far side of the lake. This was pagan territory, and it is significant that after the exorcism, when the formerly possessed man asks leave to stay with the one who has freed him, Jesus tells him instead: “Go home to your family and announce to them all that the Lord in his pity has done for you.” And so he did. Already it is becoming apparent that Jesus and his message are not for the Chosen People only (Mk 5:1-20).

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