

Gentle Jesus, Trickster Rebel

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In the mid-seventeen hundreds, Charles Wesley wrote this song about Jesus.

Gentle Jesus Meek and Mild
Charles Wesley

Gentle Jesus, meek and mild,
Look upon a little child;
Pity my simplicity,
Suffer me to come to Thee.

Lamb of God, I look to Thee;
Thou shalt my Example be;
Thou art gentle, meek, and mild;
Thou wast once a little child.

At a glance it would seem that he could have been writing this song based in general on Matthew 5, known as the Sermon on the Mount which begins with Jesus teaching the beatitudes. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. . . Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth."

Jesus goes on to talking about being salt of the earth and a light in the world. Then he gets to the section that we heard today where he says "Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also, and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.

We hear this often, as Christians. Turn the other cheek. We understand this to mean don't fight back, don't get into it with people, be the more gracious one and step aside. Be like our gentle Jesus, meek and mild.

That's one way of understanding Jesus, I suppose, although I have always been confused by this myself. When I read the gospels, I read of a Jesus who acts anything but meek and mild. I see someone who challenges the status quo, who stands with the marginalized, who defies the authorities. What I do not see is Jesus as doormat and I wonder why he would tell *us* to behave in this way.

And so these scripture always bugged me. Why on earth would Jesus tell others to behave in a ways that was so radically different from how he himself was?

This is where context becomes important. And context is not always easy to understand when we are outside of it. Let me give you an example.

Federal election 2011. Stephen Harper is hoping to turn his minority into a majority government. The Liberals, the official opposition, hopes to defeat the Conservatives and regain government status. The NDP, as always, is considered to be the distant 3rd.

Then during the campaign something shifted. The Liberals started to tank as the New Democrats began to surge forward in the polls. The Orange Crush logo started popping up all over social media. People started changing their profile pictures to Orange Crush to show their support for the New Democrats. It became an orange crush tsunami.

We know that in the end the Conservatives did get a majority. But the Liberals very handily lost their status as official opposition to the New Democrats. Pundits only needed to talk about the Orange Crush and people knew what they were referring to.

Of course, Orange Crush is actually the name of a soft drink. Before that 2011 election it was a soda pop. After the election, it was a pop culture reference to an election. But only in Canada would someone know that. And probably only for a time. Somebody looking back on that event would need to look at the context of that moment to understand it's meaning. In 30 years when an elderly Thomas Mulcair is greeted on the street with "Orange Crush man. Those were the days," the seventeen-year-old passing by probably won't know what they're actually talking about. She might, in fact, think they're reminiscing about a beverage.

In so many ways it is hard for us to understand the context that Jesus lived in. He lived under the oppressive regime of empire. The Roman Empire was huge, powerful and ruthless. To have behaved in a meek and passive way in the face of empire would have been akin to collaborating with the oppressor and Jesus certainly did not do that.

We do not live in such a circumstance. In fact, we are more *of* the empire than *under* the empire.

So how did we come to understand these scriptures in this way?

One of the reasons is that when we read the Bible, we are reading a translation as well as outside of a context that we understand. Theologian Walter Wink explains.

“When the court translators working in the hire of King James chose to translate the word *antistenai* as “Resist not evil,” they were doing something more than

rendering Greek into English. They were translating nonviolent resistance into docility. Jesus did not tell his oppressed hearers to not resist evil. That would have been absurd. His entire ministry is at odds with such a preposterous idea. The Greek word is made up of two parts: anti, a word still used in English for “against,” and histemi, a verb which in its noun form (stasis) means violent rebellion, armed revolt, sharp dissension.”

Wink concludes that “A proper translation of Jesus’ teaching would then be... ‘Do not retaliate against violence with violence’. Jesus was no less committed to opposing evil than the anti-Roman resistance fighters. The only difference was over the means to be used. The issue was how—not whether—one should fight evil.”

After being raised, like many people, on the notion that Christians somehow are supposed to be doormats to everyone who would stomp on them, Wink tells us that in fact, Jesus message is opposite. Subversion, not submission. But it’s also, mind, not to stomp back. No violence. Jesus says, rather, pull the mat out from under them.

Using Biblical examples and historical context Wink demonstrates what I always suspected, that Jesus was a rebel. He was counter-culture. And he understood his people enough to tell them how to rebel against the establishment without resorting to mere violence. His way was much more clever.

Jesus used three examples to illustrate his point (Matt 5:39-40).

“If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.”

“And if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well.”

“And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.”

Wink discusses each of these in depth. This is the gist of his explanations: Turn the other cheek. In Jesus day, you would not strike someone with your left hand as that was only used for unclean tasks. To strike someone on the right cheek with your right hand would require a backhand strike. A backhand strike would not be used for a peer, but an inferior, to put someone in their place, such as a servant. If then, you were to turn your left cheek to be struck, you would in effect be saying, I am your equal, if you’re going to strike me, strike me as an equal, with your fist.

Give your cloak. In Jesus day a poor person might give up their coat as collateral for a loan. Jewish law was very strict that the garment should be returned every evening because it was the only thing the poor person would have had to sleep in. As was likely all too common, the poor person would eventually fall into deeper debt and get taken to court to be made to pay. Having previously lost all

other goods of value, (including, often, their land) they have only their outer garment left to give. It would be humiliating. But Jesus counselled to also give their inner garment, their cloak, which would have left them naked.

Nakedness in Judaism was a taboo. For the poor person to have walked out of court into the street naked, the result would have been humiliation for the person who caused the nakedness. And it would have very publicly unmasked the system by which debtors were oppressed. It also potentially offered creditors a chance to see what their practices caused and perhaps even to repent.

Go the second mile. In Jesus day, the Roman soldiers could force subject people to carry their extremely heavy packs. This raised resentment and at times left the peasants far from home. In order to limit this, restrictions were introduced that a soldier could not force someone to walk more than one mile. They faced strict penalties for violating this. Therefore, if you were to walk that mile and then keep going, the soldier would first be thrown off guard, 'what are you doing?' He would then be put in a position of having to beg you for his pack back. The people to whom Jesus was speaking would have seen the humour in this.

In all of these examples, Jesus illustrates ways that the person experiencing the oppression can take initiative to turn the situation through, what Wink describes as an act of clowning. He notes that, "the Powers That Be literally stand on their dignity. Nothing takes away their potency faster than deft lampooning. By refusing to be awed by their power, the powerless are emboldened to seize the initiative, even when structural change is not possible." The goal here is not to say that every time one of these circumstances happens this is how you must respond, but to give examples of taking the initiative to seize the moral initiative, find a creative alternative to violence, assert your own humanity and dignity as a person, take control of the power dynamic and expose the injustice of the system.

Again Jesus demonstrates his place firmly rooted in and rooting for the margins of his society. Don't be submissive to this oppressive regime, he counsels. Wink is clear about two further points. The intent of these actions is not humiliation or revenge. But also it is not to shy away from discomfiting those involved. It is rooted in Jesus' uncompromising love. "Loving confrontation can free both the oppressed from docility and the oppressor from sin," he says. "Can people engaged in oppressive acts repent unless made uncomfortable with their actions?"

Most of us don't live with the kind of oppression that Jesus did. Yet Jesus didn't simply respond to what was happening to him, personally, but to the people around him who were most impacted by the social structures and brutal regime

that shaped the society. He stood in solidarity with them.

Injustice and inequality are all around us. Little injustices like gay jokes, blond jokes, general jerky behaviour. Big injustices such as Aboriginal children forcibly taken from their families, put into residential schools, punished for not speaking a language they don't know, and abused by their Christian caregivers. The fallout of this continues even today with aboriginal children in foster care and prisons instead of residential schools. Jesus calls us to act against these injustices. He calls us out of our docility, out of our propensity to not want to get involved or make a fuss.

Gentle Jesus, Meek and Mild doesn't speak to the Jesus I know. A more apt song would be this one:

Jesus Christ is raging, raging in the streets,
where injustice spirals and real hope retreats.
Listen, Lord Jesus, I am angry too.
In the Kingdom's causes let me rage with you.

Jesus is clear that the raging is not violent retaliation, but deft lampooning and calling out. It is to respond with an unrepentant love that does not let indignity and injustice go by unchallenged.

May we have the courage, and the faith, to stand in solidarity with Jesus.

Jesus Christ is calling, calling in the streets,
"Who will join my journey? I will guide their feet."
Listen, Lord Jesus, let my fears be few.
Walk one step before me, I will follow you.

Wink, Walter. "Jesus as Trickster Rebel." *The Tyee*.
<http://thetyee.ca/CitizenToolkit/2004/11/22/JesusTrickster/>