



“I SEE YOU”

Jesus’ encounters with cultural difference

In this series of studies, we will be looking at how Jesus interacted with the cultural and racial tensions and divisions that were deeply rooted in the society of his day. The intention is to help inform us, as his followers, as we seek to engage positively with the cultural and racial divisions of our own time.

A crucial element in this process is our choice to truly “see” people whose background, context and culture is different from what we are familiar with. The common greeting in isiZulu and isiXhosa is “*sawubona*” – “I see you”. The act of truly seeing a person invests them with humanity and dignity in our eyes. This, in turn, guides our subsequent relationship with them. It is the fundamental starting point to our obeying Jesus’ commandment, “As I have loved you, so are you to love one another”.

As we look at these various examples of Jesus in action at the junction between his own Jewish culture and the other cultural groupings that impinged on his world, it becomes apparent how his choice to truly “see” people opened the way to redemptive interactions.



The Story of the Good Samaritan *(Luke 10:25-37)*

Antagonism between Jews and Samaritans was strongly felt on both sides. As is often the case, it was made more intense because there was a racial overlap between the two groups. To understand the history of the Samaritans, we have to go back to the defeat of the Northern Kingdom, Israel, and the events recorded in 2

Kings 18:9-12. Most, but not all, of the Jews of Israel were deported to Assyrian territories; and, in turn, people from those territories were settled in Samaria among the scattered Jewish communities that had escaped deportation. God's judgement fell on the Northern Kingdom of Israel because they had been lured into idolatry and now, with these other peoples and their religious practices settling in the land, that tendency increased, resulting in a hybrid mixture of Torah observance, after a fashion, and paganism.

Roughly a century later the Southern Kingdom of Judah was defeated by the Babylonians and endured a 70 year exile of their own in Babylon. After that time, a remnant returned and set about rebuilding – first the temple in Jerusalem and then the walls of the city. The record in the Book of Nehemiah shows this returning remnant being threatened and opposed by the Samaritan groupings who were now established in the territory.

So there was a long history of ill-feeling between Jews and Samaritans, made hotter by the fact that they shared, to some degree, a common heritage. It is against this background that Jesus elects to tell a story with a Samaritan as its hero. What was he aiming to convey to his hearers by doing so?

The background to the parable is a question by “an expert in the law”, who asks Jesus, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus directs the question back to him, and in reply he shows his expertise in the Scriptures by alluding to Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. In doing so the expert in the law shows himself adept in the letter of the law, but Jesus doubts whether he has taken to heart the spirit of the law, hence the parable that follows.

1. What do you think Jesus saw in this “expert in the law” and the motivation behind his question?
2. How is it possible for us to be well versed in the Scriptures, yet fail to see their true meaning? Think of an example in your own life.
3. As the priest and the Levite came upon the man lying in the road, what did they “see” and what caused them to “see” in that way?
4. What are some of the things that define and limit what we see of human need, and consequently shape our response to it?

5. Why do you think the Samaritan was equipped to “see” in a different way? What can we learn from this?
 6. How does Jesus’ choice to make a Samaritan the hero of the story add bite to his question, “Which of these was a neighbour to the man?” What inner understanding was he wanting his hearers, and us, to grasp?
 7. Take time to apply this passage to your participation in our current racially tense context.
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Samaritan Woman



Jesus and the Samaritan Woman at the Well (John 4:1-26)

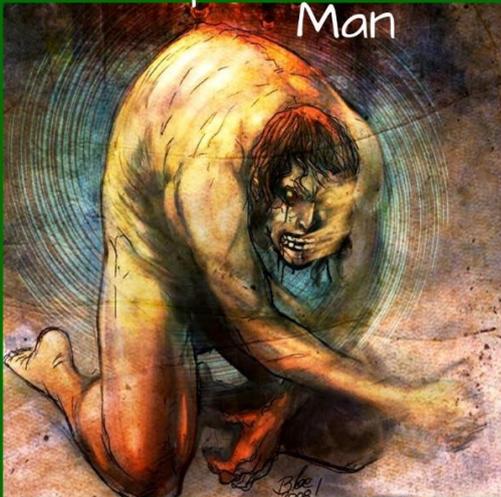
The context of this encounter was the journey on foot from Jerusalem in Judea to Galilee in the north, via Samaria, which was the most direct route, though one avoided by most Jews because of the tense and hostile relations between Jews and Samaritans. The distance between Jerusalem and Sychar is about 67kms, most of which would have been in Jewish territory (probably at least a full day’s walk the day before).

John tells us that the meeting at the well occurred at about midday, which would accord with a brisk morning’s walk from the border of Samaria.

1. Why do you think Jesus felt so impelled to travel through Samaria (vs.4)? How do you think his disciples felt about it?
2. What are our “Samaritan territories” that we avoid entering? What is the history behind our reluctance to go there? How does this account challenge us to view them differently?
3. The normal time for women to meet at the well was early morning and evening. Why do you imagine this woman approached the well at midday? How would she have felt to encounter a man, whom she recognized as Jewish, at the well?
4. How did Jesus look at this woman, and what did he see?
5. Why would it have been a shock to the woman to be spoken to by this man (vs. 9)? Why was it even more amazing that he would ask to drink from her bucket?
6. Jesus doesn’t get into the debate about difference that the woman seems to be raising, but focuses, rather, on the gift of living water. What is his purpose in this?
7. What is the bigger significance of him making this invitation to a Samaritan woman, and possibly one of dubious character? What limitations do we put on the invitation of the gospel?

8. Jesus words to her about her past and present sexual relationships shows her how fully he sees and knows her (c.f. vs. 29). Why does she not appear to have been shamed by that?
 9. Why does Jesus plainly state to this woman that he is the Messiah, even though he has been keeping it hidden when amongst the Jews?
 10. How was this woman feeling at the end of this remarkable encounter? What is she beginning to see?
 11. Why is she so well fitted to be an evangelist to her people? What would they have seen when she rushed back to her village? How did that stimulate them to go and see for themselves?
 12. Who might be “the woman at the well” for you?
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Demon-possessed Man



Jesus and the Man with a Legion of Demons (Mark 5:1-20)

The area across the lake from Galilee, in what would now be the region of the Golan Heights, was known as the Decapolis, referring to its ten constituent cities. It was a majority Gentile region. The cities were of relatively recent foundation (roughly 150 years) and began their life as centres of Greek culture. With the coming of the Romans, they wove together Greek and Roman cultural

influences. The Romans accorded them a high measure of independence as city states. It was a commercially prosperous area, with all the cities linked by good Roman roads. Some people of Jewish origin had settled in this area and become assimilated into the local cultural and religious practices. There was some trade along the shores of the Sea of Galilee, though orthodox Jews would have been cautious about any dealings they had with the people of the region, even though it was so close to them. There was, however, none of the longstanding hostility that governed Jewish dealings with the Samaritans. Perhaps it was because of the Decapolis that the Jews of the south (unfairly) spoke of “Galilee of the Gentiles”.

1. Jesus instructed his disciples to go to the other side of the lake for, it seems, just this single brief encounter with the demon possessed man. What does that tell us?
2. How did this man’s neighbours see him?
3. How do you think he saw himself?

4. How do you think the disciples felt as this man came rushing towards them? In what sense would it have reinforced their apprehension at being in foreign territory? How would you have felt?
 5. What did Jesus see as he looked at this man?
 6. Why is it remarkable that the man (via his inner demons) recognises Jesus as the “Son of the Most High God” (vs. 7)?
 7. Jesus’ brief sojourn in Gerasene territory has major economic consequences with the loss of the heard of pigs. In a sense, it confronts them with a challenge regarding whether to welcome him or not. What does this incident tell us about Christ’s impact on culture?
 8. Here, as in Jesus’ visit to Samaria, the people of the village come out to see what has happened. Here, as there, they encounter someone well known to them whose life has obviously been powerfully transformed. What does that show us about the cultural impact of the gospel?
 9. The man who has been delivered of demons is keen to go with Jesus back into Jewish territory, but Jesus sends him back to his own community as a witness to them. As a result of his testimony “all the people were amazed” (vs. 20). What does this tell us about the gospel finding authentic expression within each indigenous culture?
 10. In what ways has the missionary history of the church failed to recognise this lesson? What are the consequences for us in South Africa?
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Roman Centurion

Responding to Roman Oppression (Matthew 5:38-41)

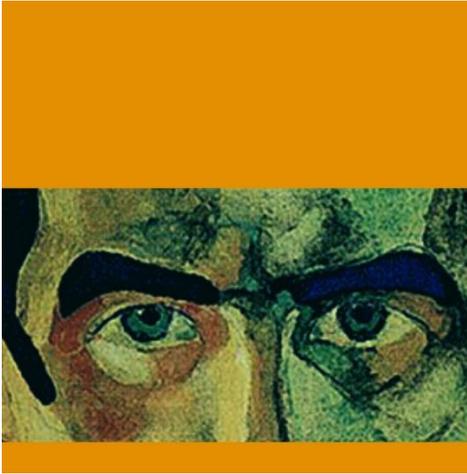
On the surface, this passage from the Sermon on the Mount would seem to have nothing to do with Jesus’ interaction with other cultures in his world, until you recognise that many of these practices which Jesus told his hearers not to be vengeful about were typical actions of oppressive Roman soldiers.

Near Nazareth, where Jesus spent his youth and young manhood, was the newly constructed Roman town of Sepphoris which was their capital in the Galilean region. Most of the work opportunities for builders (which Joseph and his sons were) would have been there. That would inevitably entail plenty of contact with Romans. Also the major trading route, the Via Maris, passed right through the region of

Sepphoris and Nazareth, so the Roman presence would always have been a felt reality. How often would Jesus, as a boy, have seen his father roughly commanded by a Roman soldier to carry his heavy pack for a mile? How often would that have been demanded of him as he grew up? How often might he have been on the receiving end of a backhanded blow across the cheek by some imperious Roman who took offence at something, or seen his friends and family members dismissively abused in this way? This “casual” abuse by oppressive forces is deeply scarring and leaves its victims seething with humiliation.

We don’t know what humiliations were directed at Jesus in the years before his public ministry, but we do know the violence of the Roman soldiers that formed the context of his crucifixion. Jesus, the Son of God, was brutally flogged, punched in the face, stripped naked, forced to carry the heavy cross-beam of his cross until he collapsed, and brutally nailed to the instrument of extreme torture. In the process, he lived out the principles that he expounded in the Sermon on the Mount.

1. The only way a right handed person can slap the right cheek of someone standing in front of them, is with a back-hander. That is a dismissive form of violence. To turn the other cheek is to invite a much more deliberate punch. What choice does that then present to the perpetrator? How does it invite them to truly “see” the victim?
 2. If someone has the legal right of exploitation and can demand your coat as payment of debt, how does the free offer of your shirt as well, make them actually face what they are doing?
 3. How does the voluntary offer to carry a soldier’s pack a second mile change the nature of the relationship between the two?
 4. How did Jesus illustrate this principle of not allowing oppression to rob a person of their humanity in the way he interacted with Pontius Pilate (John 18:33-38) and, later, with the soldiers (Luke 23:34)?
 5. How was Jesus able to maintain a secure sense of his dignity and freedom in the face of such cruelty?
 6. What, in your opinion, caused the centurion at the cross to say, “Surely this was a righteous man” (Luke 23:47)?
 7. How do the words of Matthew 5:38-41 speak into oppressive violence in our society?
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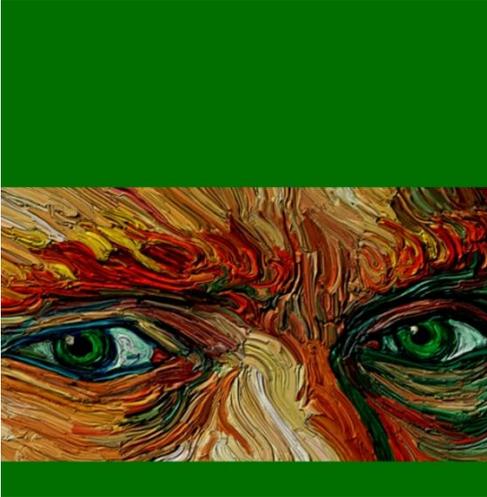


The Centurion's Request *(Matthew 8:5-13)*

As we saw in the previous study, oppressive humiliations at the hands of Roman soldiers were relatively common in Israel at that time. The Romans were a high-handed occupying force – the world super-power of their day. Jesus was very probably personally acquainted with the various minor physical humiliations that the Romans dished out, almost without thought. He certainly was going to be much more harshly abused by the Roman forces at his crucifixion

It is within this context that there comes this very unusual and quite humble request from a senior Roman officer whose servant is critically ill.

1. Why would such an entreaty from a powerful Roman figure have been truly remarkable? What might be a contemporary equivalent?
 2. What does this deep concern for the suffering of his servant tell us about this man?
 3. “Just say the word and my servant will be healed.” How was it, do you think, that he had such confidence in the power of Jesus to decree healing? What had he come to “see” in his estimation of Jesus?
 4. How did his cultural context as a Roman official actually enhance his insight into Jesus’ authority and his faith in Jesus’ power?
 5. This man is a Gentile from within the structures of Roman dominion and a part of that oppressive system. It would have been easy to see him as a representative of an evil political system, but Jesus sees in him something else. What was it that made Jesus ready to respond to his request?
 6. How would the commendation that Jesus gave to this man’s faith have been controversial and hard to hear for many in Jesus’ Jewish following? Why would this be so?
 7. What, do you think, would have been the impact on this Roman official of the miraculous healing of his servant?
 8. To what extent is he like the Samaritan woman and the Gerasene demoniac in being uniquely placed to be the doorway for the gospel into his culture?
 9. How do you imagine his faith in Jesus would have created a crisis for him in his role as an official within the Roman system of repressive control? If you were in his shoes (sandals?) how would you set about resolving that dilemma?
 10. In our context, how does this account challenge our stereotypes?
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Jesus Challenge to his own Culture

(Mark 7:1-15)

The religious and cultural difference of the Jews from all other nations was a point of great emphasis in Jesus' day. Historically, Israel had come under God's judgement and endured great hardships because of her adoption of the culture and idolatrous practices of the nations around her. It was a hard-learned lesson, and the strongly observant groupings of Jesus' day – Pharisees, Scribes and other teachers of the law – were determined to emphasise Jewish distinctiveness and practise their own form of social distancing from all other people groups.

Judaism had never been just a matter of theoretical affirmations and liturgical practices, but a whole way of life that shaped all aspects of everyday activities. That was its strength, but it also became a vast web of laws and actions that built a wall between Jews and all other people. It included attitudes of religious superiority, exclusivism and suspicion in the way Jews interacted with people of other cultures and nationalities.

Within Judaism, it easily gave rise to totalitarian attitudes that laid on everyone a constricting fidelity to a range of obligations and rules of behaviour. These were closely monitored by the custodians of orthodoxy, who were quick to shame people into compliance whenever they observed actions which they considered to be in breach of their rules.

Jesus often came into conflict with these aspects of his own Jewish culture. Many of his strongest critiques were directed at the attitudes and motivations of the Scribes and Pharisees. These occasions always sound a challenge to us within the religious establishment of our time and the ways we hold to the distinctiveness of our Christian Faith.

1. What was it about the basic motivation of these Pharisees and teachers of the law, and the sorts of things they majored on, that was so offensive to Jesus?
2. What are our Western Christian (or specifically Anglican) "traditions of the elders" that both impose internal restrictive obligations and external barriers to people genuinely encountering Jesus?
3. Jesus was not hesitant to challenge what he saw as the wrong assumptions of his own religious culture. What enabled him to see the way of God from a radically different perspective? How might that willingness to "see" differently work for us?
4. How do the instances which Jesus cites in verses 9-13 reveal the way they set about interpreting the Scriptures? How can we be alert to our own tendency to do the same thing and be helped to recognise what we are doing?
5. The great irony was that in their zeal to "protect" faithfulness to God, they were, in fact, denying the true values of God. How can we hold firm to the eternal principles and

ethical values of God without inserting our own individual and group self-interest or prejudice into the process?

6. Is it right for us to want to guard Christian truth and practice and not allow our “anything goes” age to erode our distinctiveness? What are areas of dispute in our context and how can we avoid adopting the motivations or behaviours of the Pharisees as we hold to God’s truth?