

15. IS JESUS A HISTORICAL CHARACTER OR A MYTH?

Fr Luigi Gioia
Theologian In Residence

1. From an historical viewpoint it is a fact that
 - 1.1. “on 16 September 1620, a merchant ship called the Mayflower departed from Plymouth, England, to voyage to America” and arrived in Provincetown Harbor on November 11, 1620.
 - 1.2. Historians also agree that “its passengers sought a new life, for some this meant religious freedom and for some a fresh start in a new land. They would go on to be known as Pilgrims, and influenced the United States of America in a myriad of ways”.¹
2. However there are few myths about them – for example the belief that
 - 2.1. they celebrated the First Thanksgiving in what is now the United States
 - 2.2. that they came to the New World for religious freedom
 - 2.3. that they were an inspiration for the American founders.
 - 2.4. Just for example concerning Thanksgiving, they did celebrate their first harvest but for “them, as for other puritans, a Thanksgiving was a formal day of prayer and worship” and “other Europeans [the Spanish] had already celebrated such occasions in the New World as early as 1565”.²
3. When, each year, people commemorate this event when they celebrate Thanksgiving they are aware that historically the link is tenuous. This does not prevent this link, however, from infusing meaning in the celebration and inspiring people.

Karen Armstrong on myths

4. “Today the word ‘myth’ is often used to describe something that is simply not true.”³
 - 4.1. “Since the eighteenth century, we have developed a scientific view of history; we are concerned above all with what actually happened.”
 - 4.2. “But in the pre-modern world, when people wrote about the past they were more concerned with what an event had meant.
 - 4.3. A myth was an event which, in some sense, had happened once, but which also happened all the time.
 - 4.4. Because of our strictly chronological view of history, we have no word for such an occurrence, but mythology is an art form that points beyond history to what is timeless”.⁴
 - 4.5. “In human existence [myths help] us to get beyond the chaotic flux of random events, and glimpse the core of reality”.

a. _____

¹ John Turner, “5 Myths About The Mayflower Pilgrims”, <https://www.historyhit.com/myths-about-the-mayflower-pilgrims/>

² *Ibid.*

³ Karen Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth*.

⁴ *Ibid*

SHARP FAITH

SUNDAY THEOLOGY TALKS AT SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE, NYC

5. "It is, therefore, a mistake to regard myth as an inferior mode of thought, which can be cast aside when human beings have attained the age of reason. Mythology is not an early attempt at history, and does not claim that its tales are objective fact".
6. "In mythology too,
 - 6.1. we entertain a hypothesis,
 - 6.2. bring it to life by means of ritual,
 - 6.3. act upon it,
 - 6.4. contemplate its effect upon our lives,
 - 6.5. and discover that we have achieved new insight into the disturbing puzzle of our world".
7. "A myth, therefore, is true because it is effective, not because it gives us factual information.
 - 7.1. If, however, it does not give us new insight into the deeper meaning of life, it has failed.
 - 7.2. If it works, that is, if it forces us to change our minds and hearts, gives us new hope, and compels us to live more fully, it is a valid myth".
 - 7.3. "A myth does not impart factual information, but is primarily a guide to behaviour.
 - 7.4. Its truth will only be revealed if it is put into practice – ritually or ethically.
 - 7.5. If it is perused as though it were a purely intellectual hypothesis, it becomes remote and incredible".
8. "We need myths
 - 8.1. that help us to realise the importance of compassion, which is not always regarded as sufficiently productive or efficient in our pragmatic, rational world.
 - 8.2. We need myths that help us to create a spiritual attitude, to see beyond our immediate requirements, and enable us to experience a transcendent value that challenges our solipsistic selfishness".⁵

* * * * *

9. This applies also to the way the Gospels and the New Testament as a whole has handed over to us the memory of Jesus.
10. Especially starting from the 19th century there has been a relentless 'quest for the historical Jesus' which has led to the publication of hundreds of biographies – or attempts to extract from the New Testament the historical facts about the life and identity of Jesus, his authentic sayings (the ipsissima verba) – and discard the mythical elements as purely legendary, false, or misleading. Jesus was 'reconstructed' as
 - 10.1. An "apocalyptic prophet;
 - 10.2. a charismatic healer;
 - 10.3. a cynic philosopher;
 - 10.4. a Jewish Messiah;
 - 10.5. who only subsequently "was deified".⁶

a. _____

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Cf. "Christ Myth Theory", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christ_myth_theory

SHARP FAITH

SUNDAY THEOLOGY TALKS AT SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE, NYC

11. This trend led to what was called the “demythologization of Jesus”. The idea is that
 - 11.1. “the Pauline epistles and the gospels describe the “Christ of faith”,
 - 11.2. presenting a religious narrative that replaced the historical Jesus who lived in 1st-century Roman Judea.”⁷
12. These scholars would argue that
 - 12.1. “Paul’s epistles lack detailed biographical information” and are “older than the gospels”
 - 12.2. That “the gospels are not historical records, but a fictitious historical narrative”.
 - 12.3. “They weave together various pseudo-historical Jesus traditions”.
 - 12.4. There might have been “a real historical person, of whom close to nothing can be known”.⁸
13. One of the most well-known theologians of the so-called ‘demythologization’ is the German Theologian Rudolf Bultmann (d. 1976)

“The importance of the New Testament mythology -says Bultmann- lies not in its imagery but in the understanding of existence which it enshrines. The real question is whether this understanding of existence is true. Faith claims that it is, and faith ought not to be tied down to the imagery of New Testament mythology”

“When, for instance, we read of demonic powers ruling the world and holding mankind in bondage, does the understanding of human existence which underlies such language offer a solution to the riddle of human life which will be acceptable even to the non-mythological mind of today? Of course we must not take this to imply that the New Testament presents us with an anthropology like that which modern science can give us. It cannot be proved by logic or demonstrated by an appeal to factual evidence. [...] That is why we have to discover whether the New Testament offers man an understanding of himself which will challenge him to a genuine existential decision”.

“If the event of Easter Day is in any sense an historical event additional to the event of the cross, it is nothing else than the rise of faith in the risen Lord, since it was this faith which led to the apostolic preaching.

The resurrection itself is not an event of past history.

All that historical criticism can establish is the fact that the first disciples came to believe in the resurrection.”⁹

Rachel Held Evans, “Inspired”

14. About the miracle stories:
 - 14.1. “Some will argue that the Bible’s miracle stories render the whole thing intellectually untenable, proving only the gullible and uneducated believe the Bible to be true.
 - 14.2. Others attempt to rationalize the miracle stories by developing elaborate, scientifically plausible explanations for them, whereby Lazarus suffers a cataleptic fit, the wise men spot a rare triple planetary conjunction, and Peter walks a conveniently located sandbank in the Sea of Galilee.
 - 14.3. Still others spiritualize every apparent miracle as strictly metaphorical, from the virgin birth to the healing of the blind and deaf to the resurrection of Jesus.

a. _____

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Rudolf Bultmann, *The New Testament and Mythology*, [ed.], Hans-Werner Bartsch, [trans.], Reginald H. Fuller, *Kerygma and Myth. A Theological Debate*, Vol. 1 [London: SPCK, 1972]], 41-43. 3

SHARP FAITH

SUNDAY THEOLOGY TALKS AT SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE, NYC

- 14.4. And of course, many insist that only a literal interpretation of all these events will do”.
15. Here is her take:
- 15.1. I had a hard time believing that a religion so concerned with bodies, ritual, suffering, and sustenance would produce a Messiah interested only in spiritual transformation and not physical transformation, when in Judaism the two are inextricably linked.
16. Then she makes a reference to the thought of Rudolf Bultmann:
- 16.1. I once attended a lecture given by a Christian theologian who rejected the notion of the physical resurrection of Jesus in favor of a spiritualized interpretation wherein Jesus simply rose from the dead “in his disciples’ hearts.
- 16.2. Just as Jesus lives on in our collective memory, he argued, so friends and family do not literally rise from the dead but rather gain “eternal life” whenever we honor their legacy.
- 16.3. After the lecture, I turned to the person next to me, a black pastor who had been fidgeting anxiously throughout the hour, and asked what he thought. “If the resurrection is about getting raised in memories and hearts,” he said, “that’s not very good news for me or my people.
- i. What does spiritual resurrection mean for all the brothers who died on slave ships and all the women lying in unmarked plantation graves?
 - ii. Where’s their justice?
 - iii. Where’s their liberation?
 - iv. “If there’s one thing historic Christianity is clear on,” he said, “it’s that bodies matter to God. A revolution without bodies isn’t a revolution.”
- 16.4. What makes the Bible’s miracle stories so compelling is the idea that God cares about people’s suffering, not simply their “spiritual blindness” or “spiritual poverty” but also their actual blindness and actual poverty.
- 16.5. The apostle Paul insisted to the Corinthian church that the physical resurrection of Jesus, as witnessed by more than five hundred people, portends the resurrection of all who have died, all who have suffered, and that without it “our preaching is useless and so is your faith” (1 Corinthians 15:14).
17. Then she says something that reminds us of Karen Armstrong’s approach to myths:
- 17.1. “I like how Dallas Willard put it:
- “We don’t believe something by merely saying we believe it,” he said, “or even when we believe that we believe it. We believe something when we act as if it were true.”
- 17.2. So perhaps a better question than “Do I believe in miracles?” is “Am I acting like I do?”
- i. Am I including the people who are typically excluded?
 - ii. Am I feeding the hungry and caring for the sick?
 - iii. Am I holding the hands of the homeless and offering help to addicts?
 - iv. Am I working to break down religious and political barriers that marginalize ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities and people with disabilities?
 - v. Am I behaving as though life is more than a meaningless, chaotic mess, that there is some order in the storm?
- 17.3. Indeed, the people in my life who seem most convinced of the reality of miracles are exactly the people who take the message of the Bible’s miracles to heart: hospital chaplains, food pantry

directors, addiction counselors, relief and development workers, nursing home volunteers, foster parents”.

An application to Jesus’ miracles of healing

18. “Scholars should not assume that establishing the historicity of the miracle traditions necessarily implies that Jesus carried out what would usefully be called a miracle by a modern reader”¹⁰
19. “The judgement of a twenty-first-century person on what exactly constituted an event that is inexplicable would be markedly different” [from what might have been considered inexplicable in the 1st century]
20. “And in purely medical terms, it is very difficult even just to establish what kind of disorders were suffered by those whom Jesus healed.
 - 20.1. As has long been noted, the gospels are notoriously short on detailed clinical description and medical terminology. [...] We can only guess at what is being described.
 - 20.2. The descriptions of the predicaments of those healed adhere to clear oral and redactional conventions in their depiction of symptoms. [...]
 - 20.3. Given that it is so difficult for us to have any real idea of the nature of the symptoms that those seeking healing presented to the historical Jesus, it seems unreasonable to claim that we can know anything much about the specific aetiologies of these complaints (and, of course, a specific symptom, such as blindness, can have a myriad of possible causes, physical, organic as well as psychological)”¹¹
21. There is a sense in which we can say that
 - 21.1. Whether or not Jesus did cure people
 - 21.2. He always healed them
 - 21.3. Distinction between curing and healing.
 - i. Curing is ‘the strategy of destroying or checking a pathogen, removing a malfunctioning or non-functioning organ, restoring a person to health or well-being’.¹²
 - ii. whereas healing he defines as ‘the restoration of meaning to life. It is the strategy of restoring social and personal meaning for life problems that accompany human health misfortunes.’
22. This distinction might seem far-fetched but it is important
 - 22.1. First of all, it does not deny that Jesus might have cured some people, that is restored the physical health of people
 - 22.2. At a time when medicine was very primitive and mostly ineffective (cf. woman with blood hemorrhage) people ordinarily sought for cures in spiritual healers, shrines etc...
 - 22.3. Today we would always go to see a doctor first because medicine has become (and will become more and more) able to cure
23. And yet we know that curing is not enough
 - 23.1. Restoration of health is not a purely physiological mechanism
 - 23.2. Significantly we talk about battle against cancer – the will to live on, fight, is acknowledged to play an essential part in the process
 - 23.3. It is not purely psychological

a. _____

¹⁰ Justin Meggitt, “The historical Jesus and healing: Jesus’ miracles in psychosocial context” (24)

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Pilch 2000, p. 153)

SHARP FAITH

SUNDAY THEOLOGY TALKS AT SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE, NYC

- 23.4. It is what is called psychodynamic: the close intertwining of mind and body that psychosomatic medicine has discovered is part of a larger whole
 - 23.5. This is where spiritual healing plays an essential role.
- 24. Spiritual healing can be seen as healing facilitated by spiritual practices (such as meditation and prayer).¹³
- 25. We need to feed our bodies, souls and psyches, giving ourselves resources to deal effectively with the many complex issues, emotions and interactions that occur in the course of health and healing.
- 26. More and more studies are showing that this is helpful. Through various means, ranging from art therapy to guided imagery, writing a journal and prayer, we help create a place for ourselves to explore the meaning of health and illness, and perhaps to discover new pathways to healing.
- 27. To be clear we are not talking about placebo effect here – although even placebo has been shown to be inexplicably effective (as seen especially from its opposite, the nocebo effect)
- 28. It is rather a deeper appreciation of the way in which illness and health depend on factors which are not just physiological, but inseparably
 - 28.1. Psychological
 - 28.2. Emotional
 - 28.3. Spiritual
 - 28.4. And social
- 29. This is why curing the physical aspects of illnesses is of limited impact or, on the contrary, successful only when the other aspects are tackled simultaneously.

a. _____

¹³ Meggitt, *Ibid.*