

Trinity College Cambridge
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Scenes from the Life of Christ: Jesus as Teacher¹
Ecclesiasticus 1: 1–13 John 1: 29–41

Christ is the House of Martha and Mary, Velázquez

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Jesus was a *rabbi*, a teacher, and readily recognised as such by his contemporaries. But what sort of teacher was he? How might he have fared in some 1st century Teaching Quality Assessment? The answer to **that** is, not well at all, by accepted standards of success.

He was quite unlike the Messiah his fellow-countrymen expected; he did not persuade the people in positions of power and influence ; his closest followers sometimes jibbed at what he had to say, in so far as they could understand at all; and after he had been crucified, they felt it was all up, and ran away, or skulked in fear.

Jesus, though, had things to tell his followers, good news: about the coming of God's kingdom, about what that kingdom is like, about how the kingdom was now breaking in on them, about how it would soon establish itself definitively. He told people – and he called everybody – to get ready; that what was needed was repentance, looking at the world in a radically different way, reassessing the nature and authority of the 'rule books' they had inherited.

In his teaching, he seems to have favoured aphorisms; he thrived on responding to questions, well-intended or otherwise; he related parables – stories that presented analogies with aspects of a familiar world, albeit with the intention to disconcert, to puzzle, to challenge.

Jesus' teaching, though, was far from just a matter of words. In addition to his memorable 'sayings', he taught by doing things. His many 'mighty works', including his miracles, come into this category. As Catherine Wybourne, a Benedictine nun, wrote recently, 'When we look at the life of Jesus, every word, every act, speaks of his desire to save, heal, make whole.'²

That granted, whilst recognising Jesus's intention to teach, and his apparent small success in building up a following that could withstand the first significant attempt at suppressing it, we have to take on board a point of absolutely central importance. Let me quote Archbishop Michael Ramsey, to make it for me:

¹ *The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he wakens – wakens my ear to listen like those who are taught* (Isaiah 50: 4).

² Sr Catherine's blog at <http://www.ibenedictines.org>, 2 February 2012.

‘We are tempted to believe that, although the Resurrection may be the climax of the Gospel, there is yet a Gospel that stands upon its own feet, and that may be understood before we pass on to the Resurrection. The first disciples did not find it so. For them, the Gospel without the Resurrection was not merely a Gospel without its final chapter: it was not a Gospel at all. [...] It is a desperate procedure to try and build a Christian Gospel upon the words of Jesus in Galilee, apart from the climax of Calvary, Easter, and Pentecost.’

Ramsey continues, ‘Jesus came not only to preach a Gospel but to *be* a Gospel.’³

The lesson the disciples had to learn turned familiar criteria of effectiveness and success upside down. Their culture, like our own and like all worldly cultures, involved sidestepping what another writer has called ‘a fear of unimportance and of being unable to control one’s life’. This we can recognise. But words of instruction alone are not enough to effect a vital transformation. We humans have whole-heartedly to enter into the central deeds of our Master’s life, death, and conquest of death. We find meaning through death to self, in following patiently the one who gave his life for others. That way is the way of his kingdom, and the only way to resurrection. It isn’t easy; but the *essential* work has been, and is, done by Him, not us.⁴

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The Dean asked me to build my talk around a picture. Paintings may help us *see* a point ; they may put us in the picture. Now, few artists appear to have been tempted by the subject of Jesus as teacher, a fact perhaps of interest in itself.⁵ But I have chosen one of those few instances, although in it, Jesus does not occupy the foreground. It is Velázquez’s ‘Christ in the House of Martha and Mary’, painted, probably, in 1618, when the artist was

³ A. M. Ramsey, *The Resurrection of Christ*, 2nd edn, 1946, pp. 7-10.

⁴ It may be noted, as an additional point, that Jesus ‘also has new experiences which surprise him, and these are clearly in evidence in the New Testament’ (Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 1993, p. 292). In his human reality, Jesus is a teacher who himself is open to learning.

⁵ This may result from a tradition established by Byzantine icon-painters, if not earlier still. In addition to the Pantocrator, their subjects were unique moments in Christ’s earthly life. Writing in the context of the iconoclastic controversies of the earlier 8th century, St John Damascene, for one, identifies this emphasis: ‘How give expression to the limitless, the immeasurable, the invisible? [...] It is clear that when you contemplate God, who is a pure spirit, becoming man for your sake, you will be able to clothe him with the human form. When the Invisible One becomes visible to flesh, you may then draw a likeness of his form. When he who is a pure spirit, without form or limit, immeasurable in the boundlessness of his own nature, existing as God, takes upon himself the form of a servant in substance and in stature, and a body of flesh, then you may draw his likeness, and show it to anyone willing to contemplate it. Depict his ineffable condescension, his virginal birth, his baptism in the Jordan, his transfiguration on Thabor, his all-powerful sufferings, his death and miracles, the proofs of his Godhead, the deeds which he worked in the flesh through divine power, his saving cross, his sepulchre, and resurrection, and ascent into heaven. Give to it all the endurance of engraving and colour’ (*Apologia against Those Who Decry Holy Images*, 3.8-9). Similarly, the 4th century Nicene creed and the ‘Te Deum laudamus’, later followed by the Apostles’ creed, all move straight from Christ’s nativity to his passion, without mention of his apostles, miracles, or teaching. A list of unique moments might later include Jesus among the doctors, but for his more protracted and less specific activity as a teacher to emerge as a subject for art, we must wait for the 18th century to have inspired suspicion of the supernatural and the metaphysical, leaving us with, say, a figure like Thomas Jefferson’s Teacher of Common Sense – one so unexceptionably level-headed that it is hard to see why he should have been crucified at all! See Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus through the Centuries*, 1985, especially chapters 7 & 15.

only nineteen years of age.⁶ A scene inset shows Jesus teaching, while Mary sits at his feet, and Martha expresses annoyance at her sister's apparently self-indulgent idleness.⁷ In the foreground, there is a contemporary scene, where an unwilling kitchen maid has been set the task of preparing a penitential meal. We are invited to reflect on these two scenes, and relate each one to the other. The picture has drawn a variety of interpretations, and by and large, commentators have found it easier to make sense of the inset than of the foreground, leaving the question of the relation between them problematic.⁸

As far as the inset is concerned, rather than comment on it myself, I'd like you to listen to the Carmelite, Ruth Burrows, on the underlying story, as it is told in chapter 10 of St Luke's gospel:

'Jesus enters Martha's house, and Martha does the only obvious thing for a guest – prepares his meal. But her sister behaves differently. Instead of helping Martha, which, after all, would be the charitable thing to do, Mary sits at Jesus' feet – to be fed by him. And this is the attitude he commends, the better part. When Jesus enters our house, he comes to feed us; we feed him by allowing him to feed us.'⁹

Looking at Velázquez's picture, we may quite readily identify with Martha or the kitchen maid. I often can. The maid looks a little weary, and resentful of the down-to-earth, hard, drab, realities of everyday existence.¹⁰ How might she (might we) receive Jesus's teaching and apply it? Our picture poses a central question: how might the barriers we erect between our activity, and the activity of God in us, be broken down? How can the Lord's disturbing take on things become our own, not just in theory, but in practice – at our own kitchen tables, that's to say (and College libraries can be kitchen tables for these purposes)?

Notice one small but telling detail in the picture: it's the jug and basin on the low table in the inset, bottom right. I find here an allusion to a centrally important happening at

⁶ http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/cid-classification/classification/picture/diego-velzquez-christ-in-the-house-of-martha-and-mary/272451*/moduleId/ZoomTool/x/17/y/o/z/1

⁷ The precise nature of this inset has been the subject of scholarly controversy: does it represent a painting hanging on the kitchen wall, an image in a mirror, or is it, as it were, a view through a hatch or window opening to a scene 'actually' happening next door or in an adjacent room? I don't think such ambiguity should lead us to choose between one interpretation and the other. What both have in common is a 'past' scene being vividly, clearly, imaginatively made present.

⁸ Emilio Orozco has aptly called this a *bodegón a lo divino*, a 'Still Life with a Sacred Meaning'. See the commentary on this picture by Julián Gállego, in the catalogue *Velázquez* (Museo del Prado, 1990), pp. 62-67. Gállego (p. 66) writes, 'Una escena 'de género' se convierte en escena 'sagrada' por la explicación introducida en el fondo', adding, interestingly, that 'el 'vulgar' bodegón aparece cuidadosamente pintado, mientras que el cuadro del fondo (con otro bodegoncito) es mucho más ligero de factura' [A 'genre' painting becomes a 'sacred' subject through an explanation introduced into the background. The commonplace 'still life' is carefully painted, whereas the background scene (containing another small 'still life') is much more lightly executed].

⁹ Ruth Burrows OCD, *Carmel: Interpreting a Great Tradition*, 2000.

¹⁰ Rahner, I think, also describes what we may call the 'kitchen-maid experience' when he writes, 'Man can try to evade the mysterious infinity which opens up before him in our questions. ... A person can, of course, shrug his shoulders and ignore the experience of transcendence ... He can live at a distance from himself in that concrete part of his life and of the world around him which can be manipulated and controlled.' (*Foundations*, p. 32).

the Last Supper, as chapter 13 of St John's gospel tells it (verses 3-17).¹¹ Jesus rises from the table, girds a towel around himself, takes water and a basin (there's the particular allusion), and starts washing his disciples' feet. Peter characteristically can't accept this, but Jesus insists. Referring to himself precisely as their Teacher, the Lord reverses the social expectations of their day: **he** ministers to **them**. The Teacher teaches by example, enjoining them, and us, willingly, actively, to accept what comes as his initiative. Jesus makes the first move; he invites us to respond, and do as he does, if only we'll be open and attentive. His example of humility and self-giving is applicable to Martha and to Mary, to Velázquez's kitchen-maid, and, not least, to us.

We notice finally how Velázquez's old woman seeks to put her young companion 'in the picture', to make things vivid for her. She seems to be directing her unwilling maid's attention to another picture (a picture on the kitchen wall / a vivid mental picture – it can be either), hoping to impress on her, through imaginative participation in the scene, what may be learnt from the encounter that's portrayed there. Imaginative participation is called for; words alone are not enough, as Jesus's own practice as a teacher demonstrates.¹²

'We have to experience, live, and suffer the truth, until from being merely a truth at the conceptual level, it has become a truth of the heart,' the theologian Karl Rahner says.¹³ There's no shortcut to seeing, and to following the crucified and risen Lord. It's folly by the standards of the world, but it's what we are taught, it's how we are taught, and how, please God, we'll learn from Jesus.¹⁴

¹¹ This detail appears not to have interested other commentators, and I can't prove that my own suggestion is correct. My underlying assumption, though, is that in a picture like this one, nothing is there in vain — and nothing is included, just for what Barthes called an *effet de réel*. Certain elements in a canvass may be enigmatic (and understated), but that is in order to engage the meditative *ingenio* of the viewer.

¹² In this connection, it is worth recalling what Quintilian has to say about ἐνάργεια (*enárgeia*) in *Institutio oratoria*, 6. 2. 29, 31–32 : "There are certain experiences which the Greeks call φαντασία, and we Romans *visiones*, whereby things absent are presented to our imagination with such extreme vividness that they seem actually to be before our very eyes. [...] Suppose I am complaining that a man has been murdered. Shall I not have before my eyes all the circumstances which it is reasonable to imagine must have occurred during the event? Shall I not see the assassin burst suddenly from his hiding-place, the victim tremble, cry for help, beg for mercy, or turn to run? Shall I not see the fatal blow delivered and the stricken body fall? Will not the blood, the deathly pallor, the groan of agony, the death-rattle, be indelibly impressed upon my mind? The result will be ἐνάργεια, which Cicero calls *illuminatio* and *evidentia*, a quality which makes us seem not so much to be talking about something as exhibiting it [*non tam dicere videtur quam ostendere*], and our emotions will be no less actively stirred than if we were present at the actual occurrence.' I'm grateful to Professor Mary Carruthers for reminding me of this.

¹³ Rahner, 'The Eucharist and our Daily Lives', in *Theological Investigations*, VII, 1971, p. 221. Elsewhere, the same author writes: 'For the person who has touched his own spiritual depths, what is more familiar, and what is more self-evident, than the silent question which goes beyond everything which has already been mastered and controlled, than the unanswered question accepted in humble love, which alone brings wisdom? In the ultimate depths of his being, man knows nothing more surely than that his knowledge — that is, what is called knowledge in everyday parlance — is only a small island in a vast sea that has not been travelled. It is a floating island, and it might be more familiar to us than the sea, but ultimately it is borne by the sea, and only because it is, can we be borne by it. Hence the question for the knower is Which does he love more, the small island of his so-called knowledge, or the sea of infinite mystery? Is the little light with which he illuminates this island — we call it science and scholarship — to be an eternal light which will shine forever for him? That would surely be hell' (*Foundations*, p. 22).

¹⁴ Professor David Davies has been particularly generous with his help, and I thank him most warmly. His contributions and those of Enriqueta Harris, to the catalogue *Velázquez in Seville* (National Gallery of Scotland, 1996) have been specially illuminating.