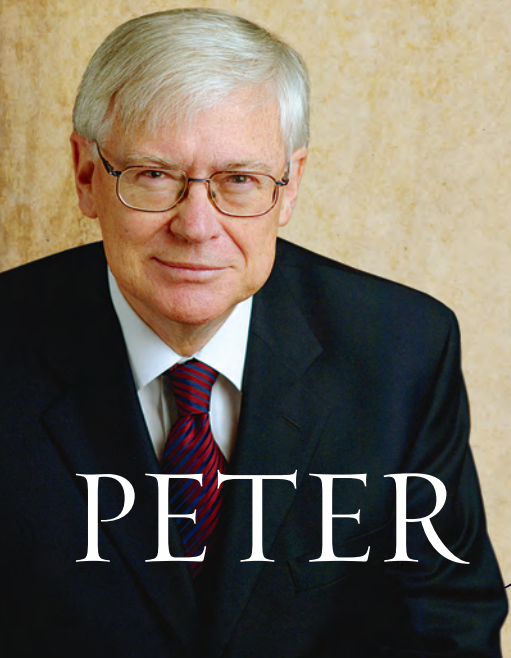


THE FUTURE OF JESUS

DOES HE HAVE A PLACE IN OUR WORLD?



PETER JENSEN

On almost any measure, Jesus has been the most influential human being ever to have lived. But is the time of his influence coming to an end? Does Jesus have a future in the secular West in the 21st century?

In *The Future of Jesus*, Dr Peter Jensen, Anglican Archbishop of Sydney, challenges believers and unbelievers alike to think again about Jesus—to consider him as an historical figure whose life, death and teachings lie behind so much of our civilization, and to whom many millions still express allegiance.

Who was Jesus? Can we believe in his miracles? If Jesus announced the coming of the Kingdom of God, why are we still waiting? Was he a failed prophet or a religious genius? And does it matter?

Dr Jensen's unfailingly intelligent investigation of these questions will doubtless provoke many to read the Gospels once more for themselves.

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The Future of Jesus

2nd edition

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For Beth and Anna

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1 | Jesus and his future

I've spent most of my life talking to people about Jesus, my great enthusiasm. But it's a job that's getting harder. I wonder how the future of Jesus and the future of our civilization will intersect. Let me illustrate from what I see happening in my own patch of the Western world—in Australia.

Four of our brightest and best—university medallists, historians, lawyers, Harvard graduates, first-class honours men—have written a book called *Imagining Australia: Ideas for our Future*. It is a work of bold and imaginative suggestions.

Rightly, they put a discussion of Australian values in the first chapter, headed 'Australian National Identity'. After all, it's hard to imagine the future without starting with matters of beliefs, identity, ethics, relationships, history.

But they do not have much room for Jesus in their vision of our future. They see that we need values, but

they favour humanist values. They seem to think that a secular state means a secular community. Perhaps they think that multiculturalism has disaffiliated Jesus; he is too divisive to be allowed to speak.

I wonder, though, how much they actually know about Jesus. It may be that they lack the requisite knowledge to bring him into the discussion. As an authority they casually quote, for example, Abraham Lincoln saying, “a house divided against itself cannot stand”.¹ No doubt he did say this. But Lincoln knew quite well, as did all his hearers, that he was quoting Jesus. He was citing a supreme cultural authority so he did not have to offer a footnote.

So it appears we have now reached a stage where four highly educated and intelligent Australians apparently fail to recognize a standard quote from the Bible. It explains, I suppose, the absence of Jesus from their treatment of values.

Mind you, it is a surface absence because, whether they know it or not, Jesus is basic to our history and therefore to our culture. Thus, when they are trying to upgrade traditional Australian characteristics such as a ‘fair go’, Jesus pops up anonymously. In a truly striking sentence they say: “The modern fair go demands that we should do unto others as we would have done unto ourselves”.²

Here again there is the utterly unconscious quoting of Jesus as a source of modern secular values. And there is the lovely irony that the modern fair go is described in the antique English of “do unto others”—straight out of the King James version of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus is there but he's been rendered invisible. He is an anonymous Jesus; he makes his contribution without acknowledgement. And that's one of the main challenges of the job I am doing.

Frankly, Jesus is slipping out of memory and imagination. We cannot really blame the authors of the book. As historian Stuart Piggin has observed, "Australia's social commentators and historians are tone deaf to religion".³ Dr Piggin documents the way in which the cliché that this is a country without a religious past is religiously repeated.

Professor Brian Dickey of Flinders University is just as trenchant:

The secular left liberal accounts of our history which became so dominant from 1950 to 1980 did not want to treat with Christianity, except to scorn it ...⁴

What is true in Australia, is also true in different ways across the Western world. In the modern secularized West, Jesus' kingdom has waned, you could say. His future is very unsure. And we have other gurus now. People seem to know so little about Jesus that they are unwilling or unable to refer to him explicitly in a discussion of values. We cannot bring him to the table to tell us what he thinks.

But—and here is a paradox indeed—another reason for his invisibility is that he is very well known. He is like the life of the party—everybody knows Jesus. His kingdom continues to wax, you could say. In fact, he is so well known, we do not even have to think or talk about

him. Which means, I submit, that we apprehend him via cultural clichés that hide the real Jesus from view. We do not know him all that well. Parts of his basic teaching would surprise us.

This leads me to another problem: it's the churches who talk mainly about Jesus, and who wants to hear what they have to say? This is a significant problem for me in writing this book. I am, after all, a denominational official—an archbishop no less. I carry the burden of the uncertain reputation of the churches. It is difficult to get beyond the boredom, indifference or antagonism that many people feel towards organized religion.

Perhaps it would be better for me to stick to something safe, like botany or golf, or even values or social justice.

Why Jesus?

For three main reasons.

First, because it is simply a fact that he is one of the two or three most influential people who have ever lived. “The name of Jesus”, said the American sage Ralph Waldo Emerson, “is not so much written as ploughed into the history of the world ...”⁵ Most people who have thought deeply about the subject will recognize the justice of this assessment.

Or take these words attributed to Napoleon Bonaparte:

I know men and I tell you that Jesus Christ is no mere man. Between him and every other person in the world there is no possible term of comparison. Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne and I founded Empires. But on what did we rest the creations of our genius? Upon force.

Jesus Christ founded his empire upon love, and to this hour millions of people would die for him.⁶

Second, his life and teaching have been so fundamentally important to our own culture. I would say that we are actually secular in a Christian sort of way. Many of us, for example, can quote the Sermon on the Mount as a part of modern humanistic ethics without knowing it.

People will always have trouble in understanding Western literature and history, and therefore Western identity, if they know little about Jesus; they will also have trouble understanding the modern world, a world in which the words of Jesus are taken with utmost seriousness, and acted upon, by millions of people, whether in the newly developing China or in the USA. His words have that sort of contemporary significance.

Third, because I think that, as well known as he is, he is still unknown. You could say that his sheer greatness has obscured the facts about him. Before he slips from view we at least ought to ask whether he has some vital and permanent truths to share with us.

I don't really want to talk about the institutional church or even religion. Such things are of marginal interest to me. Even though I quite like going to church, I find it hard to like the institutional organization. And I don't really think of myself as a religious person.

What I really want to do—and what I think each of us needs to do while we still have the chance—is to talk about Jesus, and to let Jesus talk back to us.

Where I live, there is no established church or religion. That is good law; we are fortunate not to have been afflicted with a state church. I also know that we have embraced multiculturalism, and the new and different Australia that is emerging as a result of our immigration policies is a wonderful place. But some seem to think that it means that we now have no basis for our civilization, apart from a few scaled-down general values like a 'fair go' and mateship, the myth of Anzac and the myth of Eureka.⁷

At a time when other cultures seem menacingly assured and powerful, we seem to have become very modest about our own past, very nervous about identifying who we are, very shy of receiving inspiration from some of the greatest words ever spoken.

We keep thinking that our inherent tolerance and decency will preserve us. We are, after all, a liberal society, interested in the rights of the individual, freedom of opportunity, and justice for all. I would suggest, however, that these traits are far more tenuous in us than we like to think. Put to the test, we may well fail them.

When we are no longer prosperous, when we have to struggle for existence, if terrorism becomes a part of life, what would make us stick to these values? Where would we look for inspiration?

If I wonder aloud about the future of Jesus, it is not because Christianity itself is dying. In many parts of the world faith in Jesus is growing at an astonishing rate. But in much of the West, we must now ask: Does Jesus Christ

have a future? Is he going to continue to influence us at all? Are we going to keep appealing to him for guidance? Is he going to continue to influence our lives for good? Can Jesus be brought into the conversation about the future? Many of our forebears looked to him as their inspiration when they laid the foundations of Western society. He did not seem to be a foreigner then.

My chief aim in this book is to inspire a widespread, adult reading of the New Testament Gospels. And I want you to understand some of the issues at stake as we read these documents. I want you to see what a surprising man Jesus was; I want to trace something of his impact on the world; I want to see whether there is a trajectory which suggests that there is more to come; and I want to see whether Jesus can speak with something like his old power about central cultural issues such as personal freedom, human relationships and the future of our world.



I was discussing this project with a sympathetic agnostic and she said this: “How can Jesus enrich the lives of unbelievers?” This is a question I would particularly like to address. I am trying to stand where you may be, willing to think as an adult about Jesus Christ but no surer than that. I certainly do not think that I own Jesus in some way. He speaks to us all.

I aim to be like a committed but sympathetic art critic, someone who stands with you before a portrait, who helps you to see for yourself what your own eyes are observing.

The critic cannot take your place. You will have your own perspective, your own angle of vision, your own presuppositions.

While I cannot predict the results, I do know that this discussion is vital, never more so than now. The quest for the truth about Jesus and his future has ramifications that are social political, cultural and personal.

For your part, you may be repelled, attracted, or left indifferent by such an investigation; in the end, you may share the perspective of that famous Beatle, John Lennon, who notably said:

Christianity will go. It will vanish and shrink. I needn't argue with that; I'm right and will be proved right. We're more popular than Jesus now; I don't know which will go first—rock 'n' roll or Christianity.⁸

Alternatively, however, you may stand with the great French philosopher and mathematician Pascal and say, “Jesus is the centre of all, the object of all; whoever knows not him, knows nothing aright, either of the world or of himself ... In him is all our happiness, our virtue, our life, our light, our hope.”⁹



What do we make of Jesus? Why do I say that we hardly know one of the most famous, the most universal of all men? As usual, there is a history behind these questions.

Almost for the first time, between the 17th and the 19th

centuries many intellectuals expressed an ‘enlightened’ attitude to Jesus. This enlightenment meant that people began to study the so-called ‘Jesus of history’ rather than the Christ of the Gospels—biography rather than theology; and miracles became as implausible as the tooth fairy.

The Church worshipped Jesus as both God and man, but the new rationalism accepted his humanity while rejecting his divinity. This new attitude became widespread in the community and that created a problem. What do you *do* with Jesus? How do you explain his sheer historical importance while denying his divinity?

The favourite answer was to turn him into the supreme moralist, to say that he taught us how human life is to be lived. He became a sort of peasant ethicist, a Galilean Socrates, a model human, a religious genius. In the reverent, but irreverent, words of Thomas Carlyle, the 19th-century thinker and historian, he was “the greatest of all Heroes”.¹⁰

The difficulty of this is with Jesus himself, because he is an awkward person to categorize. It’s hard to know why the Jesus of the ‘enlightened’ was crucified. Of course his teaching has moral implications, but he is not like a moral tutor, not like a philosopher, not like a hero, not like a pedagogue.

He was actually more like a man carrying a sandwich board proclaiming the end of the world. He was a man of the future. And that’s why he is unknown. If you asked for a popular summary of the teaching of Jesus, then “Love

one another” would almost certainly be the reply. Perhaps, to bring it right up to date, the reply would be: “Include one another and don’t discriminate; give everyone a fair go and be good mates”. But if you had asked Jesus to summarize his teaching, he would have said: “God’s kingdom is near; get ready for it”.

This is the conundrum: Jesus is universal, so he must have said really important things; but the things he did say are so particular, so time-bound, that they are not important—unless he is divine. So who is Jesus?

To answer this let’s start with the basics. Let’s start with what he said, and how the information has reached us.

The New Testament contains four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—written in the quite common Greek of the day. Matthew’s Gospel has him beginning his public life with this message: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (4:17).

Mark, probably the earliest of the Gospels, has him saying this: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (1:15). Both Gospels clearly regard this announcement as the burden of his message, the theme and the substance of the Gospels.

But, if so, why can’t they agree? Why does Matthew report his words as “kingdom of heaven” and Mark, “kingdom of God”? To answer that, we need to take a brief detour, which will help us see how the information about Jesus has reached us. The puzzle in this case is a relatively easy one to resolve. Matthew is reflecting, or perhaps

respecting, Jewish scruples about naming God aloud; ‘heaven’ is a euphemism for ‘God’. On the other hand, Mark, writing, as it is believed, to a non-Jewish audience, speaks directly of ‘God’ and ‘the kingdom of God’.

But what did Jesus himself say? Strictly, neither; he probably spoke Aramaic rather than Greek.

Our knowledge of Jesus is mediated by the Gospel writers in all sorts of ways. The perspective of the writers is one of the things that needs to be allowed for in any assessment of Jesus. The writers have already translated him linguistically. Their special interests will also ‘translate’ him historically. If we cannot accept this mediated, translated Jesus, we will have to find some other Jesus, for that is how the Gospels are.

To return to the task of getting to grips with the main theme of Jesus’ teaching: it is clear from Mark and Matthew that he placed special emphasis on saying “the kingdom of God is at hand”. When he said things such as “turn the other cheek”, “love one another” or “blessed are the poor in spirit”, it was because the kingdom of God was near. His call for righteous behaviour had a huge, hurrying urgency about it.

And what is this kingdom? In that time and place it was a very tricky phrase, stirring powerful emotions. Hundreds of years before, the people of Israel had enjoyed a successful period of history as a rich and powerful empire under the reign of David, who, in turn, saw himself to be under the reign, or kingdom, of God. In a

way the kingdom of God had come with David.

But that was far in the past. Closer to the time of Jesus, the recent history of Israel had been one of foreign domination and exploitation—by the Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, and then by the Romans. David's former kingdom was now merely an out-of-the-way province of that powerful empire.

As usual under such circumstances, there were different ways of reacting to foreign rule. Think of occupied Europe during World War II: some collaborated, some conformed, some conspired, some revolted, but most at least hoped. I guess that in World War II the hope of the enslaved people lay in Allied power. Some certainly believed in a Providence that would bring peace, freedom and justice. But they had no promise of this, no certainty.

Those who heard Jesus preach reacted to Roman rule in similar ways. Some, for example, collaborated. The difference was, however, that they had a history of a promise-keeping God. God had freed them from Egypt, as he said he would; God had freed them from exile in Babylon, as he said he would; God would do it again, because he said he would.

They were able to contrast their present miserable situation, as a nation under bondage to Rome and her lackeys, with the glowing promises of God for a national, indeed a universal, renewal. To them, God had a proven track record as a keeper of promises.

Why were the Israelites under the heel of Rome? They

did not read this situation as mere power politics; they read it in moral and spiritual terms. They understood that it had something to do with their own evil and with God's justice. And they hoped that God would save them. As a result, they were waiting for an open manifestation of the kingdom of God. The kingdom would include the putting to rights of all things, the judgement on the wicked inside and outside their own community, and the elevation of the righteous. It would usher in a new heaven and a new earth. This belief gave their national life a depth that is hard for us to imagine, let alone experience.

By now it will be obvious that two major factors shaped the original listeners. The first was their scriptures. They belonged to a nation of the Book; they lived in a world in which the teachings of the Book were the staple intellectual and spiritual diet. It provided them with their framework of meaning.

It's hard for us to understand this, because we have lost the sense of identity that a shared history created. In our national life there is now a vacuum where most people have a history. It's hard to find meaning, purpose and community without it.

The four authors of *Imagining Australia* know this. It is why they suggest that we begin to make the story of Eureka—the 1854 uprising by diggers in the goldfields of Victoria—our national myth. To me, Eureka seems rather weak on capacity to inspire and shape; even the authors admit that the story has never before “been so marginal

and unimportant for most Australians” as it is now.¹¹ How it will sustain humanistic Australian values in the hard years that may well lie ahead is impossible to imagine.

Even appropriating the biblical history of Israel as if it were our own could be a better option. It has certainly been done before now; think of how the biblical story sustained the American slaves.

The Bible was the history book of the Jewish nation at the time of Jesus. But it was more than mere antiquity: it was filled with a powerful sense of promise, of time waiting to be fulfilled, of events still to come. It was promise on one side, and faith on the other. In the end it became the history book of and for Western culture, not just the slaves. It provided for us, until very recent times, the dynamic of hope in a world without clear meaning, purpose or community. We have lost the biblical narrative, but we have not replaced it.

There were two key factors shaping the original hearers of Jesus’ words: the first was the Bible, and the second was their political situation. Here, all their hopes collided with all their fears. In this climate, one option was violent terrorism and insurrection. According to ancient historian Paul Barnett: “In Jesus’ day the ‘zealot’ hope was expressed in the slogan ‘No master except God’”. Dr Barnett calls one zealot, Judas the Galilean, the Osama bin Laden of his day. He led a revolt in AD 6, when Jesus the Galilean was about ten years old.¹²

‘No master except God’ is a declaration in favour of

God's kingdom. Dangerous words; you could acquire a crown of thorns for announcing its imminence. Depending, of course, what you meant. Jesus, understandably, spent a lot of time explaining what *he* meant.

He certainly talked about the coming of the reign of God upon the earth. The coming of God's reign (as opposed to the kingdoms of men) is going to be cataclysmic. Furthermore, he called it by the dangerously ambiguous word 'gospel', or 'good news'.

On the one hand the word went back 700 years to the prophet Isaiah and his prediction that the Lord would come as King to his people. This he called 'gospel'. On the other hand, in the first-century world of the Roman Empire, it referred to the birth of a new heir to the throne or to the coming of the Emperor, both 'good news' events.

To call Jesus' announcement 'good news', therefore, was to suggest at least that there was going to be a competition for the throne, that here was a message political. When Jesus preached, conflict was in the air from the very beginning. No wonder he was crucified: that was a decisive answer to his pretensions.

There has been considerable scholarly discussion as to whether Jesus himself was a zealot, an insurrectionist. Sober historical research cannot sustain that. "My kingdom", he said to Pontius Pilate, "is not of this world" (John 18:36)—and it was this idea that he spent a lot of time explaining. The 'kingdom' language was not a call for political or military action as such. "Turn the other

cheek” had a very contemporary application in those days. He clearly taught that the kingdom was a gift of God to be expected, but not as a product of human effort to be worked towards or brought in by violence. Not that these crucial distinctions seem to have done him much good; it was crucifixion for him.



Have you noticed that the closer we get to the Jesus of history, the more interesting but less relevant he seems? No wonder men such as Carlyle and his French contemporary Ernest Renan laid great stress on his ethics and his model life. What else were they to do with him? How else could you explain his influence?

When we approach the real Jesus, when we put him back into his times, we can understand him better. But he seems so particular that it becomes impossible to give him any universal significance. That is why his future has become problematic; because he spoke so much about what was to come.

What sense can we make of this?

He was a prophet of a kingdom, which he said was very near in time. Why on earth, then, are we still talking about him? Is it not time to shake off the cultural burden of a failed prophet, this pale Galilean as he has been called, and to seek fresh heroes, fresh gurus? Or, perhaps, to shake ourselves free from all who call on us to repent and believe? Surely Jesus has no future precisely because

he thought so much about the future. His future did not come, it is past, he no longer matters. The wonder is that he has had any influence at all. Perhaps there is no contest between Jesus and rock 'n' roll.

To investigate these themes two ways open before us. The next chapter explores the 19th-century answer. Perhaps we can salvage something out of the teaching of Jesus, without having to accept his apocalyptic announcements? Or, perhaps, if we really understood him, we can finally rid ourselves of his kingdom, and reduce him to an ancient moral sage?

Or, then again, perhaps not.

Endnotes



one

1. M Duncan et al., *Imagining Australia*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2004, p. 32.
2. *ibid.*, p. 20. The 'fair go' is a traditional Australian colloquialism about justice and freedom of opportunity. To give someone a 'fair go' is to allow them the chance to do something without unfair conditions or interference.
3. Stuart Piggin, 'Australia's Christian Heritage: Taking Stock of our Spiritual Capital', Founders' Day Address, Christ Church Lavender Bay, 26 August 2005, p. 5.
4. B Dickey (ed.), *The Australian Dictionary of Evangelical Biography*, Sydney Evangelical History Association, Sydney, 1994, p. viii.
5. RW Emerson, *Nature and Selected Essays*, ed. L Ziff, Penguin, New York, 2003 (1982).
6. I have traced this quote, although in a different form, to HP Liddon's 1866 Bampton Lectures, *The Divinity of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ*, Longmans, Green & Co., London, 1903, p. 150, which gives the details.
7. The Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) fought a famous campaign at Gallipoli beginning on 25 April 1915. Anzac Day, commemorated each year on that day, has become a potent symbol of national pride. The Eureka Stockade was a fairly small and short-lived rebellion by miners on Victoria's gold fields in 1854 over the cost of mining licences, taxation and other similar grievances.
8. Maureen Cleave, 'How does a Beatle Live? John Lennon lives like this', *London Evening Standard*, 4 March 1966.
9. Blaise Pascal, *Thoughts on Religion and Philosophy*, trans. Isaac Taylor, Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Adams and Co., London, 1894, p. 142.
10. Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-worship, and the Heroic in History*, Lecture I, in *Sartor Resartus*, JM Dent and Sons Ltd, London, 1908, p. 249.
11. M Duncan et al., *op. cit.*
12. PW Barnett, 'Jesus, Paul and Peter and the Roman State', in Michael Nai-Chiu Poon (ed.), *Pilgrims and Citizens: Christian Social Engagement in East Asia Today*, ATF Press, Adelaide, 2006, pp. 63-77.



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Dr Peter Jensen was born and raised in the eastern suburbs of Sydney. He trained for the ministry at Moore College and was ordained in 1969. After serving at St Barnabas, Broadway, next door to the University of Sydney, he returned to Moore College as a lecturer in 1973. He became Principal of Moore College in 1985, and served in that capacity until he was elected Archbishop of Sydney in 2001. Dr Jensen is a graduate of the universities of London, Sydney and Oxford. His academic studies have been in the areas of history and theology. He is married to Christine, and they have five children and 10 grandchildren.

Does Jesus really belong any more in our modern world? Not surprisingly, Anglican Archbishop Peter Jensen thinks he does. But not perhaps in the way you might think. He writes:

“I don’t really want to talk about the institutional church or even religion. Such things are of marginal interest to me. Even though I quite like going to church, I find it hard to like the institutional organization. And I don’t really think of myself as a religious person.

What I really want to do—and what I think each of us needs to do while we still have the chance—is to talk about Jesus, and to let Jesus talk back to us.”

