

Multigenerational Homily Martha Hodges June 1, 2008
“Who Was Jesus?”

Many people think about Jesus as the founder of the Christian religion, but this is wrong. The Christian church didn't come along until many years after his death and Jesus had no intention of starting a new religion.

Jesus was a devout Jew who lived and preached as a Jew, brought his message to the Jewish people, tried to reform the Jewish society of his times, and was executed as a Jewish threat to the Roman occupiers of Palestine.

Jesus was a Jewish holy man – one of many wandering the hills of ancient Palestine, begging or relying on friends and sympathizers for food and shelter. Like many others, he was a mystic. He had visions and believed that God spoke through him. When he spoke of God as his father, he spoke as all Jews of that time did. He called God Abba, or Papa. This was the way that his people understood God, like a stern and demanding, but protective and loving father.

Another one of these wandering holy men was John the Baptist, or John the Immerser. He was called that because he practiced immersion, or getting into the river and letting the water cover you. John practiced ritual purification by immersing himself and others in the river that represented the Spirit, as a way of becoming closer to God. Jesus was one of John's many followers, or disciples. He learned from John not only how to preach to a crowd and perform the ritual of purification; he also learned a special esoteric spiritual practice of uniting with God through meditation, prayer and trance. After John was killed by Herod, the Jewish governor of Judea who had been appointed by Rome, Jesus set off on his own and started his own ministry, gathering followers and preaching about the Kingdom of God. He became more and more of a threat to Herod and to the Jewish High Priest as he gained fame and influence.

Jesus, or Yeshua, as he was known in the Aramaic language he spoke, wanted to reform the way sacrifices were made at the Temple in Jerusalem. The Temple was the center of Jewish power, a huge and beautiful white and gold building that all Jews tried to visit on holy days to make sacrifices of animals and grain and wine. The priests that ran the Temple were very powerful and wealthy. These priests slaughtered the animals and tended the fires that cooked the meat and grain offered as sacrifice, and poured oil and wine on the fires, sending the aroma up to God to be enjoyed by Him. Jesus wanted his people to be able to sacrifice their own animals themselves and this would have made the temple priests much less powerful.

So the High Priest was angry at Jesus, and the King, Herod, was also suspicious of him. Jesus had many followers, men and women, not just the twelve apostles who were his inner circle. This was enough to make Herod nervous, but Jesus also preached that the Jewish people owed their love and obedience to their God, not to the Romans or the rulers they put in place, like Herod. So Herod and the High Priest agreed to capture and

execute him. They wanted to make an example of him to the Jewish people and so they used the most horrible form of execution they had at their disposal, crucifixion.

What was the message that Jesus preached that made him so dangerous to the authorities? Jesus preached to the outcasts and the poor and oppressed, people who were scorned by those in power. He was very popular with these people, and if the people realized their potential power, they might have revolted and caused Rome a lot of trouble.

Jesus was an outcast himself. First, he came from Galilee, from a small and poor village far from the important city of Jerusalem. He had rough manners and rough clothes. He wasn't highly educated or polished, and people in the south, in Judea, where Jerusalem was, looked down on people from his region. Then there was the question of his birth. His mother Mary, or Miriam, was already pregnant when she married Joseph. In those days, nobody thought much about that, but his father, Joseph, came from another town and so wasn't around during Mary's pregnancy. People wondered if his father might not be a Roman or someone else from outside the Jewish community, and this made Jesus an outcast, too. This was probably one reason he preached so much about welcoming everyone into his circle, into the Kingdom of God.

Then there was the question about the sacrifices. Because Jesus was excluded from the Temple and was wandering in the hills and along the River Jordan, he came to believe that sharing meals with his followers was a different and better way than making sacrifices was to honor God. When he sat with the people who offered him hospitality and prayed and ate with them, he felt the presence of God. This was a whole different way of practicing religion and it didn't depend on the Temple or the Temple's priests. This shared meal was the heart of Jesus' ministry and, today, you can see it being re-enacted symbolically in the practice of communion in Christian churches. Jesus was a revolutionary thinker who might well have led his people in a real revolution, or so the authorities believed.

Eating and drinking and talking together was a big part of how Jesus convinced people to believe in the Kingdom of God. So it's appropriate that today we're going to be enjoying a meal together. But before we do, we're going to sing a song about inviting everyone to the welcome table, inviting everyone into the circle of justice, love and wholeness.