

# Ruthless Truth

## *Jesus and creativity*

### PROFOUND ENIGMA

#### Tantalising tension

Across the sweep of the New Testament Jesus' creativity moves between two points of reference, 'son of a carpenter'<sup>1</sup> and 'son of the creator',<sup>2</sup> creativity permeates Jesus' humanity and divinity in tantalising tension.

We meet Jesus on the dusty Palestinian roads as a maverick rabbinical teacher. This phrase 'a carpenter's son', the Greek word is *tekton*, implies someone who works with hard materials such as wood, metal, stone or iron, so might best be described as a builder.<sup>3</sup> The Hebrew behind the Greek possibly suggests a furniture maker (chests, cupboards, stools, benches). Another tradition speaks of Jesus making yokes and ploughs.<sup>4</sup> Joseph was a skilled craftsman and there is every reason to believe that he apprenticed Jesus in these skills and they worked together in the Nazareth area.<sup>5</sup>

It is fascinating that while some were dismissing Jesus as 'son of a carpenter' others were asking, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power?"<sup>6</sup> Intriguingly, these two qualities of wisdom and power are the central characteristics biblical writers attribute to God's unique creativity!<sup>7</sup> Following Jesus' resurrection and the events of Pentecost the early Christian community began to see Jesus' creativity in cosmic terms:

'He is the image of the invisible God,  
the firstborn of all creation:  
for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created,  
things visible and invisible ...'  
(Col 1:15-16)

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<sup>1</sup> Mt 13:55; Mk 6:3

<sup>2</sup> Col 1:15-17

<sup>3</sup> Traditionally the Eastern (Greek) church tended to stress his working with wood, while the Western (Latin) church tended to speak of an iron worker

<sup>4</sup> See WL Lane *'New International Commentary on the New Testament'* Eerdmans 1974 p 202-203

<sup>5</sup> It is believed by many scholars that they may have both worked on the extensive building programme of the increasingly prominent town of Sepphoris just a few miles north of Nazareth. Note that Jewish Rabbis usually had training in a manual craft, Paul was a tentmaker

<sup>6</sup> Mt 13:54 cf Mk 6:2

<sup>7</sup> cf Prov 3:19; Ps 33:6



## Catch the idea

Whatever the implications of Jesus' background as both 'son of a carpenter' and 'son of the creator'; the gospel writers reveal his remarkable creativity as a natural expression of the way he lives his practical everyday life.

Jesus' creativity is riddled with enigma. You cannot exactly pin it down, or explain precisely what is going on. Trying to catch the impact Jesus' creativity would have made, we are using some modern-day examples to serve as metaphors for how Jesus lived and acted creatively. Held together these images perhaps give a flicker of the idea of what an encounter with Jesus might have been like:

- **Jesus as ... Conjurer**
  - *a person who performs magic tricks and slight-of-hand illusions*
  - Street-level close up hand-magic
  - Using simple things with unexpected results
  - Intriguing, questioning, fascinating, frustrating and perplexing
  - Breathtaking, how do they do it?
- **Jesus as ... Balloon sculptor**
  - *an artist who makes representations of objects using long pliable balloons*
  - Takes something fragile and twists and bends it
  - Is it going to explode under the pressure?
  - You don't know what it is going to be until then last moment
  - You get it as a gift in the end!
- **Jesus as ... Chess-master**
  - *a chess player of such skill that they can usually beat experts*
  - Working within a confined space with strict rules / controls
  - Not under pressure but creating pressure
  - Obstacles become opportunities
  - Careful thinking, flashes of brilliance, checkmate!
- **Jesus as ... Comedian**
  - *a performer who entertains an audience by making them laugh*
  - Vulnerable but unafraid
  - Humour that bites
  - Draws people in, then displays their inner attitudes
  - Laughter that reveals
- **Jesus as ... Guerrilla-gardener**
  - *an activist who reclaims land from neglect or perceived misuse by planting it*
  - Cultivates neglected spaces
  - Brings beauty secretly
  - Takes communities by surprise
  - Works for 'the joy of it' and not for reward



➤ **Jesus as ... Adbuster**

- *an anti-consumerist subverting mainstream society by counter-advertising*

- Uses culture to challenge culture
- Exposes hypocrisy
- Wakes us up to the illusions we live with
- Reveals and demonstrates alternatives

Jesus was ruthless, relentless and unsparing in his pursuit to bring truth, communicate truth and confront people with truth where ever he went. Truth is about reality, that reality which harmonises with the character of God. Jesus did it creatively using every means available and possible.

## DEEP IMPACT

### Complex originality

Jesus is totally original. Within the complexity of his personality there is a constant flow of opposites and paradoxes that take his uniqueness to profound depths. Jesus is ...

simple : profound  
controlled : uninhibited  
relevant : mysterious  
affirming : challenging  
planned : spontaneous  
reliable : unpredictable  
assuring : disturbing  
attractive : shocking

You never know what Jesus is going to do next; whatever he does you are taken by surprise, even shocked, yet everything he does is always appropriate and absolutely right. Jesus is not a bundle of contradictions but rather an integrated complex of incarnated creativity. Unpredictable freedom rooted in life-giving truth; someone living from the centre on the edge.

### Miracles - power that speaks

Probably the most obvious and dramatic examples of Jesus' creativity are his miracles; turning water into wine,<sup>8</sup> opening the eyes of the blind,<sup>9</sup> resuscitating the dead,<sup>10</sup> not to mention walking on water<sup>11</sup> or stilling the storm<sup>12</sup> and very much more – experiences all seemingly outside the possible experience of ordinary people.

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<sup>8</sup> Jn 2:1-12

<sup>9</sup> cf Mk 10:46

<sup>10</sup> Lk 7:11-17

<sup>11</sup> Mt 14:29

<sup>12</sup> Mk 4:35-41



These powerful works all point towards the source of his being having its origins in God who is creator:

“The father who lives in me does his works”  
(Jn 14:10)

The Greek words used by the Gospel writers demonstrate their astonishing creative source:

- **Dunamis** - a demonstration of the powers of the age to come, *now!*
- **Erga** - the works of God who continues to act through the Messiah;
- **Semeion** - signs of the presence, power and character of God’s kingdom;
- **Exousia** - actions that demonstrate God’s rule and authority are present;
- **Thaumasios** – events that fill people with a sense of awe and wonder.

Nevertheless, Jesus’ creative use of powerful works was restrained; he would not do them to order,<sup>13</sup> nor would he do them where there was unbelief.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, each miracle was communicating and illustrating some aspect of truth about the kingdom of God. Like his teaching, especially his parables, Jesus’ miracles confronted people with truth. In fact his words and his works could not be separated, they supported each other and illustrated and explained each other at every stage:

“If I am not doing the works of my father, then do not believe me.  
But if I do them, even though you do not believe me,  
believe the works so that you may know and understand”  
(Jn 10:27-28)

Christian creativity should expect to be able to touch the miraculous, but whether or not it does, what we see in the quality and character of Jesus’ powerful works should mark our creativity; everything communicating worth and value that harmonises with the character of God and as necessary with appropriate restraint.

### Parables – ‘little revolutionaries’

As a teacher Jesus was without equal, his stories and illustrations were finely crafted masterpieces, but it was his use of parables that was exceptional. Here are stories, not told for entertainment but for direct impact that challenges the hearer to the extent that it confronts them with themselves, with truth and with the challenge to act differently. They are literally ‘little revolutionaries’ that have the potential to turn people and circumstances around.

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<sup>13</sup> cf Mt 16:1-4

<sup>14</sup> cf Mt 13:58



There are five images that can help us illustrate how a parable works:

- **A joke:** a story where the impact comes at the end with an unexpected twist; you either 'get it' or you don't 'get it'. You have to 'get' parables; in fact parables 'get' you!
- **A hook:** a story that catches people's attention and draws them into the events being described, unconsciously dropping their psychological guard and making them vulnerable;
- **An arrow:** a story where the colourful details are like the flights at the end of the shaft helping to balance the sharp point as it flies through the air in order to hit the target;
- **An explosion:** a story that confronts the hearer with truth that may be disturbing as well as potentially liberating; the truth becomes like pieces of shrapnel that once embedded work their way towards the heart;
- **A circle:** a story, that like a joke, divides hearers into those 'inside' and 'outside' a circle; those who 'get it', those who don't 'get it' and those who are not amused! Each parable is a moment of judgement.

Stories that are able to have the type and level of impact of a parable have to be crafted to an astonishing standard. They have to be culturally appropriate and sensitive. They have to work with a sophisticated understanding of human psychology. They have to be pared down to the minimum so there are no extraneous elements. At the same time they have to be able to carry, communicate and focus core ideas that can be delivered with maximum impact as the story reaches its climax. That is creativity as communication at its most dramatic!

## MASTER CRAFTSMAN

### Spirit of wisdom

Creativity flows from the complexity of character and personality. Jesus was a master craftsman, not only in using his skills to work with physical materials, but also in the way that he shaped ideas and communicated them to others. It was prophesied that Messiah would be filled with the 'Spirit of wisdom', the quintessential hallmarks of biblical creativity. Jesus unquestionably demonstrates this.

With a person so profoundly creative as Jesus, it is impossible to either illustrate all the aspects of his gift or identify its key characteristics. However, we will make the following observations:

- **Confidence:** Jesus always comes over as supremely confident in all that he says and does. This self-assurance seems to provide the foundation for his creative expression:

'Jesus knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands,  
and that he was coming from God and was going to God,  
rose from supper, laid aside his garments,  
girded himself with a towel and washed the disciples' feet'  
(Jn 13:3-4)



- **Humour:** We have no record of Jesus cracking jokes as such (though there is every reason to believe that he would have done), and humour is so subtle and culturally nuanced that we are probably missing a great deal of it in reading an English text based on a Greek account of memories that were originally in Aramaic. Nevertheless, we get flashes of what Jesus' humour might have been like:

‘It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle  
than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God’  
(Mk10:23)

“Why do you see the speck in your neighbour’s eye  
and not notice the log in your own eye”  
(Lk 6:41)

These are hyperbole, but they work with the ridiculous; while they are serious they are the sorts of comment that would have raised an ironic laugh.

“Be merciful (wombish) as your father (*Abba*) is merciful (wombish)!”  
(Lk 6:36)<sup>15</sup>

The Hebrew and Aramaic word for ‘merciful’ or ‘compassionate’ is the plural form of the noun for ‘womb’; so here is the image of a ‘daddy with a womb’!

- **Childlikeness:** Jesus is insistent that an essential quality is childlikeness:

“... whoever does not receive the kingdom of God  
like a little child shall not enter it.”  
And he took them up in his arms, laid hands on them and blessed them’  
(Mk 10:15-16)

Jesus brings the perspective of a child in the way he looks at the world and expresses his creativity. There is a blend of seriousness and wonder. Fearlessness, mixed with an insight that sees things quite differently. Picasso said, “It took me a lifetime to paint like a child”; Jesus’ creativity has the same feel to it.

- **Nature-man:** Jesus’ creativity is constantly marked by the natural world around him. He moves creatively within it and uses its images to illustrate his ideas. He goes into isolated locations to pray<sup>16</sup> and teaches on both the hills and in open spaces;<sup>17</sup> places where ‘reeds are shaken with the wind’.<sup>18</sup> He is at home with the wild animals.<sup>19</sup> He talks about the ‘birds of the air’ and the ‘flowers of the field’,<sup>20</sup> and also of wolves.<sup>21</sup> Jesus was familiar with reading the sky to anticipate the weather.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See Marcus Borg ‘*Jesus: A New Vision*’ SPCK 1993 see p 102, 130-131 plus footnotes

<sup>16</sup> Lk 6:3; 9:28

<sup>17</sup> Mt 5:1; Mk 6:35

<sup>18</sup> Mt 11:7

<sup>19</sup> Mk 1:13

<sup>20</sup> Mt 6:26-29

<sup>21</sup> Mt 7:15; Jn 10:12



Jesus speaks of trees<sup>23</sup> and grapevines<sup>24</sup> and even the wind and the waves obey him<sup>25</sup> All of this provides so much of the environment, the materials and the texture for Jesus' creativity.

▪ **People-person:** Jesus was an insightful observer of human nature and a keen eye for the lives of people across the whole of the society in which he lives. These are the people he meets on his travels and the characters that illustrate the stories that he tells. There are farmers,<sup>26</sup> shepherds<sup>27</sup> and fishermen,<sup>28</sup> fathers and sons,<sup>29</sup> women as homemakers and householders.<sup>30</sup> There are day labourers<sup>31</sup> and lonely travellers.<sup>32</sup> People who are mentally ill,<sup>33</sup> fevered,<sup>34</sup> lame, blind and lepers<sup>35</sup>, both the dying and the dead.<sup>36</sup> There are rulers,<sup>37</sup> landlords,<sup>38</sup> merchants,<sup>39</sup> builders<sup>40</sup> and servants.<sup>41</sup> There are weddings and funerals,<sup>42</sup> bridesmaids<sup>43</sup> and undertakers,<sup>44</sup> and very many more ...

These are some of the primary colours that make up the pallet of Jesus' creativity. How this all comes together in Jesus teaching and actions, and what other aspects of Jesus' creativity are revealed we shall now explore further.

### Graphic sound-bites

One of the most distinctive imprints of Jesus' creativity are his powerful pithy sayings. They are very visual in their imagery, highly memorable in their format and often increase their impact because they juxtapose ideas often turning expected responses on their head. Here are just a few ...

- "Wise as serpents, harmless [innocent] as doves" (Mt 10:16)

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<sup>22</sup> Mt 16:2-3

<sup>23</sup> Lk 6:43-44

<sup>24</sup> Jn 15:1

<sup>25</sup> Mt 8:27

<sup>26</sup> Mt 13:31-36

<sup>27</sup> Lk 15:3-7

<sup>28</sup> Mt 4:18

<sup>29</sup> Lk 15:11-32

<sup>30</sup> Lk 15:8-10

<sup>31</sup> Mt 20:1

<sup>32</sup> Lk 10:30

<sup>33</sup> Mt 4:24

<sup>34</sup> Mk 1:30

<sup>35</sup> Mt 11:10

<sup>36</sup> Jn 11:1-44

<sup>37</sup> Lk 13:31-32

<sup>38</sup> Mk 12:1-9

<sup>39</sup> Mt 13:45

<sup>40</sup> Lk 20:17

<sup>41</sup> Lk 12:35-38

<sup>42</sup> Mt 11:17

<sup>43</sup> Mt 25:1

<sup>44</sup> Mk 5:38-39



- "... like lambs into the midst of wolves" (Lk 10:3)
- "First shall be last and the last shall be first" (Mk 10:31)
- "The meek shall inherit the earth" (Mt 5:5)
- "Blessed are you who weep now for you shall laugh" (Lk 6:21)
- "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek turn the other also" (Mt 5:39)
- "If any one forces you to go one mile, go also the second" (Mt 5:41)
- "I will make you fishers of men" (Mt 4:19)
- "... made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 19:12)
- "... those who lose their life for my sake ... will save it" (Mk 8:35)
- "Let the dead bury the dead" (Lk 9:60)
- "... those who humble themselves will be exalted" (Lk 14:11)
- "Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you" (Mt 5:44)
- "God's kingdom has suffered violence, violent people plunder it" (Mt 11:12)
- "Sabbath was created for people, not people for the Sabbath" (Mk 2:27)

### Creative tension

Time and again we see Jesus quite deliberately creating tension in a situation before he acts. He seems to do it for different reasons; to heighten expectations, to create unexpected space, to test faith, it is part of his creative technique. Seven examples are ...

- **Raising Lazarus:**<sup>45</sup> Jesus stayed two days longer where he was
  - "Lord if you had been here my brother would not have died"
- **Wedding in Cana:**<sup>46</sup> The mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine"
  - Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?"
- **Feeding the crowd:**<sup>47</sup> "Send the crowd away to buy something to eat"
  - Jesus answered, "You give them something to eat!"
- **Syrophonecian woman:**<sup>48</sup> She begged Jesus to heal her daughter
  - Jesus said "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to dogs!"
- **Galilee storm:**<sup>49</sup> They saw Jesus walking on the sea and cried out in fear
  - Peter said "If it is you command me to come", Jesus said, "Come"
- **Shoal of fishes:**<sup>50</sup> "We have worked all night but we have caught nothing"
  - Jesus said, "Let down your nets for a catch"
- **Taxes to Caesar:**<sup>51</sup> "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor?"
  - Jesus said, "Show me the coin used for the tax"
- **Taxes to Temple:**<sup>52</sup> "Does your teacher pay the temple tax?" "Yes"
  - "The children are free ... however we do not want to cause offence"

<sup>45</sup> Jn 11:1-44

<sup>46</sup> Jn 2:1-11

<sup>47</sup> Mk 6:30-42

<sup>48</sup> Mk 7:24-30

<sup>49</sup> Mt 14:22-33

<sup>50</sup> Lk 5:1-8 cf Jn 21:1-8

<sup>51</sup> Mt 22:19-21

<sup>52</sup> Mt 17:24-27



## Shock of the true

Jesus' creative style and his passion to communicate truth meant that he often would say and do things that were considered scandalous, shocking people who saw it or heard about it:

- **Teaching Torah:**<sup>53</sup> “You have heard it said, ‘Do not commit adultery’”
  - “I say to you, anyone looking lustfully has already committed adultery”
- **Withered hand:**<sup>54</sup> They asked, “Is it lawful to cure on the Sabbath?”
  - “It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath ... Stretch out your hand!”
- **Woman in adultery:**<sup>55</sup> “The law commands us to stone such women”
  - “Let anyone without sin be the first to stone her”
- **Eating with sinners:**<sup>56</sup> “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors?”
  - “I have come to call not the righteous but sinners”
- **Samaritan woman:**<sup>57</sup> His disciples astonished he was talking to a woman
  - “Come and see a man that told me everything I have ever done!”
- **Bread from heaven:**<sup>58</sup> “Our ancestors ate manna in the wilderness”
  - “Those who chew on my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life”
- **Temple:**<sup>59</sup> “This temple has been under construction forty-six years”
  - “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up!”
- **Simon:**<sup>60</sup> “A prophet would know the woman touching him was a sinner”
  - “Her sins which were many have been forgiven”
- **Washing disciples feet:**<sup>61</sup> Peter said, “You will never wash my feet”
  - “I have set you an example that you should do as I have done to you”

## Martial art

How does Jesus handle conflict situations? He does so with remarkable and unpredictable creative dexterity. A real art form to behold!

We must remind ourselves that Jesus clearly declares that children of God are peacemakers, they do not retaliate physically when attacked and they are to love their enemies.<sup>62</sup> We expect peacemakers to speak words of reconciliation, search for resolve and calm troubled situations and this is true. However, in his ruthless pursuit

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<sup>53</sup> Mt 5:27-28

<sup>54</sup> Mt 12:9-14

<sup>55</sup> Jn 8:1-10

<sup>56</sup> Mt 9:9-13

<sup>57</sup> Jn 4:1-42

<sup>58</sup> Jn 6:22-59

<sup>59</sup> Jn 2:13-25

<sup>60</sup> Lk 7:36-50

<sup>61</sup> Jn 13:1-20

<sup>62</sup> Mt 5:9, 39, 44



of truth we often see Jesus shattering open situations that superficially appear inoffensive; this is part of his creative style. He deliberately precipitates crisis by carefully chosen words and actions, probing beneath the surface for hidden attitudes and motives that are seething with hostility.<sup>63</sup> Jesus created conflict with the purpose of resolving conflict. Jesus' peacemaking is alive with creativity, actively making peace. He is a craftsman at work who, from the raw materials of fear, hatred and violence creates masterpieces in human lives and circumstances.<sup>64</sup>

Jesus displays that inner security that we have already referred to.<sup>65</sup> He stands in the teeth of conflict with poise and stature. Fearless in the face of the mob, whether threatening to throw him over the cliff at Nazareth,<sup>66</sup> stone him in Jerusalem,<sup>67</sup> or arrest him in Gethsemane.<sup>68</sup> For Jesus a conflict had to count for something or else it was a useless or dangerous diversion. Sometimes he defused the situation by his teaching,<sup>69</sup> at other times he simply walked off and left them standing.<sup>70</sup> On other occasions wisdom dictated that he hide in the Temple<sup>71</sup> or escape across the Jordan.<sup>72</sup> On each occasion he had to decide whether what faced him was a creative crisis. His work was not to be endangered or frustrated. Nevertheless, when the time was right he would allow himself to be engulfed by the mob as a means of winning the greatest victory of all.<sup>73</sup>

### **Creativity of the Spirit**

Watching Jesus engage with life situations is breathtaking; every word and action spontaneous and unpredictable. His message is packed with paradox and yet remains consistent and without compromise. Jesus meets every circumstance with profound wisdom. Not the usual blend of common sense, broad experience and mental agility, but inspired insight and penetrating perception, radical and ruthless while at the same time disarming and winsome. Jesus wields words and actions like a master swordsman and moves with all the skill of a warrior in hand-to-hand combat. But he does not fight to win, rather to proclaim the truth and expose evil. He is always looking to find that space in the human heart and mind. Opponents may be silenced<sup>74</sup> but they are never humiliated. The door to God's kingdom is always open.<sup>75</sup> Some of Jesus most powerful statements about God's love come in

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<sup>63</sup> Lk 4:16-30

<sup>64</sup> cf Mk 5:1-20

<sup>65</sup> cf Jn 13:3-4

<sup>66</sup> Lk 4:9

<sup>67</sup> Jn 10:31

<sup>68</sup> Jn 18:4

<sup>69</sup> Jn 7:48

<sup>70</sup> Lk 4:30

<sup>71</sup> Jn 12:36

<sup>72</sup> Jn 10:39-40

<sup>73</sup> Mk 15:11-14

<sup>74</sup> Mt 22:34

<sup>75</sup> cf Mt 23:37; 7:36-50



response to the bitterest attacks against him. Here is true creativity, creativity of the Spirit.

### Questions

1. What are the particular 'stand out' qualities of Jesus' creativity?
2. How do you think Jesus might have worked with creativity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?
3. How are miracles creativity?

### Reading and Resources

- R Alter '*The Art of Biblical Narrative*' Basic Books 1983  
E de Bono '*Serious Creativity*' HarperCollins 1995  
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