# WAS JESUS A PRACTITIONER OF NON-VIOLENCE? READING THROUGH MARK 1.21—3.19 AND MARTIN LUTHER KING

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*Few contemporary writers have done more to help us understand the political context of Jesus' life and teaching than Ched Myers. What better place to begin this discussion than with an exegesis of Jesus' life as one who demonstrated a path of non-violent resistance against the oppressive forces of his day. Myers strips away our romantic illusions and reveals Jesus engaged in a titanic struggle with both religious and political authorities and continually risking his own life in the process.* **CS**

James W Lawson, one of Martin Luther King Jr's closest colleagues in the civil rights movement of the 1960s, continues to work tirelessly in the tradition of non-violent activism for social justice.[1] Speaking at a King commemoration recently he said something that caught my theological attention: "If you want to understand King you must look at Jesus." He was acknowledging that King was a committed Christian who understood the gospel as a vocation of advocacy for the oppressed, of love for adversaries and of non-violent resistance to injustice. King cannot be understood apart from his faith: he organised his movement in church basements, prayed as he picketed, sang gospel hymns in jail, preached to presidents and challenged other church leaders to join him (most poignantly in his 1963 "Letter from a Birmingham Jail"). But Lawson was saying more than this. He was alluding to the undeniable, if uncomfortable, parallels between the Jesus story and the ministry of King.

Like King, Jesus was a member of an ethnic community that suffered great discrimination at the hands of a world power. Both of them: (1) spent time *listening* to the pain of the dispossessed and broken, and advocating on their behalf; (2) worked to *build popular movements* of identity, renewal and resistance to injustice; (3) *proclaimed the vision* of God's "beloved community" in ways that got them into trouble with the authorities; (4) were widely perceived as *operating in the biblical prophetic tradition* by both allies and adversaries; (5) animated dramatic *public protests* resulting in arrest and jail; (6) were deemed such a *threat to national security* that their inner circles were infiltrated by government informers; and (7) were *killed through an official conspiracy* because of their work and witness. These parallels have been oddly absent from longstanding, abstract theological debates as to whether or not Jesus was a "pacifist", or whether he was politically engaged, and are thus worth exploring.

To understand King we must look *at* Jesus, but the converse also applies: if we want to understand Jesus, we would do well to look at King. Indeed, the more I study the civil rights movement, the more the Gospels come alive. Remembering the challenges that King faced trying to build a social movement for racial justice in the teeth of the hostile system of American apartheid can help us re-imagine how difficult it must have been for Jesus to proclaim the Kingdom of God in a world dominated by imperial Rome 2,000 years ago.

Most Christians tend to think of Jesus in a highly spiritualised, even romanticised, way, ignoring the fact that he lived and died in times that were as contentious and conflicted as our own. It was a world not so unlike that of the USA in 1968: a world of racial discrimination and class conflict, of imperial wars abroad and political repression at home, all presided over by a political leadership that (directly or indirectly) engineered the demise of the prophet, then issued stern but pious calls for law and order in the wake of his tragic death.

In order to move the theological conversation about Jesus and violence beyond the favourite proof texts of pacifists (e.g. Mt 26.52) and non-pacifists (e.g. Lk 22.36), we might ask whether the Jesus story can be read coherently as a narrative of a sort of King-style active non-violence? King drew his strategic inspiration from Gandhi. Public figures such as Jesus, Gandhi or King, although eulogised in retrospect as great "peacemakers", they were in fact accused in their own time of being "disturbers of the peace". The reality of social change is, for prevailing conditions of injustice within a system to be changed they must be first articulated. Thus before conflict can be *resolved* it must first be *provoked*. One can see just such provocation in ministry of Jesus; I will take as an example Mark's narrative of Jesus' early work in Galilee (Mk 1.21—3.19).[2]

In Mark's Gospel the local authorities plot to execute Jesus! This is after only a few weeks of his public ministry, long before he marches on Jerusalem, overturns tables in the Temple and calls for its demise (Mk 11.1–19; 13.2). What is it about his teaching, exorcism and healing work that threatens those in power? To discern this we must briefly review the components of Jesus' first "campaign" in and around Capernaum.

Jesus' first public action, an exorcism, ends in controversy (Mk 1.21–28). In a setting that represents the heart of the local social order, the Capernaum synagogue, the story is structurally framed by the reactions of the crowd (Mk 1.22,27), reactions of

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amazement that articulate the central issue: *who exercises authority in this communal space?* In-between an unclean spirit protests Jesus' presence: "What do you want with us?" (Mk 1.23f.; see Judg 11.12, 1 Kgs 17.18). The demon's defiance quickly turns to fear: "Have you come to destroy us?" Who is the "we" on whose behalf the demon speaks? Mark's framing device suggests he represents the voice of the scribal class whose "space" Jesus is invading. The synagogue on the Sabbath is their territory, where they teach Torah; this "spirit" seems to *personify* scribal power. Only after "exorcising" their sway over the hearts and minds of the people is Jesus free to begin his compassionate ministry to the masses (Mk 1.29–34).

The controversy continues when Jesus encounters a leper (Mk 1.40–45). Jesus' willingness to have social contact with this leper is subversive enough, given the impurity and its contagion. But given the fact that both diagnosis and cure for skin diseases was the exclusive prerogative of priests (Lev 13—14), it is Jesus' intervention (as an "unlicensed practitioner") that is really problematic.[3]

Similarly, in Mark 2.1–12 Jesus' encounter with a physically disabled man is turned into a debate about sin. Rather than simply "curing" his body, Jesus chooses to challenge the official protocols by unilaterally releasing him from sin/debt (Mk 2.5,7). The scribes object, claiming that only God can forgive (Mk 2.7). But this is a defence of their own social power (since as interpreters of Torah *they* actually adjudicate sin/debt), not of God's sovereignty. Jesus ignores their warning and the healing becomes the first directly defiant action that asserts his counter-authority (Mk 2.10).

In these two stories Jesus challenges how power is distributed in the "health-care" and "criminal justice" systems, respectively, within Second Temple Jewish culture. The social map at that time consisted of two, mutually reinforcing codes: purity and debt. The purity code, adjudicated by priests, established what was clean and unclean in order to maintain ethnic group and class boundaries. One's purity status was determined by *birth* (e.g. tribal affiliation), *body* (male or female, disabled or "healthy") and *behaviour* (cultic obligations). Debt and sin, on the other hand, were under the jurisdiction of the scribal class. The Law regulated individual and social responsibilities, criminal behaviour and economic rules, determining sins of commission (stealing an ox or adultery) and omission (not paying tithes or observing the Sabbath). Who interpreted the purity or debt codes (the power of *diagnosis*)? Who was able to effect a change in someone's status in that system (the power of *treatment*)? What did "treatment" or "forgiveness" cost the one who was impure or indebted? We can begin to see that when Jesus breaks the rules or engages in debates with the priests or scribes, who are senior administrators of and spokespersons for the status quo, he is involved in *social* criticism. Later, when he challenges the Temple cult itself, he is subverting *political* authority. Jesus seeks the root causes of why people are marginalised and his ministry unmasks the causes of social oppression. Thus these healings are interpreted either as liberation (by the crowds) or lawless defiance (by the authorities) depending upon one's commitment to or place within the prevailing social order. Thus Jesus is seen as a threat to those whose social status and national identity is bound to the dominant cultural codes and structures of the Temple state.

Three consecutive food controversies now follow, in which the issues are: *who* disciples eat with; *when not* to eat; and *where and what food* is appropriate to eat. These were keenly political issues in a culture where table-fellowship was the primary indicator of social intercourse and status and they each illustrate an aspect of what I call "Sabbath economics".[4] In the story of Levi, debtors and debt collectors share extraordinary "Jubilee" table fellowship (Mk 2.15f.). In the fasting debate Jesus pits a banquet metaphor against ritual piety, arguing that the poor need shared abundance, not religious abstinence (Mk 2.18f.). And the grain-field episode (Mk 2.23–28) dramatises Jesus' argument that the Sabbath ethic endorses the right of hungry people to glean food (Ex 23.11f.; Lev 23.22; 25.35,37) despite laws that might restrict such access.

The settings of these episodes represent what today we call the economic sphere: in a traditional agricultural society the table was the primary site of *consumption*, the field of *production*. This series can be read as a protest over the politics of food in Palestine, in which the authorities (primarily here the Pharisees) control *distribution*. Jesus' clinching argument can be properly paraphrased as, "The economy was made for humans, not humans for the economy", or more simply in contemporary parlance, "Food for people, not for profit" (Mk 2.27–28).

We can now understand why by the second synagogue showdown (Mk 3.1–6) the elites want Jesus neutralised. It is structured as a kind of trial scene: in the public

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glare the political authorities stand poised, ready for the suspect to "cross the line" (Mk 3.2). In a sort of Deuteronomic ultimatum (Deut 30.15ff), however, Jesus turns from defendant to prosecutor (Mk 3.4). In the classic tradition of civil disobedience, Jesus then proceeds to break the law in order to raise deeper issues about the moral health of the community (Mk 3.5). This form of "speaking truth to power" will have costly consequences in the story, of course, and to prepare his spirit for the greater showdowns to come Jesus concludes this campaign by withdrawing to the lake (Mk 3.7) in order to reflect on the mission and build community (Mk 3.14ff).

We see in this narrative sequence a Jesus who experiences the incessant press of needy "crowds" (mentioned some 38 times in Mark). Indeed, economic and political forces in the decades prior to the Roman-Jewish war had dispossessed significant portions of the Palestinian population. Illness and disability were an inseparable part of the cycle of poverty for the poor, as they still are today. Jesus demonstrates an emphatic bias towards these disenfranchised people and endeavours to "articulate" the problems structurally in his interventions, which in turn threatens the entrenched interests of the elites.

Jesus' practice of militant non-violence becomes even clearer later in Mark's Jerusalem narrative, from the subversive "street theatre" of Jesus' entry into the capital (Mk 11.1–10) to his "blockade" of the Temple (Mk 11.11–25). He interrogates every level of political authority (Mk 11.27—12.17), yet issues a sharp rebuke to those who imagine that only war can overthrow the regime (Mk 13.5–13), inviting his disciples to instead face the consequences for speaking truth to power (Mk 13.9–13). Of course, Jesus models this way: he is arrested, put on trial and executed as a dissident (Mk 14—15). But it is Mark's firm conviction that the cross of Jesus is the only weapon powerful enough to prevail over the powers and transform the world; this is why every disciple is commissioned to take up the way of non-violence (Mk 8.34ff).

This non-violent but militant Jesus is a far cry from the stained-glass images of him we see in our churches. Interestingly, the same could be said of King. His legacy has been widely domesticated in the USA. King is routinely portrayed as a lovable, harmless icon of peace and tolerance, his message typically reduced to a vague and sentimental sound bite – "I have a dream." But the *historic* King, like Jesus, was prophetic in every sense of the word. His oratory was often polarising and his campaigns of civil disobedience upsetting to the status quo.

Like Jesus, King was deeply impacted by the plight of the poor he encountered in his advocacy work. This caused him to move from a strictly civil rights agenda to a deeper questioning of war and poverty. We see this most clearly in his famous "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break the Silence" speech, delivered to a gathering of clergy and laymen concerned about the War in Vietnam on 4 April 1967 at the Riverside Church in New York.[5] By then a famous civil rights leader, having already been awarded the Nobel prize for his work, King here publicly articulated his opposition to the Vietnam War for the first time, against the advice of his closest circle. His incisive analysis of the "giant triplets" that plague American life and politics – racism, militarism and poverty – continues to be relevant to this day.[6] At the time, however, government authorities – most notably the head of the FBI, J Edgar Hoover – were furious that King had joined his considerable moral authority to the anti-war movement. It is not surprising, then, that exactly one year later, almost to the hour, King was gunned down in Memphis.[7]

Jim Lawson reminds us that to challenge the powerful in the name of the poor is always both controversial and costly, whether in first-century Palestine or twenty-first-century America. Both the historic Jesus and King are highly inconvenient for a nation that has canonised and then ignored them. We are, after all, far more comfortable with dead prophets than living ones, honouring them publicly only *after* they are safely disposed of. Jesus understood this tendency all too well: "Woe to you!" he warned, "who build the tombs of the prophets whom your ancestors killed" (Lk 11.47 NRSV).

At the end of their lives, Jesus and King were each hemmed in by the factions of their respective political terrains. They had to navigate death threats from without and dissent from within their own movements, and had as colleagues only a relatively tiny group of feckless companions. But that is how it always is struggling for the Kingdom of God in a world held hostage by tyrants, terrorists, militarists, and kingpins, unaided by ambivalent religious leaders and insular academics and utterly distracted young folks. Despite this, both chose non-violent love without compromising their insistence upon justice.[8] They believed that the movement for God's beloved community was worth giving their lives to – and they invite us to do the same. ■

**NOTES**

**1.** For a brief biography of this remarkable person, see www.wagingpeace.org/menu/programs/youth-outreach/peace-heroes/lawson-jim.htm

**2.** For a detailed treatment of this narrative sequence see my *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), ch. 4.

**3.** In the epilogue to the story, Jesus further empowers the leper by dispatching him to "make a witness against" the priestly system by paying for services not rendered (Mk 1.44). He is not up to this "protest", however, and instead turns it into a spectacle, causing Jesus to have to go underground (Mk 1.45).

**4.** For more on this see my *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics* (Washington, DC: Church of the Saviour Press, 2002).

**5.** The text and an audio excerpt can be found at: www.drmartinlutherkingjr.com/beyondvietnam.htm

**6.** One of the best accounts of this history is David Garrow's *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: Perennial, 2004).

**7.** Noted Catholic theologian James W Douglass has closely followed the debate of who killed King, and summarised it in "The Martin Luther King Conspiracy Exposed in Memphis", *Probe* Spring 2000, available online at: www.ratical.org/ratville/JFK/MLKconExp.html

**8.** I want to be clear that I am not contending that Jesus was "just" a non-violent martyr, nor that Martin Luther King is the resurrected saviour of the world! There is more to the New Testament story than what I have focused on here, and King was a disciple, not the Master. I am simply arguing that there are significant aspects of Jesus' ministry as portrayed in the Gospels that can only coherently be understood through the lens of the kind of non-violent activism embodied by, for example, King and Gandhi – aspects that are forever overlooked by theologians and churchgoers.