Contact with Jesus

Teacher Background

A significant challenge for readers and interpreters of Scripture is to increase their contextual understanding of the time and place in which the Bible stories were set. In the case of this module, a deeper contextual understanding of the first century Mediterranean world - the world in which Jesus lived - is required. Unless religious educators as readers and interpreters of Scripture take on this challenge and impart their contextual knowledge of this world, they run the risk of interpreting and accepting interpretations of Scripture that are literal and/or bound by largely personal, 21st century world views. Meeting this challenge is not easy because much, if not most of what is needed for adequate interpretation of Scripture is simply left unsaid and presumed known from the cultural experience of the first century Mediterranean reader for whom it was originally written. Anthropology, sociology and Biblical studies are a few of the disciplines that can assist religious educators and their students to broaden their knowledge of past social systems. As considerate readers and educators, we are challenged to learn to understand our alien Biblical ancestors in faith and find God in our own contemporary experience.

It is also essential to have a deeper understanding of the social system of the time of Jesus, because of the significant impact and influence his teachings and actions had on society and the social systems of that time. Jesus’ mission and vision of the kingdom of God challenged profoundly the contemporary social system and order. Wherever Jesus went spreading his new vision for of the kingdom of God, crowds around him were divided into two groups: the favourable and hostile. For example, Zacchaeus repents at Jesus’ work, while the bystanders are offended that Jesus eats with this sinner (Luke 19:1-10) and the Pharisees seek to silence the crowds who acclaim Jesus at his entry into Jerusalem (Luke 19:38-40). Jesus’ short career frequently provoked conflict, rejection and hostility, particularly from the individuals and social groups who upheld and benefited from the status quo. His favourable followers were often those on the social margins and visionaries who were looking for freedom, forgiveness, hope, justice and a better and brighter future. For the favourable he was the ‘Messiah’; for the hostile he was a ‘dangerous revolutionary’ who was bent on turning the known world upside down.

The teacher background below will provide some support towards teachers’ and students’ contextual understanding of the first century Mediterranean world.

Social System, Class and Jesus

In Palestine in the time of Jesus, what we know as middle class was rather small. It was made up of professional people such as shopkeepers, tradesmen, fishermen, and educated people such as the Pharisees and Scribes. Jesus the carpenter may have belonged to this class, though other scholars put the artisan class below the peasantry; but Jesus the itinerant preacher would be down at the bottom of the social ladder. Even smaller than the middle class was the upper class. This class included the very wealthy such as the aristocratic families of the Herods, the high priests, and the rich nobility who owned most of the land. The majority of the people in Palestine belonged to the peasant class. These were the tenant farmers and farm labourers Jesus refers to in his parables. Below them was an even lower class, known as the poor. All sorts of people belonged to this class, such as orphans and widows, the blind, the crippled and the mentally ill. Having no other means of livelihood, people with physical and mental handicaps became beggars. To this class also belonged outcasts. One can be an outcast without necessarily being poor economically. Such were tax collectors and sinners.

The tax collectors were Jews who collected taxes from fellow Jews for the Roman Empire. They were considered traitors, who became wealthy by collaborating with Roman authorities at the expense of their own people. The sinners, who are grouped with the tax collectors, were not “ordinary” sinners. The Pharisees, along with others, could readily admit that everyone is, after all, a sinner and in need
of God’s mercy and forgiveness. But the sinners associated with tax collectors were in a special class. These were people who deliberately and persistently transgressed the requirements of the law. Included in this group would be money-lenders who charged interest on loans advanced to fellow Jews. This was a clear violation of the law of God stated in Leviticus 25:36-38. Also in this group of sinners might be prostitutes who made their living by their ill-gotten gains. These were individuals who sold themselves to a life of sin in deliberate disregard of the law of God. Yet, Jesus apparently associated with such people at dinner parties. The Pharisees charged that Jesus was “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Luke 7:34). Even though Jesus belonged to the middle class, he reached out to people of the lower class. On one occasion Jesus said to some religious leaders in Jerusalem, “The tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you” (Matthew 21:31). It’s not hard to see why those who were hostile to Jesus were upset. Jesus broke religious and social laws. He had table fellowship with people who were morally questionable. These individuals were profiting by disobeying the command of God and betraying their own people. They were what the Old Testament calls the wicked, unworthy to be part of the people of God.

Purity Systems
The purity systems within the first century Jewish culture impacted profoundly on Jewish attitudes and behaviour. As Jerome Neyrey, a prominent Biblical scholar points out, Israel’s land and places, classes or persons, holy times and unholy physical “uncleannesses” were all classified and ranked according to degrees of purity or impurity. This system established the structure and social stratification of the Jewish community, the norms of public and private behaviour and the lines of demarcation between holy Israelites and those at or beyond the margins of God’s holy people-these being physical or social deviants, Samaritans and Gentiles.

Organisation of society along purity lines meant careful avoidance of contact with all people who were judged impure or unholy e.g. sinners, lepers, blind, lame, menstruates, corpses, toll collectors, Samaritans, Gentiles. Proper respect was given for holy places (the temple and synagogue), holy persons (temple personnel) and acts of purification such as washing hands before meals and holy times (Sabbath and festivals).

This system of economic and social stratification legitimated by purity classifications meant that the rich were ranked above the poor; the clergy above the laity; urban dwellers, especially those living in Jerusalem, above the rural peasantry, especially those living in distant Galilee; men above women; married above unmarried; the healthy above the ill; conformists above deviants. As an occupied country, the Roman Emperor, Governors, Prefects, Centurions, soldiers were ranked above the occupied people of Palestine from a political standpoint.

According to the Gospel writers, it was this system of purity and the exclusivity and injustice that it fostered which Jesus challenged. This challenge proved dangerous for Jesus and his followers because it was so wide-reaching in its political and social ramifications. Jesus’ position of overturning the social world of the times inevitably led to conflicts, clashes and social division.

Gender-Based Place and Roles
Men in this time directed their attention outwardly, away from the home; women looked inwardly to the home and to places and things germane to it, such as the well or the grinding wheel. Men are usually aggressive and concerned with authority and precedence, whilst women are guardians of the family honour. These first century Mediterranean societies are clearly patriarchal. A woman when she marries, moves to her husband’s house and becomes embedded in that new kinship group. She moves from one male protector (her father) to another (her husband). If a woman appearing in Scripture is not identified as the wife of some one, the reader could wonder as to her ‘shame’. In many gospel stories, Jesus is seen to ignore the stereotypical roles and places of women. He challenges the ways of his own culture many times through his liberal and compassionate treatment of and association with, women.