

Eugene Peterson : The Jesus Way - A conversation in following Jesus

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Introduction – the purification of means

My concern is provoked by the observation that so many who understand themselves to be followers of Jesus, without hesitation, and apparently without thinking, embrace the ways and means of the culture as they go about their daily living 'in Jesus' name'. but the ways that dominate our culture have been developed either in ignorance or in defiance of the ways that Jesus uses to lead us as we walk the streets and alleys, hike the trails, and drive the roads in this God-created, God –saved, God-blessed, God-ruled world in which we find ourselves...

Jesus is an alternative to the dominant ways of the world, not a supplement to them.

I am the Way, Truth, Life. The Jesus way wedded to the Jesus truth brings about the Jesus life.

The great American innovation in congregation is to turn it into a consumer enterprise, identifying what people want and giving it to them, offering entertainment, satisfaction, excitement, adventure, problem-solving. The cultivation of consumer spirituality is the antithesis of a sacrificial, 'deny yourself' congregation.

Jesus' metaphor, kingdom of God, defines the world in which we live. We live in a world where Christ is King. If Christ is King, everything.. has to be re-imagined, re-configured, re-oriented to a way of life that consists in an obedient following of Jesus.. A total renovation of our imagination is required.

This has to be done by the whole people of God, ordained and lay.

1. Jesus: 'I am the Way...'

I am the Way, Truth, Life.

Jesus' first 3 imperatives according to Mark, following his announcement that the kingdom of God is here:

- Repent – means a change in direction
- Believe – means a personal, trusting, relational involvement in this reordering of reality
- Follow me – gets us moving in a new way of life

Way is a metaphor. Life is mostly invisible, and the quickest access to the invisible is through metaphor, which carries us across the abyss separating the visible from the invisible. The contradiction between what the metaphor denotes and what it connotes sets up a tension which stimulates us to an act of imagination: we become participants in what is being spoken.

A word is a label. But when used as a metaphor, a word explodes, comes alive – it starts moving (p26).

Metaphor makes me a participant in creating the meaning and entering into the action of the word. I can no longer understand the word by looking it up in the dictionary, for it is no longer just itself. It is alive and moving, inviting me to participate in the meaning. When the writers of scripture use metaphor, we get involved with God.

The Way, and the temptations not to follow it.

- Turn stones into bread – a way of doing good, meeting people's needs, fulfilling them
- Jump off the roof of the temple – a way of exciting people with a circus career of miracles, creating a hedge against boredom
- Rule the world – take charge, sort things out (on devil's terms)

Each of these would have been an impersonal way, abstracted from relationships, imposed from outside. Each is an invitation to do good things in the wrong way. The Way of Jesus is not a slogan but a metaphor: a road, path, street, trail, and also a person. The primary documents that tell us about this way are narratives of the way Jesus lived and proclaimed the good news messages. Every detail is embedded in his metaphor-studded

story. We are intended to enter by imagination and faith and prayer into the story, this narrative, and get a feel for what is involved, the relationships that t make up the web of this way. P37

2. Abraham : Climbing Mount Moriah

The defining moment in the way of Abraham takes place on Mt Moriah – the binding of Isaac. Striking is the spare language, economy of words used in drawing us in as participants – cp Auerbach. Abraham is remembered as a man of faith, trusting in what he cannot control, living in relation to One he cannot see, venturing obediently into a land he knows nothing about. Faith has to do with marrying the visible and the invisible. When we engage in an act of faith we give up control, sensory control of reality, relying on head knowledge as our primary means of orientation; to do with choosing to deal with a living God whom we trust. This is what it is to follow the way of Abraham – realising we are not in charge of our own lives, entering into a lifelong process of no longer arranging the world and the people on our terms, embracing what and who are given to us.

‘Faith’ is the noun and ‘believe’ the verb of the same root word in both Hebrew and Greek. It’s used only once in this story (15.6), but it’s the thing Paul singles out in Hebrews. Paul wants to teach about faith, and gives not a definition but a story. Look at the verbs in Gen 12 – go, went, departed, set forth, had come, passed through, moved on, journeyed. Abraham is on a way. Same pattern in ch 22 as he sets out for Mt Moriah.

The fatal thing is to reduce faith to an explanation. It is not an explanation, it is a passion. 47. The Abraham story narrates a way of living in which God is personal and immediate, in which God is embraced and followed, in which God speaks and is obeyed – recovering a language we knew as children, but have lost. Faith designates a way of life that takes place in an intimate web of visible and invisible, silence and speech, light and darkness, chaos and cosmos, knowledge and mystery, God and us... It cannot be predicted or programmed; it can only be realized by participation. The word faith isn’t often used in this way; more often it is cliched into a feeling, fantasy, disposition – a kind of wish upwards, an inclination indistinguishable from a whim. So the way of faith needs testing. The test is sacrifice. Abraham was called to a life of leaving, leaving Ur and Haran, Shechem and Bethel, Egypt and Cerar, Beersheba – leaving, leaving, leaving. But every leaving was also a lightening of self, a cleansing of the toxins of acquisition. A life of getting was slowly but surely replaced by a life of receiving – promises, covenants, Isaac; being transformed into a life that abandons self-sovereignty and embraces God-sovereignty. Every time left one place, the road lengthened and the landscape widened. Abraham did not become our exemplar in faith by having it explained to him but by engaging in a lifetime of travel, life on the road, daily leaving something of himself behind and entering something new. 51

The testing of Abraham can only be understood in the context of his journey, his long life of faith. The test is: are we using God or are we letting God use us? The temptation is to come to God shopping for the gospel as a commodity. Mt Moriah tests the possibility that Abraham has, all along, been attempting to get God on his own terms. Are we exempt? Our faith too needs testing; and we cannot be trusted to test ourselves. Faith doesn’t mean God gives us what we ask; it doesn’t mean reducing the world to land and people that we can take charge of, and then employing our minds and imaginations to figure out how we can get God to help us. We need testing; and when we have the test results, then we can get on with the resurrection-shaped life God has for us. The way of faith does not serve our fantasies, illusions, ambitions. Faith is not the way to God on our terms, but the way of God to us on his terms.

Jack Leax:

The Spirit must scream
Plummet down
Like a bird of prey
And sit fierce
Talons clenched
In your bleeding lips

And your words become
His Word
And his Word become
Your words
That your speech
Dead in the agony of self
Might be resurrected
In self-extinction.

Abraham arrives at Mt Moriah after a life of letting go, of leaving behind, of travelling light. Apart from that context, the demand to make this sacrifice makes no sense. He is being asked to abandon not just the present, but also the future. But he has a lived history in which God has provided for him in unanticipated, unexpected ways. He is not nearly as surprised as we are, either at the command or at its release. It's all part of following the Way.

3. Moses: on the plains of Moab

More words in scripture are ascribed to Moses than to any other single speaker/writer. They are the foundational words of the revelation of God to us. Historical criticism destroyed the literary and theological coherence of the text; critics take it apart but have no mechanism for putting it back together again. Like taking a car apart as a boy, after which it doesn't work. Moses is not exactly the author of Torah, but the authority behind it. It's like a stream which loses part of its water as it broadens and travels, gains new water; but still carries a good part of the waters it started off with.

Words are holy. The Torah opens with God speaking words, saying creation into being. Everywhere as Christians follow Jesus we use words that were first used by God in bringing us and the world around us into being. Words are inherently holy regardless of how we are using them. We should use them carefully. And words don't just sit there; they have agency. We participate in the energy they carry as they are used, and so enter into something new. 68

The books of Moses are a community of speech. It has 3 elements – names, stories, signposts. The story is full of names. A name is a seed, which germinates to become a story. Moses is not a name-dropper but a storyteller, which is good because story is our most accessible form of speech. It's also good because story doesn't just tell us something and leave it there; it invites our participation, gathers us into the story. A good storyteller respects our freedom, offering us a place in the story through our imaginations and then through our faith. We are participants in a larger family. And telling a story is the best way of accounting for life as we live it; it's immediate, personal, relational – and when we lose touch with our lives, story is the best way of getting us back in touch again.

Signposting is the remaining element – directions, laws, instructions.

The gospels are the counterpart to the Torah; they are not history, entertainment, inspiration, love, apologetics, psychology, encounters, threats, challenges – they are a way, the language way of Moses and Jesus.

4. David: 'I did not hide my iniquity'

Perfectionism is common among Christians – dividing ourselves into first and second class ones, regarding as more 'spiritual' those with a particular intensity of interiority. But we can expect it of ourselves too; Jesus is perfect, and we are commanded to follow him, so... But perfectionism is not the way of Jesus. We know that because of David. The way of David is a way of imperfection. In the story of David we see an extensive and detailed probing of the human condition. There is not the slightest effort given in the biblical story to make David admirable in any moral or spiritual sense; and there is the assumption that flawed as he is, he is representative, not a warning against bad behaviour but an inadvertent witness to the normalcy and inevitability of imperfection.

David did not kill Saul in the cave because he saw him as the magnificent, if flawed, king anointed by God. He kills Goliath, spares Saul even when Saul is obsessed with killing him; he's a failed father. The story shows both compassion and lack of compassion. The life of David is a labyrinth of ambiguities; the most that can be said about him is that he is interesting. His prayers express everything we are capable of experiencing. The penitential psalms (6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143) are prayers prayed on the way of imperfection. Striking that none shows a resolve 'not to do it again'; all depend on God's forgiveness – sin in itself is beyond our power to deal with.

5. Elijah: 'Hide yourself by the brook Cherith'

His name is his prophetic witness; it means 'my God is Yahweh'.

Why was it Elijah with Moses at the Transfiguration? Both had their lives formed and defined by the Name, Yahweh. We are to understand that in them, everything that God revealed in the words and actions that preceded Jesus is now fulfilled in Jesus. Moses is the name we associate with the foundational word of God that brought creation, salvation and community into being, and that continues to furnish us with the language we have used to listen and pray ever since. Elijah is the name we associate with the recovery of that language when it is lost; the prophetic word of God that gets us back on the way when we have strayed from it.

Prophets insist that God is the living centre or nothing. Our task is to become relevant to his situation; prophets insist that we deal with God as God reveals himself, not as we imagine him to be. Elijah is pre-eminent among them all.

Elijah was immersed in the culture and politics of his day but not shaped by them. He lived on the margins. Ahab. The widow. Baal. Elijah on worship – worship is not an experience, but a response to God's word in the community of God's people. We don't experience it; we do it. Worship is shaped by God's authoritative and clear word; nothing is dependent on feelings, all is determined by scripture and Jesus. Worship is the act of attending to the self-revelation of God.

Moses and Elijah are both prophets at critical moments in the life of the people of God, Moses at their formation, Elijah at their reformation. Parallels between them – p114. But the main link is the Name. Moses receives the commandments on Mt Horeb, Elijah restates them on Mt Carmel.

The task of the prophet is to say the name of God correctly, accurately and locally – Yahweh, God alive, God personal, God present. For Elijah that meant not just God but also neighbour. He lived his life on the margins – marginal to the popular religion of the day, marginal to the power politics of the day. Because he lived on the margins he was unimpressed by what went on in the centre. He was not popular, or easy-going, never became a celebrity, and was uncongenial to the temperament and disposition of the people with whom he lived. He is not reasonable, diplomatic, tactful; he hauls us unceremoniously into a reality far too large to be accounted for by our explanations and expectations.

Baal = Baal Zebul. Zebul means prince. Parodied into Baal Zebub – Lord of the flies.

6. Isaiah of Jerusalem: 'The Holy'

Elijah is the archetype prophet, Isaiah of Jerusalem is the comprehensive prophet. Holy means the life of God breathed into our lives. In our culture it is made banal, reduced to blandness, the speciality of sectarian groups who reduce life to behaviours and clichés that can be certified as safe – goodness in a straitjacket, truth drained of mystery, beauty emasculated into ceramic knickknacks, 128. Ellen Glasgow on her father: 'he was entirely unselfish, and in his long life never committed a pleasure'. Holiness is in wild and furious opposition to all such banality and blandness. The God-life cannot be domesticated or used; only entered into on its own terms. Holiness does not make God smaller so that he can be used in more manageable projects; it makes us larger so that God can give out life through us, extravagantly, spontaneously. The holy is a capacity for exuberance in the presence of God.

We have to break the ignorant and faithless habit of letting the journalists of the day tell us what is going on. We need to give Isaiah at least equal time.

Isaiah was not a spectator of the holy; he was a participant in it. It begins with awareness of sin, as an opening to mercy and forgiveness. Then conversation begins – who shall I send?

Isaiah is told to preach to a congregation that is not going to hear God's word, not going to see what God is doing. He is told he will spend his life speaking to people who are god-consumers, who go to god garage sales most Saturdays. If he doesn't preach to them on their terms, they will neither see nor understand. They want a God who serves them on their terms, not vv. The task of preaching the truth of salvation is not an issue of clear communication. Isaiah will preach powerfully and eloquently, and people will go to sleep in the middle of his

sermons. The end result of a lifetime of preaching will be that the country is destroyed, like a blackened forest, a nation of stumps. But here is the holy seed. A shoot will come out of the stump, and be called Jesus.

7. Isaiah of the Exile: 'How beautiful on the Mountains'

2 Isaiah sought out the meaning of the preached words of Isaiah before the exile, and repitched them to the exiles. He took the seeds from Jerusalem and made them sprout in Babylon. We know nothing about him; except that he gave voice to God.

We who have grown up in a world in which a voiceless technology dominates our imaginations tend to denigrate what we sometimes designate as just words. Words out of a machine. Words isolated from a personal voice, a Babel-like torrent of words severed from anything relational, from a living being — a particular man, a named woman, God revealed in Jesus. When we think in terms of getting things done, we typically think in terms of machines and bombs, size and horsepower and money — impressively effective but at the same time thoroughly impersonal. What are mere words in such company? Words occur, of course, but mostly to provide information and give instruction. When we want to get something done, want to make a difference in history, we send a rocket to the moon, drop a bomb on a city, build a skyscraper or stadium, a hospital or school. But as we spend time in the company of the Prophet, that diminishing adjective “just” becomes less and less useful, at least in conjunction with words. In the company of the Prophet we draw near “to the One in whom the word embraces the act itself.” Words used as the Prophet used them are not just words, they are words plus — words that bring into being what they say. They are words in the lineage of Genesis: ‘Then God said, ;Let here be light’; and there was light’ (Gen.1.3); words in continuity with Jesus, who spoke to the man who was paralyzed, ‘Stand up,’ and he stood up (Mark 2.11-12). 161

His preaching installed the term 'gospel' as a key word; he didn't coin it but he used it in a new way. It meant a report, but he used it as far more; something which brings us into a participating awareness of what it proclaims. We are involved. *Basar* is the Hebrew word, *euangelizo* in Greek. Isaiah uses it 5 times (40.9 x2; 41.27; 52.7x2). 500 years later Mark uses it as a title to his account of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

2 Isaiah was effective not for his arguments or his warnings, but for the way he conveyed the present and alive personal here-ness of God. He did this through use of metaphor. His 2 commonest images are Creator and Saviour. He uses the imagery of Genesis, creation; what God did then, he is doing again now (eg ch 40.26, 28). At least 12 times the work of creation is specifically cited to interpret what God is doing among them at present (in chaps 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 48, 51, 54). The citations of God as Redeemer/Saviour are just as frequent. Isaiah piles up and mixes together these two sets of images, mixing in others to create a symphony of sounds. In between he mocks the Babylonian no-gods; he's scathingly funny (ch44).

One more thing is necessary – to root his salvation preaching in a solid sense of creation and history. So he insists that what God was doing in the exile was the same as what he did in Genesis and Exodus. He insists a new creation is taking place on Babylonian soil; and that it will come about through a servant; → the servant songs.

The Hebrew word for servant, '*ebed*', means both slave and servant (slave if forced, servant if chosen). Same is true of the Greek *doulos*. The gospel preached by Isaiah in the obscurity of the exile finally found its most prominent pulpit on Golgotha, where it remains the only word that will save the world.

One more word requires comment: the word 'beautiful'. He only uses it once; 52.7, beautiful are the feet of him who brings good tidings. *Beauty is commonly trivialized in our culture, whether secular or ecclesial. It is reduced to decoration, equated with the insipidities of “pretty” or “nice.” But beauty is not an add-on, not an extra, not a frill. Beauty is fundamental. Beauty is not what we indulge ourselves in after we have taken care of the serious business of making a living, or getting saved, or winning the lottery. It is evidence of and witness to the inherent wholeness and goodness of who God is and the way God works. It is life in excess of what we can manage or control. It arrives through a sustained and adorational attentiveness to all that we encounter on the way: a forced march across a desert, a rock, a flower, the dragon Rahab, a face, a rustle in the trees, the “cup of staggering,” a storm crashing through the mountains, wounding and bruising of all sorts, an old man's gesture, a lamb led to the slaughter, a child's play, an altar call, a good death, wings like eagles, the Scriptures, Jesus.*

181 Beauty doesn't explain, it reveals. The gospel is beautiful. Life on the way is not violent; sin is not rejected but borne. And this is the world we enter alongside Jesus.

8. The Way of Herod

The way of Jesus is not the only way to live. People are always looking for other ways, which they try and then discard. One is the way of Herod. Author remembers standing on top of a skyscraper as a boy, and feeling important; entering a world where size and wealth define the human condition. In Jesus's day the central figure in this world was Herod. His paranoia at Jesus' birth; his 7 palaces, his building projects. Herod actually had the same agenda as Jesus – to establish a way of life that would shape the behaviour and capture the imaginations of the people. But Jesus lived as if Herod didn't exist. He chose not Sepphoris but Galilee.

The Greeks had taken over the Roman empire, culturally, and began to put pressure on the Jews to conform. This led to the Maccabean revolt and ultimately to the appointment of Herod as king over Judah. The Jews preserved their identity, but by becoming fixed and obsessive. Like moving into a house with a picture window onto a fantastic view of hills and lakes, and gradually becoming obsessed with specks of dirt on the glass.

Jesus worked in a different way. To follow him was to be plunged into a world of relationships – an intricate, shimmering web of real persons and God; and to walk away from a world of size and numbers, huge and beautiful buildings, lavish spectacles and crowds, and into one of personal names, encounters, conversations, meetings and a personal God. While Pharisees got locked into precision, Jesus talked in metaphor.

A metaphor is, literally, a lie. It is simply not true. You are not salt. If I sprinkle you on my breakfast eggs their taste is not improved. I am not light. If I walk into a dark room, nothing is illuminated. God is not a rock. Geologists don't examine rocks looking for fossil evidence of God, or write learned papers arguing for the pre-Cambrian revelation of God.

So why do we speak in metaphors? Why was Jesus so fond of metaphors? Why is the Bible so profuse in metaphor? When we first ask these questions, it does seem odd, for metaphors are not precise. A metaphor can almost always be understood in several different ways. If Jesus was interested primarily in precision he certainly would not have gone around saying things such as "I am the vine, you are the branches" (John 15:5) or "Feed my lambs" (John 21:15).

But after some reflection we realize that a metaphor does a couple of remarkable things that are at the heart of both language itself and the gospel. One is that a metaphor requires participation. When Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:14), our imaginations go into action. A picture forms in our mind, associations spring up, the phrase lives. A metaphor is a compressed story, and as the metaphor embeds itself in our consciousness it begins to tell a story that involves us. It is hard to maintain passivity in the presence of metaphor. Metaphor makes it difficult to continue as a bystander, coolly watching the action. Metaphor pulls us into an involved participation in what the writer or speaker of the metaphor is about.

And metaphor involves us in a web of meanings. In this world of God's creation and salvation, everything is connected. The world is not a vast flea market of stuff from the basements and attics and closets of homes and towns all over the world that we sort through to find what might suit us just now at this time of our lives. It is more like a complex and intricate organism — a creation and a covenant in which there is meaning and purpose everywhere we look, in everything we touch, in every sound we hear. Metaphor is a word that actively involves us in that intricate, organic connectedness that is inherent in God's creation and covenant. Everything has something to do with everything else. Pruning vines and branches and feeding lambs is part of the same world in which Jesus is revealing God to us and working out our salvation. 215.

9. The Way of Caiaphas

Caiaphas stands for religion as commodity, as oppression, exploitation, privilege. Priests are there to preside over our worship, assist us in our sacrifice. But they have a way of taking control of the relationships; and so reformers get rid of priests. But they are there for a reason; to stop diy religion. The current interest in 'spirituality' is in some ways a result of frustration with institutional religion.

Jesus is not anti-institutional. He regularly led his followers into the synagogue and the temple. We like to say the church is not a building but a people; but the buildings provide continuity for Jesus to work his will among his people. The Essenes did refuse to enter the temple, and retired to practise an ascetic life. But Jesus was obviously not an Essene. His invitation to follow him was not an invitation into a select spiritual company.

10. The Way of Josephus

Some confused Jesus with the Zealots. Perhaps Judas was a zealot (ish-sicarii = a man of the sicarii, or dagger). The Jerusalem Talmud listed 24 sects committed to armed revolt against Rome. The Zealots had a base at Gamala, 10 miles from Capernaum. But Jesus blessed the poor in spirit, commanded love for enemies, approved paying taxes to Caesar, collected all kinds of people around him who would be of no use in a war. But he did ride into Jerusalem. The final evidence that he was not a Zealot was that after his crucifixion there was no revolt. Nothing happened.

But things hotted up. Josephus was sent on a diplomatic mission to Rome to negotiate the release of some priests. He made a good impression; and then in the war against Vespasian he betrayed the Jews to Rome. Vespasian adopted him, and he pursued a career as a successful writer. Josephus was on the winning side.

Merton defines a zealot as someone who immerses himself not in Christ but in the force of a project or program.

Following Jesus is a unique way of life. It is like nothing else. There is nothing and no one comparable. Following Jesus gets us little or nothing of what we commonly think we need or want or hope for. Following Jesus accomplishes nothing on the world's agenda. Following Jesus takes us right out of this world's assumptions and goes to a place where a lever can be inserted that turns the world upside down and inside out. Following Jesus has everything to do with this world, but almost nothing in common with the world. 270

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