

Jesus, his disciples and almost all members of the earliest Christian community were Jews. The church began as a faction **within Judaism among those Jews who had come to faith in Jesus as the Messiah.*

Judaism contained a number of groups. Pharisees and Sadducees, priests, Levites, reform movements and baptizing groups. After the Jewish war against Rome in 66-70 CE, only the Pharisees survived.

By the time John's gospel was written, the parting of ways between Jews and Christians had become sharp and painful. The community believes it has been rejected, persecuted and excluded by the leaders of the Jewish community. So, for the most part, the opponents are simply called, 'the Jews'. Sometimes it means, 'Jewish leaders', sometimes it means 'person from Judea, or a member of the synagogue who follows Jesus but has not done so publicly. And, again, it often means those who reject Jesus.

Some translations refer to 'the Jewish leaders' and try to show the distinctions. The NIV does not. So, all we read in this gospel is that Jesus was in conflict with 'the Jews'. One of the awful things to come out of this, is that some people have used this to support anti-Semitic racism. That is a terrible misreading of the text. The conflict had absolutely nothing to do with race or racism. From Boring and Craddock. The Peoples' New Testament Commentary pp286-287

Read John 7:1-24

John 7 is filled with urgent questions and strong opinions about Jesus. To try to get that flavour, the first part of our message this morning takes place as we listen in on a conversation. '...overheard in a small house in Jerusalem 32 AD...' Three pretty opinionated guys are hanging out.... let's listen. (*the summary of the points of the discussion was greatly helped by Boring and Craddock, The Peoples' New Testament Commentary)

Speaker 1 : "I tell you, he is a good man! You all know how the temple was a mess. Remember how you tried to take your father-in-law from Hebron there for prayer.

He stepped in sheep poo in the temple court. It was awful. And noisy. No one could pray. Until Jesus came. Jesus made space for God for us all. He got rid of the animals and the sellers and the money changers. Listen to me, **I** tell you, he is a good man!

Speaker 2 : “Ok, so maybe he is a good man, but **I say** we need a leader around here and Jesus is not the kind of leader I am thinking of. I know a couple of his brothers. They were so ticked when I talked to them last week. They wanted Jesus to rally Judea. They wanted him to start to build his support base with the people. Judea is ready! Those are Jesus’ kind of people out there. But Jesus just disappeared. Again! And they said that you cannot keep Jesus on message. Can you tell me what his vision for Jerusalem looks like? I am so tired of these wanna-be leaders who don’t have the skills to really get things moving. Jesus – schmeezus. Son of God? **I** say ‘Fraud!’

Speaker 3: “The thing that gets me is that he keeps talking about how our leaders are trying to kill him. Can you imagine? Caiaphas and Annas and that crowd? They are so holy their sandals don’t even stink. I bet their... well you know, nothing about **them** stinks. They are pious, they go by the book. Jesus actually said, ‘None of you keeps the law. Why are you looking for an opportunity to kill me?’ There is no way the Messiah would talk like that!

Here’s the deal. He’s either demon possessed or he was out in the sun way too long, but I heard him say it. “Why are you trying to kill me”? It was pretty awkward.

I’m telling you, he cannot be the One!

Speaker 2: Another thing. This is Jesus of **Nazareth** we are talking about. Hello! Nazareth sounds like a name for a rock band. How could the Chosen One come out of Nazareth? Besides his dad is Joseph (a very good man and no disrespect intended), but the guy is a labourer, not a rabbi. I worked with him about ten years ago in Galilee. Nice man, so don't get me wrong, but 'adopted father of the Son of God?' I don't think so. There are a few places the Messiah might come from, but Nazareth? Ha!

Speaker 1: Calm down guys, and listen to me. My cousin was helping cater at a wedding once in Cana. Don't stop me if you've heard this one before. They ran out of wine. Terrible, right? We all know how bad the economy was in Cana then, but still, who runs out of wine at their son's wedding?

Anyway, Jesus told my cousin Schmoolie and the others to fill the stone washing jars up to the brim with water. Schmoolie said they had no idea what that had to do with the wine shortage. Then Jesus told them to pour out some of the water into a cup and bring it to the head waiter. When they did, it turned out to be the best wine anyone had ever tasted! There was so much and it was so good, Cana was shut down for a week!

And, let me remind you about that kid that just about died. His dad does something for king Herod, I'm not sure what. So the dad goes and tracks Jesus down and asks him to come and heal his boy. Jesus doesn't go. Instead, he just speaks the word and they figured out later, **right at that moment** when Jesus said it, the kid got better!

And, he healed the guy that was at the pool forever. And, by the way, what is that you are eating? Where did you get that bread?

I tell you, Jesus is the Messiah!

Speaker 3: Ok, you've made your point. He has done some amazing things, I'll give you that. But **I** have two problems with him being the One. First, the prophets all say that the Messiah will come from Bethlehem. If he was not born in Bethlehem, from David's family, he can't be the Messiah. God would not play a trick on us. So unless you can tell me he was born in Bethlehem, I'm sorry, but I just won't believe in him.

Second, even if he was not born in Bethlehem, there has never been a prophet born in Galilee. Check it out for yourself. So I just don't believe it. He cannot be the One. (*note to reader, see John 7:41-42)

Speaker 1: How many sermons have you heard? Sorry, I should have asked how many entire sermons have you heard? Sermons are so boring and you know it! I've seen you on snooze control! You even started snoring once.

But I've noticed you have not had that problem when **Jesus** preaches.

Jesus knows what he's talking about.

Jesus does not go on and on quoting Reuven and Hillel and all of those other dry and dusty rabbis.

Jesus does not need to raise his voice to make his point. His words are strong and clear and loving. When some of our rabbis preach I feel guilty, when Jesus preaches I feel stronger, even when it hurts.

Jesus speaks with authority, he **must** be the one!

Speaker 2: Thanks for reminding me about the rabbis and the leaders. They've been with us through a lot of stuff. They've gone to school. They've studied the prophets and they have never led us wrong before.

They know about Jesus. They're listening, they're asking questions, and **they** don't seem to be convinced. How could Jesus be the Christ if our best teachers are not convinced?

I will believe in him when Jesus has some solid endorsements. Right now, he may be a good man, and he does some very cool things, but I cannot get my head around him being the **one**.

Speakers return to their seats....

The discussion has continued ever since....

Where do you hear the points of contention around us these days?

We have 'priests and leaders.' Their opinions matter and influence public opinion. Do you think there are people holding back from Jesus because of Oprah's thoughts about Jesus?

Many people were afraid of the Jewish leaders. My first idea for this little drama was a coffee shop. But then I realized that it had to take place in a private home.

Fear is just about the most effective inhibitor of open conversation that there is. What are some of ours?

We may be nervous about full and complete devotion to Jesus because we live in a day of wars, conflicts and tensions. And 'they say' that religion is the reason for many of them. We all want to keep the peace, could it be that we fear ruffling feathers, or being known as intolerant?

We may be afraid that our friends or co-workers will think we are extremists if we ask them what they think of Jesus.

But here is something funny. Our friend W. (who lives and works in China) says conversations like these happen on the bus in China between people all the time. But in this manuscript I cannot give his full name or where he lives, for fear of the authorities.

1. Who Jesus is has nothing to do with popular opinions or surveys. Who Jesus is has nothing to do with how many people might 'like' him on Facebook. Jesus is part of reality. No one debates the law of gravity or tries to live against the law of gravity. Gravity is a given. Jesus Christ is a given. God the Father and God the Holy Spirit bear witness to him so that the events of our lives confirm that Jesus is real. We do not need to argue him into existence. Maybe what we need to do is invite others to 'come and see', come and see Jesus alive in his battered and messy beloved bride.
2. In this gospel Jesus insists that we know him in one way. He is the one who was crucified and raised from the dead and is now alive and with us. He calls us to follow him into a life of dying and rising, he is with us every step of the way. He is with us in our witness, because it is scary for us.

3. Jesus himself encourages us. He tells us that the Spirit will lead us into all truth, he tells us not to be afraid of what to say, (see John 14:26 for example) And how to respond when our words or actions that come from faith, get us into trouble.

Listen to him as he speaks to us through 1 Peter 3.

¹³ Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? ¹⁴ But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. "Do not fear their threats^[a]; do not be frightened."^[b] ¹⁵ But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, ¹⁶ keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. ¹⁷ For it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. ¹⁸ For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit.

Let's pray for clear, courageous and gentle witness.

The Lord be gracious to you,

The Lord be gracious to me,

And all God's people said, Amen.