

JESUS AS THE TEACHER: Facilitator of Learning

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An exploratory paper

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This paper shines a spotlight on the portrayals of Jesus the Teacher in the four canonical Gospels. As a result of reading these first-century Gospel portrayals in the light of a twenty-first century learning-community approach to teaching, an interpretation of Jesus' teaching ministry for today's context is presented. The implications of that presentation are discussed.

A LEARNING-COMMUNITY APPROACH¹

The *contemporary context* of teaching and learning in Australian Anglican parishes is the backdrop of this paper. I write, from within the Anglican tradition, as a parish priest, a Christian educator with an ecumenical outlook and a learning-community practitioner and researcher.²

From the 1990's the idea of seeing the congregation or parish as a learning community was developed in the literature. The learning-community framework used in this paper has grown out of my own experience in parish ministry and builds on the writing of others.

A contemporary Christian Learning-community approach in parishes is three-fold. It is holistic, collaborative and theologically reflective.

(i) Holistic: There is a shared vision of the whole parish, the bringing together of the five parts of parish education: the individual, the group, the congregational and missional learning along with a fifth component 'seeing it as a whole'. There is an educational ministry for all kinds of people in the parish community and beyond.

¹ In the Gospel Portrayals section of the paper the Gospel language that portrayed Jesus as the Teacher has been used. Words from the *New Revised Standard Bible* (NRSV) English translation of the biblical texts are referenced. Such language is used out of respect for first century teaching context and the need to be alert for anachronisms; alert to the danger of imposing twenty first century educational language onto first-century texts as those texts are interpreted in today's context. In the reflective section of the paper however, twenty-first century educational language is used to show respect for our context. Reference to a learning-community approach brings the twenty-first century teaching and learning context into the conversation. For more on the role of language in relation to a conversation with a Gospel text, see Michael Trainor, *According to Luke : Insights for Contemporary Pastoral Practice* (North Blackburn, Victoria, Australia, Collins Dove, 1992): 7-12, 28, 102-103.

² John Littleton, "A Learning Community Focus for Christian Education" in *Religious Education 103, 5* (October-December 2008): 553-578 ; John Littleton, *A Handbook on Leading Learning in Congregations: A Christian Learning Community Perspective Leadership audit included*, (Magill, Adelaide, TJH Littleton, 2010).

(ii) Collaborative processes in parishes involve people in the sharing of leadership within the ministry and mission responsibilities, when members work and learn together interactively, enjoying and respecting the abilities and contributions of others in achieving a common task.

(iii) Theological Reflection processes in parishes involve people in reflecting or thinking about present life actions in the light of the biblical Story and tradition, and then moving forward renewed for future action.³

Teaching in such a learning-community is in broad terms seen as the intentional facilitation of learning.

THE GOSPEL PORTRAYALS

Jesus was a Jewish teacher/rabbi from a peasant background in Galilee during the early part of first century Common Era (c.1-40 AD/CE). He was known in the Christian Gospels as “one having authority” (Mt 7:29). He was remembered many times in the Gospels as “Teacher” (Mk 9:38; Mt 8:19; Lk 7:40; Jn 8:4). Some twentieth century Christian educators have described Jesus as the “Master Teacher.”⁴ Jesus the Teacher is a constant primary

³ The Learning-community Parish is my research topic. <http://www.tjhlittleton.com.au>
Other authors writing on the congregation as a learning-community include: Isa Aron, *The Self-Renewing Congregation* (Woodstock, Vermont, USA, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2002); Isa Aron, Steven M. Cohen, Lawrence A. Hoffman and Ari Y. Kelman, *Sacred Strategies: Transforming Synagogues from Functional to Visionary* (Herndon, VA, USA, Alban Institute, 2010); Dennis G. Campbell, *Congregations as Learning Communities-Tools for Shaping Your Future* (USA, Alban Institute, 2000); Norma Cook Everist, *The Church As Learning Community - A Comprehensive Guide to Christian Education* (Nashville, USA, Abingdon Press, 2002 ; Barbara C. Fleischer, “The Ministering Community As Context for Religious Education: A Case Study of St. Gabriel’s Catholic Parish” in *Religious Education* Volume 101, Number 1, (Winter 2006): 104-122; Thomas R. Hawkins, *The Learning Congregation, A New Vision of Leadership* (Louisville, USA, Westminster John Knox Press, 1997); John Sutcliffe, “Learning Community” in *Education News Letter No.1* (Geneva, World Council of Churches, 1997): 2-4.

In 2000 a composite definition of learning community was compiled by *Adult Learning Australia*. When applied to a congregation or parish that definition reads:

“A learning community is a group of people sharing common beliefs, values and purpose, which collaborates and reflects in order to create a vibrant, participative and skilled congregation, while respecting a variety of perspectives and using active promotion of learning opportunities to enhance the potential of all members that may create new knowledge.”

Kilpatrick, Sue, Margaret Barrett and Tammy Jones, Faculty of Education, University of Tasmania, “Defining Learning Communities”, Australian Association of Research in Education, Conference Paper (Auckland, 2003): 6.

<http://www.aare.au/03pap/jon03441.pdf>

⁴ Examples from the literature on Jesus as the Teacher include: Gilbert Highet, *The Art of Teaching* (London, UK, Methuen & Co Ltd, 1963):167-179; Douglas S Hubery, *Teaching the Christian Faith Today* (Melbourne, Australia, Joint Board of Graded Lessons of Australia and New Zealand, 1965):86-91; Thomas H. Groome, *Christian Religious Education* (Melbourne, Australia, Dove Communications, 1980):135-137; James T. Dillon, “The Effectiveness of

source of strength and example for a learning community leader in a twenty-first century congregation. Seeing Jesus the Teacher at work in the Gospels is indeed impressive.

I read those Gospel portrayals of Jesus as the Teacher with the awareness that these Gospels were written many decades after the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus the Teacher. The writing of biblical scholars has informed my understanding of the formation of the biblical texts.⁵ This understanding indicates that, in reading the Gospel accounts of Jesus as the Teacher, I am studying Jesus through the eyes of the writers and the early Christian communities in the first century CE. In the writing of this paper I recognise that the Gospel portrayals of Jesus as the Teacher are portraits offered by members of the early Christian communities, rather than straightforward accounts of the historical Jesus in action as the Teacher.

In addition, I am reading these Gospel portrayals of Jesus the Teacher, from our world *in front of* the biblical text, that is, the twenty-first century world, with its teaching and learning concerns in congregations.⁶ In this paper, *a conversation approach to reading the Bible* is used. In this method of Bible reading there is a respectful conversation between the context of the first-century world of the Bible passage and the context of our world today in the twenty-first century.

Mark

Written c.68-70 AD/CE. This is the earliest canonical Gospel. The Markan Christian community consisted mainly of people who were Gentile or non-Jewish background, people who understood the need to expect suffering as a result of following Jesus.⁷ In Mark, Jesus is generally portrayed, as the suffering Son of Man. Son of Man is the term “often used in Mark as a self-reference by Jesus.”⁸

Jesus as a Teacher”, in *Lumen Vitae* Volume XXXVI (1981, No. 2): 135-162; PHEME PERKINS, *Jesus as Teacher* (Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 1991, Reprinted twice); Robert W. Pazmino, “Jesus: The Master Teacher” in *Introducing Christian Education*, Edited by Michael J Anthony (Michigan, USA, Baker Academic, 2001): 111-116.

⁵ Michael Trainor, *Jesus in Luke’s Gospel* (Homebush, NSW, St Pauls, 1995): 21-22; PHEME PERKINS, *Reading the New Testament: An Introduction*, (New York, USA, Paulist Press, Third Revised Edition 2012); John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus* (San Francisco, USA, Harper, 1992); Robert Crotty, *Three Revolutions: Three Drastic Changes in Interpreting the Bible* (Adelaide, ATF Press, 2012).

⁶ Clare Amos, “Theological Education in the Anglican Communion” in *Handbook of Theological Education in World Christianity* edited by Dietrich Werner, David Esterline, Namsoon Kang and Joshva Raja (Oxford, UK, Regnum, 2010): 647; Michael Trainor, *About Earth’s Child: An Ecological Listening to the Gospel of Luke* (Sheffield, UK, Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2012): 13-14; Michael Trainor, “Five Ways Australian Catholics use the Bible” in *Inform 59* (Sydney, NSW, Catholic Adult Education Centre, 1998): 3-4.

⁷ Perkins, *Reading the New Testament*, 4; PHEME PERKINS “The Gospel of Mark” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible Volume Eight* (Nashville, USA, Abingdon Press, 1995): 513-517.

⁸ *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible New Revised Standard Version With The Apocrypha*, General Editor, Walter Harrelson. (Nashville, USA: Abingdon Press, 2003): 1808.

In Mark's Gospel Jesus is portrayed as a teacher-at-large in action. He was a peripatetic teacher who taught many different people in many places as the opportunity presented itself – in the Synagogue, a house, beside the sea, on the sea in a boat, in villages and to crowds in the countryside (1:29; 4: 35-41; 6 : 2; 8: 34; 10:1).

Jesus was concerned that his teaching content had not been getting through to his disciples (8:1-20). The disciples were slow to understand the new worldview that Jesus was teaching. Through a series of questions, Jesus helped disciples to understand the significance of the feeding of the crowds (6:41; 8:6, 17-21). The section in Mark on the purpose of parables and the example of the parable of the soils in chapter four indicated that Jesus was concerned for his listening audience to understand the meaning, and that some responses to his teaching would end in failure.⁹ Use of the words “Let anyone with ears to hear listen” (4: 9, 23) at the end of that parable stresses the need to discern the significance of the parable. The implication was that the parable was worthy of close scrutiny; that the listeners should think for themselves as they reflected upon it. Jesus was keen to assist his disciples in their learning (4: 10-11) and recognised that for many others the parables would not be “self-evident illustrations.”¹⁰ Through parables he helped them to learn the attitudes and ways of God's Kingdom.

Jesus is presented as one who used teachable moments to assist people to be theologically reflective. For example, he indicated the difference between kin family and the new family as “whoever does of the will of God” (3:31-35). He noted the significance of the widow's offering (12: 41-44). He considered leadership as service not power over others (9: 33-37;10: 35-45). He quoted the scriptures as a source for reflection on the present (7: 6; 12: 10, 29). The discussion with the scribe about the two great commandments portrayed Jesus as a teacher who could draw a person forward in their learning (12: 28-34).

Mark portrayed Jesus as learner when, in conversation, a Syrophenician woman taught Jesus that the scope of his ministry was not limited to Jews but included Gentiles (7: 24-30). Jesus is also presented as someone who shared ministry with his disciples. He sent them out in pairs to teach (6: 7).

Matthew

Written c. 85 AD/CE. The Matthean community consisted predominately of people with Jewish background. The community continued “to reverence the Jewish law, interpreting it in

⁹ *The New Interpreter's Study Bible New Revised Standard Version With The Apocrypha, 1814.*

¹⁰ Stein, *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teachings* (Philadelphia, USA, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994): 39-40.

the light of Jesus' teaching.”¹¹ Jesus was seen as “Teacher of Israel,”¹² and was presented throughout the Gospel as a great teacher, like Moses. Matthew reshaped the material to “redefine Judaism in the light of God's revelation in Jesus.”¹³ Matthew the teacher taught the reader/listener about Jesus as a teacher whose teachings were relevant to their circumstances.

Matthew portrayed Jesus as ubiquitous - teaching in cities and villages – and as a compassionate teacher (14: 14, 15: 32), a narrator of teaching sermons, one who “told them many things in parables,” (13: 3) one whose created wise sayings and left instructions about mission and discipleship for his followers (10: 1-42). The sermons were full of content, with mention of twenty three teaching topics in the insightful Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7), and another seventeen topics elsewhere. Jesus himself is shown using the scriptures as the source of theological reflection (4: 1-11, 12: 1-8). He was concerned that the disciples understood his teachings (13: 43, 51). He is reported to have asked people, “What do you think?” before telling a parable. (21: 28) and “Have you understood?” after telling a parable (13: 51). The inclusion of such questions portrayed Jesus as a teacher who was concerned that his disciples were people who thought for themselves about his teaching, about God and God's Kingdom.

In Matthew's Gospel Jesus is portrayed as God's agent, one who articulated a different worldview, a teacher with enthusiasm for God's kingdom. The values of God's kingdom were not to be patriarchal nor hierarchical but more egalitarian,¹⁴ inclusive and to include “mutual service that seeks the best for the other”, especially the “marginal nobodies.”¹⁵

According to Matthew, Jesus as the Teacher, was clever and clear thinking in disputations (22), and articulated his teaching in ways that amazed and astounded many of his contemporaries (22: 22,33).

Luke

Written c. 85 AD/CE. This gospel was written for Luke's Christian community, which existed two generations after the original ministry of Jesus and consisted of people and issues not even dreamed about by Jesus and the first generation disciples. Luke took the traditions about Jesus and “reshaped (them) in the light of the present needs of the community.”¹⁶ A great diversity of people belonged to Luke's community, people who were Gentile and

¹¹ Perkins, *Reading the New Testament*, 4.

¹² *Ibid.*, 199.

¹³ Michael Trainor, *Voices from the Edge: Matthew's Gospel in our World* (North Blackburn, Victoria, Australia, Collins Dove, 1992): 9-11; Paul S. Minear, *Matthew: The Teacher's Gospel* (London, UK, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1984): xii, 3.

¹⁴ *The New Interpreter's Study Bible New Revised Standard Version With The Apocrypha*, 1780 -1783, 1788, 1793, 1800.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1793.

¹⁶ Michael Trainor, *Voices from the Edge: Luke's Gospel in Our World* (North Blackburn, Victoria, Australia, Collins Dove, 1991): 3; Perkins, *Reading the New Testament*, 213.

represented the wealthy elites as well as the urban workers and the rural peasants.¹⁷ All walks of life worshipped together and this raised new issues to be considered in the light of the Jesus tradition. Men and women from all social categories were called to discipleship.¹⁸

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus is portrayed as a universal teacher, who helped the disciples and others to grow in their Christian faith. He took what others said and what others did as starting points for teaching. He taught about prayer after a disciple made the request (11: 1-4). Jesus is presented as one who taught through conversation in homes and with Pharisees too (7:36, 11:37). He was a universal teacher in that he related to many different kinds of people in a great variety of venues, using a range of teaching methods to help people learn the good news of God, God's realm and discipleship behaviour.

The issue of genuine 'hearing' is again (see Mark) raised in chapter eight, (8: 8,10,12-15, 18, 21) in association with the parable of the soils. "Authentic hearing is demonstrated in producing fruit." "How one hears will eventually become manifest in one's actions."¹⁹

Jesus as presented in Luke spent much time and energy on the formation of his disciples. He used parables, sayings, ministry examples of healing and caring for the marginalised in society, participation in key events, symbolic actions and discussion of a variety of topics to assist in the formation process. The travel to Jerusalem narrative (9-19) provides examples of intensive disciple-training processes. Sometimes the disciples did not understand (9:45). In the Emmaus Walk Jesus "opened their minds to understand the scriptures" (24:45). His Nazareth sermon (4:18-20) articulated his missionary intent. The author of Luke shows (1: 1-4) that he, Luke, can reflect theologically²⁰, as indeed Jesus had in his use of scripture (4:1-12; 4:16-30).²¹ The Gospel is evidence of the effectiveness of Jesus as the Teacher of a third generation of Christians through his followers.

As portrayed in this Gospel, Jesus had an apprentice-like approach to learning for ministry. The disciples became active participants in ministry and debriefed with Jesus afterwards (9: 1-36). Jesus is reported to have had many conversations with his disciples (10:1-42). Jesus

¹⁷ Trainor, *About Earth's Child*, 37.

¹⁸ Perkins, *Reading the New Testament*, 221.

¹⁹ *The New Interpreter's Study Bible New Revised Standard Version With The Apocrypha*, 1868.

²⁰ Michael Trainor, *According to Luke: Insights for Contemporary Pastoral Practice*, 20-35.

²¹ *The New Interpreter's Study Bible New Revised Standard Version With The Apocrypha*, 1859; Bruce Chilton, *Rabbi Jesus An Intimate Biography* (New York, USA, Image Books, 2000): 98-102. Chilton writes about Jesus' use of the targumic tradition of early Judaism in relation to this passage (Lk 4:16-30), how Jesus paraphrased and interpreted the biblical text. More detail on targums, footnote 53; Bruce D. Chilton, *A Galilean Rabbi and His Bible* (Wilmington, Delaware, USA, Michael Glazier, Inc, 1984): 24-25, 39, 188-189. Chilton provided a short definition of the term targum. "The term targum refers to translations from the Bible into Aramaic." Chilton summarised his claim that Jesus' reflective style in using the Bible was "analogical, critical and experiential."

was a teacher who “spoke with authority” (Lk 4:32). He opened people’s minds and hearts, and they were “spellbound” (19:48).

John

Written c. 90 AD/CE. This very different Gospel was derived from the life of the Johannine Christian community and has a focus on coming to believe that Jesus was the Christ, the incarnate Word of God. The reader of the Gospel was presumed to know something about Jesus.²² The author, possibly in the tradition of “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” interpreted the story of the life of Jesus for the congregation. The author invited people to have faith in God’s presence in and through Jesus; faith in the God who sent Jesus that people may have eternal life in his name (7: 14-18, 20:30-31).

In the Gospel According to John, Jesus is portrayed as an insightful Teacher or Rabbi who articulated many great and memorable teaching themes. These indicated the very strong relationship between himself and God. The “I am” statements introduced imaginative images drawn from the Hebrew Scriptures: Jesus as the ‘bread of life’, the ‘good shepherd’, the ‘vine’... The theme of ‘agape love’ was highlighted (13: 31-35; 15: 1-15; 17:23-24). The words “I am the bread of life,” for example, were reported to indicate that the words “I am” made “a direct connection with the divine name (as in Ex 3:14) in order to identify (Jesus) as the one in whom God is visible and made known.”²³

The author, following Jesus’ example of the use of scripture (7: 38), reflected theologically on Jesus’ identity as God’s Son. Those reflections influenced his portrait of Jesus as the Teacher. In this sense the Gospel is an example of theological reflection in its use of the Jesus tradition as the source of that reflection. Jesus became “the content of the gospel message.”²⁴

The Gospel According to John is also a teaching Gospel. The Johannine Jesus, the Rabbi (1:38), spent much time and energy in the formation and teaching of his disciples (13-17). Jesus taught through symbolic actions and example (13:1-20), through signs (2:1-12) long discourses (17:1-26), metaphor and word play, conversations and prayer. He encouraged “spiritual sight” (9: 35-38), even when people found it hard to understand and believe that he was ‘one with’ God the Father (6: 66; 16:16-19).

As reported in this Gospel, Jesus enabled Thomas, the twin, and Peter, the fisherman, to deepen their faith (20: 26-29; 21:15-25). Jesus discussed faith issues with the disciples, fellow teachers and friends, (3:1-15; 11:1-44) and interested persons like the Greeks (12:20). In disputation and discussion with Jewish leaders, Pilate and questioners, Jesus taught through

²² Perkins, *Reading the New Testament*, 225.

²³ *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible New Revised Standard Version With The Apocrypha*, 1915.

²⁴ Perkins, *Jesus as Teacher*, 67.

clear communication and firmness on some occasions and respectful silence on another occasion (8: 8).²⁵

During a festival, Jewish leaders were in the temple when Jesus taught. They were astonished at his teaching. They recognised Jesus as a “man of learning” (7:14-15) and wondered how this man came to know his letters.²⁶ They thought that he had “never been taught” in a traditional way. They would have known that Jesus had been taught at home and possibly through the local synagogue school in Nazareth. In this incident those Jewish leaders discovered from Jesus that his teaching came from God. (7: 16) The Johannine Jesus was indeed the inspired Teacher from God, according to the Gospel of John.

REFLECTIONS

As I reflected on the exercise of reading the Gospel portrayals of Jesus as the Teacher, I gradually became aware that I was not only reading and observing but also hearing and listening, not only to the words but also to the actions, conversations and events.²⁷ More than this, I found myself, at first unconsciously, then intentionally, also, watching and listening *from a learning-community perspective for learning-community behaviours in Jesus the Teacher*. I was, from *my world in front of the text*, studying the world of Jesus the Teacher through the lens of a learning-community perspective. I listened *for* and then listened *to* the presence and voice of ‘learning-community’ attitudes and behaviours of holism, collaboration and theological reflection in the biblical portrayals of Jesus the Teacher.

A new description of Jesus as the Teacher emerged. In today’s terms, Jesus was an intentional facilitator of learning, one who carefully planned his holistic, collaborative and theologically reflective teaching ministry. Through this interpretation of the Gospels²⁸ Jesus was, in twenty-first educational language, a Teacher for all, a collaborative and theologically reflective Teacher.

²⁵ *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible New Revised Standard Version With The Apocrypha*, 1923.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1922.

²⁷ Trainor, *About Earth’s Child*, 40-61, especially the methodology section on “The ‘reading-listening to’ intertextual dynamic”, 48-51.

²⁸ This interpretative method can be named, in terms of Biblical Studies, as a ‘learning-community hermeneutic’, a learning-community interpretation of the gospels as evidenced in and through the portrayal of the ministry practice of Jesus the Teacher. K. C. Hansen & Douglas E. Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts* (Minneapolis, USA, Fortress Press, 1998):151. Hanson and Oakman help us to “see more clearly the complexity of the hermeneutical task for contemporary communities of faith that read the New Testament,” by exploring the worlds of the biblical texts.

Jesus: Teacher for all Jesus was a teacher at large. He was a peripatetic teacher, an holistic and a universal teacher who facilitated learning for all kinds of people, Jew and Gentile. He was inclusive, used a wide variety of methods, in a range of different venues and situations. Jesus taught his disciples and the crowds. There were “widening circles of discipleship.”²⁹ There was ‘the beloved disciple’ a close friend of Jesus, the inner circle of Peter, James and John, and then the twelve disciples. There was also a much wider circle of disciples including Matthias, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary and Martha, and Joseph of Arimathea, and many more men and women and some in his own family. And there were many more people in the crowds and amongst the poor, the enquirers and the socially outcast or sinners. Those who heard and did the will of God belonged to the community gathered around Jesus. There was an openness and inclusivity about Jesus the teacher who taught and showed others how to break down the boundaries of exclusion in his day.

Jesus, as reported in the Gospels, taught in a range of venues, the temple, the synagogue, in homes, cities and villages, out in the open air in the countryside, from a boat on the shore and from a boat at sea. There was no one place and no one time for teaching and learning in Jesus’ ministry. He taught when there was a ‘teachable moment’, when people were ready and made a request or when he decided to formally teach during worship in a synagogue.

In the blessing of the children incident, where parents, children and disciples were involved (Mk 10:13-16; Mt 19:13-15, Lk 18:15-17), Jesus is seen to be concerned for all participants. He invited them to enact his new Kingdom teaching of inclusion and respect, especially for children as role models of God’s realm.

In summary, as a teacher for all, Jesus taught about God the Father (Abba), God’s realm, discipleship and ethics. His main teaching themes were repeated many times. Other topics were also included: faith, forgiveness, prayer, new birth, and eternal life.³⁰ He taught about the loving, accepting and generous nature of God. The great teaching themes mentioned in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew and the discourses in John were insightful for many people. His teaching showed great concern for the poor, the needy and the marginalised. He applied the principle of love - love of God and neighbour as one self - as compared to society’s rules, customs and precedents, which were exclusive of people and God’s purposes.

²⁹ James G. D Dunn, *Jesus’ Call to Discipleship* (Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 1992): 108-110; Perkins, *Jesus as Teacher*, 31. Perkins wrote “Jesus’ Message is for All.” Douglas E. Oakman, *The Political Aims of Jesus* (Minneapolis, USA, Fortress Press, 2012): 82-83. Oakman writes “The Gospels certainly imply that Jesus had a rich experience of life (the parables) and networked with both poor and rich.”

³⁰ Lilas D. Rixon, *How Jesus Taught: Methods and Roles of Jesus Christ the Teacher* (Croydon, NSW, Australia, Sydney Missionary and Bible College, 1977): 9.

Jesus: Collaborative Teacher As a Teacher Jesus had an interactive teaching style. He facilitated learning for ministry, and learning from ministry practice (Mk 6:7; Lk 9: 1-36).³¹ He demonstrated concern for and ability to forward the formation of his disciples into his new teaching of the Kingdom of God (Lk 9 -19; Jn 13-17). Jesus was concerned to help his disciples overcome their difficulties in understanding his new teaching. The disciples could be described as being on a learning curve in seeking to understand the new worldview that Jesus was teaching. He facilitated their learning through the use of parable, conversation and much more. He recognised effective learning when it happened and encouraged further learning, as in the case of the observant and learned scribe (Mk 12:28-34).

Jesus' collaborative teaching methodology was wide and various according to the situation and the people. He taught in an oral culture so his teaching was spoken rather than written. A listing of his teaching methods would include: parable, sermon, discourse, conversation with individuals and groups, symbolic actions, collaboration and team work with a debriefing discussion, theological reflection processes with use of scripture. He was people-centred, learner-centred and process-centred in his approach to teaching God-Kingdom-centred attitudes and behaviours. Jesus' God experience was ever present in and through these teaching methods. He was a compassionate teacher who was a man of prayer.

Comments from a variety of authors enrich this conversation. Stein lists some other examples of Jesus' methods as: overstatement, hyperbole, pun, simile, metaphor, proverb, riddle, paradox, irony, use of questions, parabolic or figurative actions, poetry through parallelism (Mk 3:4; Mt 7:7-8; Lk 6:27-28).³² Stein comments that Jesus' use of parallelism poetry indicated that he spent time organising his teaching and preparing its form in ways "that would be easy to memorise".³³

In addition, Rixon emphasised the way that Jesus enabled active participation by the learners doing something in response to his new teaching (Mk 8:6-9; Mt 15:36-37).³⁴ Csinos highlights Jesus' apprenticeship approach to learning. Csinos explores Jesus' learning for discipleship and ministry strategy "through the lens of legitimate peripheral participation."³⁵ Learning happened through the apprenticeship "experience (of) full participation in a community by engaging in its practices".³⁶ Hybels drew attention to Jesus' three-way

³¹ Robert L. Kinast, *Let Ministry Teach: A Guide to Theological Reflection* (Minnesota USA, The Liturgical Press, 1996): vii, x.

³² Stein, *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teachings*, 7-32.

³³ *Ibid.*, 31.

³⁴ Rixon, *How Jesus Taught*, 62-64.

³⁵ David M. Csinos, "'Come, Follow Me': Apprenticeship in Jesus' Approach to Education," in *Religious Education* Vol 105, No.1 (January-February 2010): 45-62.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 46, 53.

learning for ministry strategy.³⁷ Jesus selected his disciples, invested time and energy in developing them as leaders, then “he entrusted them with real ministry responsibility and coached them into effectiveness”.³⁸

Jesus: Theologically reflective Teacher Jesus as the teacher was a practitioner in theological reflection as illustrated in the parable of soils (Mk 4:1-9; Mt 13: 1-23; Lk 8: 4-15) and in his Nazareth sermon, when he reflected on his present and future ministry in the light of the Hebrew scripture passage from the book of the prophet Isaiah (Lk 4: 18-20). The Gospel writers, as previously outlined, following in Jesus’ footsteps, also practised theological reflection.

Jesus was concerned that people thought about his teachings through parables. In the parables we have “the actual teachings of Jesus.”³⁹ The parables were “the most characteristic element of his teaching, for not less than 35 percent of his teaching in the Synoptic gospels is found in parabolic form”.⁴⁰

Jesus gave people time to think through the meaning of a parable. The words “ Let anyone with ears to hear listen” (Mk 4:9, 23) were an indication that the parable was worthy of examination and also an invitation to think about the significance of the story. He wanted to help them understand when he asked the question “Have you understood?” (Mt 13:51). Jesus did his teaching with an attitude of great respect for God and God’s realm, and great respect for learners when he facilitated their learning with a variety of teaching methods, as they considered his invitation to follow and be disciples.

As reported in the Gospels, Jesus learnt from God and others. Jesus prayed and, at their request, taught others to pray the Lord’s Prayer. Through prayer Jesus communed with God and learnt from God. Jesus recognized that he was a learner, learning from God (Jn 7:16, 8:28).⁴¹

Jesus taught as he was taught in God. Words in the book of the prophet Isaiah (50:4) are often used to illustrate the point that in listening to God, Jesus was being taught. The Christian claim, as expressed in the creeds, that Jesus was truly human and truly divine, comes into play here as another way of expressing the close relationship between Jesus’

³⁷ Bill Hybels, *Courageous Leadership* (Michigan, USA, Zondervan, 2002): 126

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 127.

³⁹ Stein, *The Method and Message of Jesus’ Teachings*, 42-44.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁴¹ Lee Magness, “Teaching and Learning in the Gospels: The Biblical Basis of Christian Education” in *Religious Education* Vol. LXX No. 6 (November-December 1975): 630.

theology of God and his teaching practice. In Parker Palmer's terms Jesus had the courage to teach from "the inner landscape of the teaching self."⁴²

A general perspective

Jesus, as portrayed in the Gospels, was a God inspired Teacher, a compassionate and Godly person who was an intuitive teacher, learned and a learner. He introduced visionary themes imaginatively presented, well prepared and respectful of learners. Jesus as the Teacher had authority, authenticity, and integrity; authoritative but not authoritarian;⁴³ firm yet generous hearted. His teachings and teaching methods were congruent.⁴⁴ He was a parabolic teacher passionate about his Kingdom of God teaching. He was prayerful, mindful of the scriptures and concerned for the other, especially the marginalized. As the Son of Man, Jesus had a theology of and spirituality for his teaching ministry. In today's terms, he was an holistic, collaborative and theologically reflective facilitator of learning.

IMPLICATIONS

The past and the present: thinking critically, implications for today

The Gospel portrayals of Jesus as the Teacher indicated that he had a distinctive style for his teaching ministry. There are some similarities and differences between Jesus' three-fold teaching style and the forms of teaching and learning known to us today. Comparisons can be made.⁴⁵

There is however one amber light concern about making immediate comparisons from the first century into the twenty-first century church. This kind of comparison could look like a literal "blue-print" approach to interpreting the Bible, where biblical truths or practices are extracted from the biblical context and applied or translated to our modern and different cultural situations without a discussion. In the blueprint method there is one direction, from the Bible to our world.⁴⁶

In this paper, instead, a conversation approach to interpreting the Bible has been used, where "our present and the Bible are partners in conversation".⁴⁷ There is a dialogue between

⁴² Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach* (San Francisco, USA, Jossey-Bass publishers, 1998): 4, 183.

⁴³ Robert W. Pazmino, "Jesus: The Master Teacher" in *Introducing Christian Education*, 114.

⁴⁴ Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*, 24, 63. Palmer emphasizes, again and again, that there needs to be congruence between the inner voice and the behaviour of the teacher.

⁴⁵ The idea for this section on implications derived from two papers by Kevin N. Giles, "Teachers and Teaching in the Church: Part 1" in *Journal of Christian Education*, Papers 70 (April 1981): 5-17; "Teachers and Teaching in the Church Part II" in *Journal of Christian Education*, Papers 71 (July 1981): 52-62.

⁴⁶ Trainor, "Five Ways Australian Catholics use the Bible", 2.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

the past and the present. The biblical text “informs, illuminates and critiques” the present circumstances;⁴⁸ and we can reflect on the very different teaching and learning circumstances of Jesus’ day. So, even as the amber light warns about the potential limitations of comparing the two centuries, there is benefit in continuing the conversation approach to interpreting the Bible. A conversation that compares the Gospel portraits of Jesus’ pedagogy⁴⁹ and twenty-first century parish pedagogies will suggest some potentially effective educational approaches with implications for today.

* Jesus taught in the Temple and Synagogue during worship services. He also taught in many other places and on many other occasions, in homes and at outside venues to crowds, groups and individuals. My own research to date is indicating that many Anglican parish leaders appropriately use sermons and worship services for the delivery of educational ministry. This is not enough however. Educational ministry in parishes is not to be confined to church buildings on Sundays. It is to be holistic, 24/7, life-wide, life-deep, life-long and involves Christian learning about life issues debated in society; respectful conversations in parish groups and in homes, at work and in the community; peripatetic teaching.

* Jesus worked with a group of disciples in collaborative ways. Teaching and learning today are to be interactive and collaborative. The sharing of ministry and the enabling of others into discipleship and for ministry are essential leadership practices in congregations. Jesus, as leader, apprenticed others into discipleship and towards ministry and mission leadership.

* Jesus was reported to have been a theologically reflective teacher. My own research to date is indicating that many in parish educational leadership today seek to reflect theologically. Contemporary Christian educators Groome and Trainor derive their theological reflective processes from within the Gospel of Luke. Groome offers an “educator’s reflection” on the

⁴⁸ Ibid., 4.

⁴⁹ Littleton, *Leading Learning in Congregations*, 16. The word ‘pedagogy’ in this context describes the method and practice of teaching in general. I am aware that ‘pedagogy’ is also an educational term used for teaching children and ‘andragogy’ about teaching adults. Thomas H. Groome, *Will There Be Faith?* (New York, USA, HarperOne, 2011): 266. Groome comments that a challenge for Christian educators today is to recognize “that all of our churches have gotten a long way away from the pedagogy of Jesus”. Groome then listed some previous modes of Religious Education, for example the didactic process of “telling what to believe and how to live”, without engaging with the lives and experiences of people. He also mentioned the method of “memorizing catechism questions and answers or Bible verses and stories”. Nicholas C. Burbules, “*Jesus as a Teacher*” retrieved on 27/9/13 from <http://faculty.education.illinois.edu/burbules/papers/jesus.htm>.3. Burbules wrote “The kind of teaching Jesus practiced poses a sharp contrast to the didactic styles of most instruction, including most moral instruction.”

Emmaus story (Lk 24:13-35). Trainor begins his examination of Luke's "praxis for faith education" by exploring the Prologue (Lk 1:1-4).⁵⁰

* Jesus used a wide variety of teaching methods, which were adapted to many different situations and focused on intentional learning – sermon, parables and much more. Congregation members today have a variety of learning styles and are gifted with multiple intelligences. There are a number of generations within congregational life.⁵¹ All of these factors require different teaching methods to facilitate learning in individuals and parishes.

* Jesus was presented in the Gospels as one who nurtured the learner and learning as well as articulating visionary teaching themes. Affirming learning achievement, by individuals and congregations, is appropriate for disciples of Jesus the Teacher. The Gospel theme of kingdom behaviour was like an assessment method, a way of describing learning by outward action (pages 4-6 above). Ways to recognize and affirm growth or enhancement of Christian learning in parishes are available.⁵² Reporting on 'ordinary faith learning episodes' is one effective method. Feedback and self-assessment forms assist in the recognition of individual learning enhancement. Congregations also learn, need affirmation and value recognition of learning achieved.

* In his world Jesus taught through the 'spoken word' in the oral tradition.⁵³ He was a powerful storyteller as is attested by his use of parable to facilitate reflection on the Kingdom of God. In our twenty-first century Western educational world great value is placed on the ability to read and write. Sometimes this appropriate emphasis on reading and writing underplays the importance of the spoken word and storytelling skills. The skills of "story telling, metaphor, orality, wholism, spiral and networked thinking and listening"⁵⁴ are as

⁵⁰ Groome, *Christian Religious Education*, 136, 184-224; Groome, *Will There Be Faith?*, 277, 299-338; Trainor, *According to Luke*, 28, 19-35, 93-137; *Education for Ministry* (EfM), an adult programme that teaches a theological reflection method, is used in some Australian Anglican parishes. For more detail see: Patricia O'Connell Killen and John De Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection* (New York, USA, Crossroad Publishing, 1994).

⁵¹ Littleton, *Leading Learning in Congregations*, 46; VARK Learning Styles, retrieved on 27/9/13 from <http://www.vark-learn.com/english/page.asp?p=categories>

⁵² John Littleton, "Defining Christian Learning in Parishes," Draft Paper, June 2013; Roger L. Walton, "Assessment in Adult Christian Education" in *Learning in the Way: Research and Reflection on Adult Christian Education*, Edited by Jeff Astley (Leominster, England, Gracewing, 2000): 90-112.

⁵³ Chilton, *Rabbi Jesus An Intimate Biography*, xviii, xx, 4-5, 101, 115, 296, 300. Chilton writes about Jesus as a rabbi in the early first-century rabbinic oral teaching tradition of the spoken word and his use of targums. Targums were part of the oral tradition of the Scriptures, when paraphrases and explanations of the Hebrew Bible were memorised and rendered during worship in the local Aramaic language of the people.

essential in Christian Education as are the skills of critical thinking and the ability to communicate in the written word. In her book *Soul Stories* Anne Wimberly⁵⁵ brings these various abilities together in the process of “Story-Linking.”

* Many people, as reported in the Gospels, experienced Jesus as the Teacher and were ‘amazed’, ‘astonished,’ ‘astounded’, attracted, and some, then, became disciples. The teaching of Jesus, the Master Teacher, continues to amaze to this day.

CONCLUSION

The Gospel portrayals indicated that Jesus as the Teacher was inspirational, visionary and practical in his approach to teaching and learning. Reading the Gospel portraits through a learning-community window⁵⁶ has revealed that he was a Teacher for all, a collaborative and a theologically reflective Teacher. Jesus’ profound influence as the Teacher has resonated down the centuries and continues in this century. It has very significant implications for Christian Education challenging the Church to provide a teaching ministry that is holistic, collaborative and theologically reflective.

⁵⁴ Rosemary Dewerse, *Breaking Calabashes: Becoming an intercultural community* (Unley, Adelaide, Australia, MediaCom Education, 2013): 47.

⁵⁵ Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, *Soul Stories African American Christian Education*. (Nashville, USA, Abingdon Press, 2005 Revised Edition): 26, 33-34. Wimberly writes “Story-linking is a process whereby we connect parts of our everyday lives with the Christian faith story in the Bible and the lives of exemplars of the Christian faith outside the Bible.” This process helps us “engage in Christian Ethical Decision Making.”

⁵⁶ Oakman, *The Political Aims of Jesus*, 18, 20. Oakman uses the ‘window’ image. He writes “The Jesus traditions incorporate many stained-glass windows through which the historical Jesus can be discerned, in some places more clearly than in others, but these “windows” have also obscured that historical Jesus figure behind the editorial composites of his early interpreters.” He also writes “Aphorisms or short wisdom *chreiai* (sharp sayings with a brief setting) or parables provide us with the most likely windows onto or insights into the intentions and interests of the historical Jesus.”

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