

# Jesus Is Lord!

A BASIC CHRISTOLOGY FOR ADULTS

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T H O M A S   Z A N Z I G

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"Splendidly written and fully current discussion of the historical Jesus and the transforming impact the Risen Jesus had on his first disciples."

Donald Gray

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**A Basic Christology for Adults**

**by Thomas Zanzig**

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# Introduction: “Who Do You Say I Am?”

Now one day when he was praying alone in the presence of his disciples he put this question to them, “Who do the crowds say I am?” And they answered, “John the Baptist; others Elijah; and others say one of the ancient prophets come back to life.” “But you,” he said, “who do you say I am?” It was Peter who spoke up. “The Christ of God,” he said. But he gave them strict orders not to tell anyone anything about this (Luke 9:18-21).

## A Humble Beginning to a Great Story

Nearly two thousand years ago he was born in poverty. The magnificent paintings of his birth by countless artists, the inspiring sound of Christmas carols sung by choirs, and brightly wrapped presents under decorated trees tend to mask the fact that his real “birth-day” was very humble.

He was raised in an obscure Galilean village in Palestine, a small country no bigger than New Jersey. The names perhaps sound remote, strange, distant—Galilee, Palestine—as do so many names of towns and villages which would someday become famous chiefly because of their association with him: Bethlehem, Cana, Bethany, Capernaum.

He was the son of a carpenter. Today television’s constant harping about the glories of Craftsman power tools and Black and Decker Workmate benches and “the friendly hardware man” have blurred our understanding and appreciation of the particular joys and



challenges of carpentry two thousand years ago. How much we think we know of him; how little we really do.

We know very little about his early life, and most of what we claim to know about his childhood and young adulthood is drawn from our understanding of his Jewish roots, from our knowledge of the historical circumstances of his time, and from the recollections of people upon whom he made a powerful and lasting impact. We can only speculate on what he looked like, the types of people he associated with as he grew, the kind of education he attained. Yet our strong impression is that we know him well. His face is, after all, recognizable in literally thousands of paintings, films, and statues—all bearing different images, of course, and yet all looking vaguely similar. The stories of his encounters with people have become as familiar as reruns of old favorites on TV. Many even think that his profound ideas came easily to him—certainly without a need for any formal education. Somehow his having to go to school strikes us as almost humorous, even ridiculous. How much we think we know of him; how little we really do.

So we know little about his early “hidden years.” And we have only a brief and somewhat confusing record of what would come to be called his “public life,” starting from about the time he was 30 years old. He almost seems to come out of nowhere, taking the people of his time by surprise. His people, the Jews, had waited a long time for someone who would claim what he was to claim—that he was “the one sent by God” who was to free them from their oppression. And yet when he came among them, many rejected him. He was so unlike what they had hoped for and expected.

His public life seems in some respects to be as cloudy and vague as his early life. He may have been a public figure, for instance, for as little as six months or for as long as three years. The few written records we have of his life and work—what we call “gospels”—seem so often to conflict with each other on the details of his actions and words that some people choose to reject them as unreliable, even as fables and fairy tales.

### **Matters of life and death.**

In his own time he was most often called simply a teacher, yet one whose “classroom” varied from the formal setting of Jewish houses of prayer and worship to crowded and dusty streets, from peaceful lakeshores to rolling hillsides. His basic message as he delivered it might well fill only a small pamphlet, yet library shelves today groan under the weight of thousands of books that have attempt-

ted to “simplify” and to explain the message he felt was so simple that even children—perhaps only children—could quickly understand it. It was a message about a good God and a proclamation of unlimited love, of generosity, of a world of peace, of brotherhood and sisterhood. It was a message of hope in the midst of despair, of joy beneath the tears and hunger, of freedom from the chains of oppression, of life in the face of death. And the man who preached that message of unbounded hope, of unquenchable joy, of profound liberation and abundant life was savagely executed on a cross by people he had somehow frightened. The glorious vision he offered had become for some people a horror show. His words of love and joy and peace had become for some a threat, even a curse. How could this happen? How much we think we know of him; how little we really do.

Like so many great leaders throughout history, he was fully appreciated and understood only *after* his brutal death. That in itself is not unusual. We humans often seem to appreciate wonderful gifts only when they have been taken from us, to experience deep love when the one we love is absent, to recognize great people when death snatches them from us. John Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and John Lennon were all young men when assassins’ bullets brought them down. Our human inclination in such cases is not only to mourn the loss of what once was, but also to ache for what might have been—the promise that was never fulfilled, the talent left untapped, the wisdom never shared, and the music that would never be sung. But with *this* young man, this man from Nazareth nearly two thousand years ago, the response was strangely, mysteriously different. Following his death there was barely time for grief and no time to write obituaries. All the talk of “what might have been” had just begun when a completely shocking message rang out across the land. “The one whom you have crucified has been raised by God and is now alive!” Incredible! Stupendous! If true, it was a reality that almost shook the world at its foundations! And yet in cathedrals and churches across the world today, that message of joy is often received—and occasionally proclaimed—with a yawn, with boredom, with apathy. We have, after all, heard it all before. How much we think we know of him; how little we really do.

Nearly two thousand years have passed since the days when “the carpenter’s son” walked the roads of Palestine, and still we must ask, “Who is this man?” He was called by many names during his earthly life—teacher, rabbi, the Nazarene, a prophet—and still we must ask, “Who is this man?” We need to constantly seek out new answers to that question primarily because of what people claimed about him

after his death and after the event that some claimed was his Resurrection from the dead. The titles he then received come so easily to us now that we lose touch with what they mean—we forget that many people throughout history have endured torture and execution with these words on their lips and joy in their hearts. We fail to realize how haltingly these titles must have been uttered by those who first spoke them: Lord, Redeemer, Savior, Son of God, the Christ of God. How many throughout history have fallen to their knees with the overwhelming realization: “My God . . . he’s God!” Yet how many today find those titles nearly meaningless? How many “put on” their faith in him with the same sense of routine as putting on a well-worn shirt? How much we think we know about him; how little we really do.

### **About this book.**

This is a book about that man from long ago, the son of the carpenter from Nazareth, the one called simply “Jesus” in his own time, the one now recognized by a quarter of all the people in the world as “the Christ,” the one sent by God. The name and the title are perhaps *too* familiar. They fall too easily from the lips of some people, at times as a curse when life gets rough, perhaps as an expression of surprise, and even occasionally as a sigh of disgust. “Oh, Jesus!” “Christ Almighty!” But listen to what one of his followers, St. Paul, said long ago about Jesus and about that title:

**His state was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave, and became as men are; and being as all men are, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross. But God raised him high and gave him the name which is above all other names so that *all beings* in the heavens, on earth and in the underworld, *should bend the knee* at the name of Jesus and that every tongue should acclaim Jesus Christ as Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:6-11).**

Hardly a routine statement! The point is this: For many of us, our lives have been filled with stories about Jesus and with explanations of his message that the Church—that community of people gathered in his name—has developed through the years. And there is a chance, even a likelihood, that after awhile it all becomes so routine that we lose the sense of joyous surprise that should be a part of our experience of Jesus. It is important that we at least acknowledge that possibility, and that we try to identify why so many of us become apathetic about Jesus, about religious practices, about Christian faith.

Part of our difficulty as adult Catholics stems, of course, from our past experience with the Church's approach to Christian education and, more specifically, to the study of Jesus and his meaning. For reasons that will be more clearly explained in the last chapter of the book, the Catholic Church developed an approach to education that revolved around the memorization of rigidly defined doctrines, dogmas, and teachings. The clearest expression of this would be the Baltimore Catechism, which was for many their primary—and perhaps only—religious education text. There is no point in discussing here the pros and cons of such an educational methodology. Suffice it to say that such an approach can too easily result in the reduction of the life of faith to the intellectual acquisition and acceptance of religious teachings, rather than the development of a personal relationship of love with our God revealed in Jesus.

Many converging events and developments have resulted in dramatic changes in our way of understanding Jesus and, consequently, our approaches to teaching about him. Vatican Council II is, of course, often identified as the primary cause of these changes, but the council itself was the result or expression of a tremendous surge of development in the fields of Scripture study, liturgical renewal, ecumenism, and so on. So great have been the resulting changes in our approaches to Christian education that many parents—and many teachers in Catholic schools and parish religious education programs as well—often feel like religious or theological schizophrenics. They find themselves with one foot firmly anchored in their past understandings and images of Jesus, while their own children or the students they teach are expected to view Jesus from completely different perspectives. This can be confusing, frightening, disconcerting, aggravating, threatening, or a blend of all these emotional reactions and more.

What is needed, it seems, is a kind of bridge between the two worlds of the past and present, a discussion of our understanding of Jesus which recognizes the past but helps us get in touch with the most recent trends in Christology—the theological study of Jesus and his meaning. The goal of this book is to be such a bridge. *Jesus Is Lord!* offers a thorough, solidly researched, and clear presentation of the life, ministry, message, and meaning of Jesus. Reflecting the impact of contemporary theology and strongly centered on the gospels as privileged sources for our understanding of Jesus, it is a book that, it is hoped, can help make sense of what for many Catholic adults is a very confusing situation indeed. A brief overview of the contents and progression of material in the book might illustrate this:

**In chapters 1 through 4** we will discuss the various sources we have available for information about Jesus and offer some important background on the geographical, religious, and political world in which he was born, grew, preached his message, and eventually died by crucifixion. Without this kind of background, it is virtually impossible to understand what Jesus was all about and why the world reacted to him as it did.

**In chapters 5 through 8** we will take a close look at the message Jesus proclaimed to the world and the ways in which he proclaimed it—the words that he spoke and the things that he did that often spoke more loudly than words. Was Jesus proclaiming a message about himself or rather about his vision of God and of life? The answer to that question is central to our understanding of Jesus and of what it means to follow him.

**In chapters 9 through 11** we will discuss those factors that have made Jesus the most widely proclaimed figure in history—his death and its meaning, the proclamation of his Resurrection from the dead, and the developing understanding of Jesus through the years by those, the members of the Church, who profess to follow him. It is only at these latter stages of our discussion that we will deal directly with many of the issues and teachings about Jesus with which we may be most familiar—the Church's convictions about his nature as God, the development of the doctrines and official teachings about him that we recite regularly in the creeds at Mass, and so on. It is hoped that, by that point, most if not all of these teachings will make more sense because they will be firmly rooted in an understanding of the history which led to their development.

Each chapter of the book concludes with questions and activities for reflection and discussion, making the book useful for adult discussion groups, catechetical training programs, convert instruction, and so on. It is hoped, however, that this might also be a book to be studied and prayed over privately, leading the reader to a deeper personal relationship with the Jesus of History who is, for believers, the Christ of Faith. With that sense of purpose and that hope in mind, let's begin.

# 1

## The Gospels: Testimonies of Faith

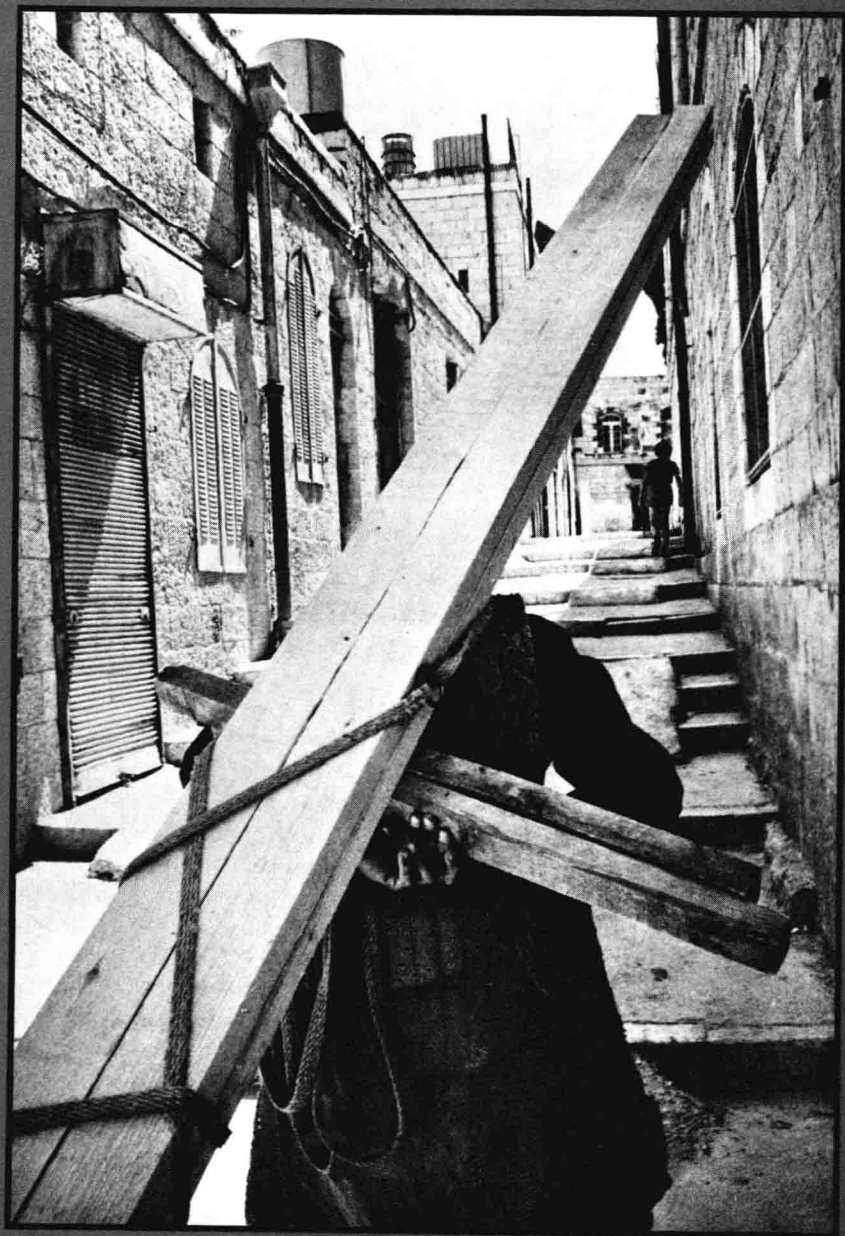
**This disciple is the one who vouches for these things and has written them down, and we know that his testimony is true. There were many other things that Jesus did; if it all were written down, the world itself, I suppose, would not hold all the books that would have to be written (John 21:24-25).**

### Knowing by Heart and by Head

It is very possible to know a great deal *about* Jesus, to know all kinds of facts about his life, the message he preached, the historical and religious conditions of his time, and so on, and yet never truly “meet” him, never actually get beyond the random details *about* him to the point of developing some kind of a personal response to him and his message. In such cases Christian faith may appear to be simply a series of teachings, religious principles, traditions, and perhaps meaningless practices and rituals.

If, on the other hand, we have all that information about Jesus as a foundation, and then actually meet him in a personal way through a particular life experience, all the cold, hard facts *about* him take on new meaning, new power in our lives. What before were just descriptive phrases and some recollections by others now touch us more deeply, more profoundly, in our hearts rather than just in our minds. And, perhaps, we begin to develop a true and deep response to Jesus and his message, a relationship of love in and through faith.

It is also very possible to develop a sincere and even profound love for Jesus and all he stands for while actually knowing very little



*about* him. Maybe we are touched by the infectious strength of another believer—a parent or close friend deeply committed to Jesus, for example. Perhaps we experience a tremendous surge of peace in our hearts as we sit quietly in a darkened church, and we know of a depth of God’s true presence that we could never describe or explain to anyone in words. Maybe we have a powerful experience of a loving community of friends—as often happens on good retreats, in the Cursillo Movement, the Charismatic Renewal, Marriage Encounter, and so on—and we know in our hearts that Christ is real even if all we can say about the experience is, “You had to be there to understand what I mean.” In these cases we may say that we know Jesus “by heart” long before we know all that much *about* him, that we in fact love Jesus even before we can logically explain to others why we do.

Therefore, a strange kind of reality now becomes more clear to us. It is possible to be a deeply faith-filled Christian, a believer, without taking a lot of courses in Christian theology and philosophy. It is also possible to have a thorough grasp of Christian teaching and history and to know Catholic beliefs to the point of teaching them in the halls of great universities but to remain an unbeliever, even an atheist, one who truly accepts none of it. Christian faith, therefore, is as much a matter of the *heart* as it is of the *head*. In selecting his Apostles, Jesus did not recruit people on the basis of their intellectual abilities. He looked, rather, into the hearts of simple and honest people, and he touched them there. This should be a great consolation to those of us who find theological discussions difficult and even overwhelming. God will never judge us—thank God—on the basis of our intellectual prowess.

### **Love hungers for knowledge.**

Having said this, however, it is important to add one more brief comment about knowing and learning about Jesus that has a direct bearing on our discussion. **Even though it is possible to love Jesus without knowing a great deal about him, it is equally true that *real* love always causes a great hunger to discover more about the person loved.** It is unimaginable to think of falling in love with a person but having no great desire to learn anything more about him or her. Just the opposite is always true. There is a deep yearning for more information, for knowledge about the person’s past, for discovering in a continually growing way all the details that must be hidden within the life of the person we have already accepted in our heart. Therefore, for the person who already feels certain of his or her love for and commitment



to Jesus, there is a real need to plunge more deeply into that relationship and to discover even greater richness in it.

That may not always be a comforting experience, however. We may find, for example, that the image of Jesus we had when we initially invited him into our hearts is not a totally accurate one, that “our Jesus” may be too middle-class, too White, or too easily accepted because his message as we had understood it was not all that demanding. In such cases, even believers may be challenged by what they discover in the search for a deeper understanding about Jesus, but they will find also that a more mature and accurate understanding of him ultimately strengthens and confirms their love for him rather than weakens or threatens it.

## Where Did It All Come From?

How do we learn about Jesus? At first this may seem like a fairly easy question with an obvious answer, but the fact is that this initial question in our search for a mature understanding of Jesus is about as basic and critical as we can encounter. If the foundations of our understanding are shaky and questionable, then everything we build upon them on our way to some ultimate decisions about Jesus will be uncertain, unsettled, and easily disproved or uprooted. If these initial foundations are solidly and clearly constructed, however, we will be able to pursue our understanding of Jesus with confidence, self-assurance, and conviction.

**On what solid foundation of information can we reasonably build an understanding of Jesus, an understanding upon which we can eventually make mature, rational, solidly based decisions about him?** There is, it seems, only one real answer—the same foundation upon which all the popes, bishops, teachers, and other believers through the years have ultimately been called to base their own understanding of Jesus and their faith in him—the gospels.

Many Christians—particularly Catholic Christians—feel they know little more about the gospels than that there are four of them (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) and that we hear the gospels read at each Mass. Even in these cases, however, it is likely that the average Catholic knows more about the gospels than she or he thinks, simply because these sacred writings are in fact central to everything we know and believe about Jesus. Try this exercise to gain a sense of this fact: