

Inventive teacher? Yes. Entertainer? No.

By Father David K. O'Rourke, OP
NC News Service

I sat down to rest on a crescent beach on the Sea of Galilee a few miles south of Capernaum a few years ago, during a stay in the Holy Land.

An Arab family was setting up for a picnic. Their teen-age son had set his precious transistor radio on an air mattress floating a dozen yards from shore. The thin voice of an Arab pop singer rolled easily across the water and carried to the natural amphitheater behind the beach.

Two thousand years ago the voice of Jesus of Nazareth rolled across this same stretch of water. He was teaching on the shore, but a large crowd had gathered, too large for easy teaching. So he entered a boat and spoke across the water to the people gathered on the slope of the amphitheater.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is addressed as a rabbi, a teacher. But what kind of teacher was he?

Fortunately, the Gospels give us many pictures of Jesus teaching. We can recapture the character of his teaching in one word — crowds. No matter where he went, no matter what the season of the year, Jesus attracted mobs of people, even to the point of emptying villages.

Jesus taught "with authority," so the people said. He taught with great imagination, engaging his hearers at every point of the story or parable he unfolded.

Jesus used images from the people's daily lives and actual concerns. He was attractive, fascinating and engaging.

But there was one thing Jesus was not. He was not an entertainer.

Today people sometimes look at teachers and judge them by their ability to keep students entertained. Jesus was magnetic when it came to gathering a crowd. But he did not change his teaching to keep a crowd. Put simply, he was there to teach the truth, not to entertain.

The result? The people, who came to him in droves, left him in droves.

Jesus taught the people about what he called "the kingdom of God." He spoke of justice between peoples and of spiritual values and eternal life.

But when the people heard "kingdom of God" they thought of political independence and economic prosperity. They thought of the cruel Romans expelled, the corrupt royal court reformed and God's Messiah ruling a chosen kingdom of peace and prosperity from Jerusalem.

The people watched Jesus, saw the miracles and half listened to what he said, impatiently waiting for the kingdom to come. Then, as he continued to talk of a spiritual, not a worldly kingdom, the people finally understood.

He meant what he was saying. And he was not saying what many of them wanted to hear.

Today a perceptive preacher soon learns what to say to engage an audience. How often have I heard people say, "Father, that was a great sermon. I couldn't have agreed more."

Great sermon or good show? They're not necessarily the same.

In the life of Jesus we see the clear distinction between a real teacher and a good entertainer. Jesus was an inventive, magnetic and involving teacher. But he pointed the people beyond their immediate interests and needs.

He turned people toward God, toward an eternal life, and he asked them to change their way of living.

Most people didn't want to hear that. So they left him and many eventually turned against him.

(Father O'Rourke is on the staff of the Family Life Office in the Diocese of Oakland, Calif.)

FOOD...

...for thought

Think back to a teacher whose influence became a positive force in your life. But remember, people learn from many kinds of "teachers," including parents, spouses, homilists, friends, co-workers and classroom teachers. Some people even learn a lot from their children.

Was there a teacher who saw an ability you possessed, even though you hadn't seen it yet? That is the gift of some teachers: to identify the gifts hidden in others.

And such a teacher is not quickly forgotten. Learners tend to be grateful to teachers who help them get to know themselves better.

Was it someone whose insight gave you hope when you needed it? Was it someone who foresaw that your world would grow larger, just when you feared it was about to shrink up? Was it someone who made you think?

Teachers fulfill many roles. Some have a unique ability to help people understand that things are not always quite as they appear. Jesus was a teacher like that.

He told those who listened to him that the poor were especially blessed. He delivered a message about how new life emerges in death's midst. This wasn't the

way things seemed to his listeners.

Some who listened to Jesus must have been surprised by what he said. Those who believed him must have felt that these convictions — about the poor, about the connections between life and death, about love for enemies, about forgiveness — would change them. For such convictions alter people's perspectives on the world around them and on themselves.

Jesus must have been the kind of teacher who got people to realize that there is more to the world, more to their own lives, than meets the eye.

Most teachers are appreciated when they can look into the future and find that it is full of promise. Jesus was like that, introducing people to a world and a way of life whose horizons could stretch them and cause them to grow.

Some people look to Jesus the teacher to gain understanding of what a good teacher is. It is worth thinking about. For most people, at one time or another, fulfill a "teaching" role in someone's life. People learn a lot from each other.

What "teacher" do you recall best? What force did that teacher bring into your life?

...for discussion

1. What "teacher" do you recall best? What role did this person fulfill for you?

2. Do you think you presently fulfill the role of a teacher — in the broadest sense of the term — in anyone else's life? Do you value this role?

3. From what you know about Jesus as a teacher, what are some of the qualities of his approach?

4. What sort of influence did the late Cardinal John Wright have on Father Francis Kelly, according to Katharine Bird's article? What made Cardinal Wright a memorable teacher?

5. Why does Father David K. O'Rourke stress the fact that in educating people Jesus did not fulfill an entertainer's role?

6. In her article, Monica Clark talks about young people who are disinterested in religion. Do you think this is a common problem? What are some of the ways Jesus the teacher can serve

as a model for parents faced with a similar situation?

SECOND HELPINGS

"The Seventh Trumpet: The Good News Proclaimed," by Jesuit Father Mark Link. This easy-to-read book offers background on the life of Jesus, the political world and the culture of the ancient Middle East. Thus it enables readers to understand many biblical images. What did Jesus look like? Father Link writes: "Jesus held crowds spellbound... Jesus lived a rugged life... For these reasons, some experts conclude that Jesus was, indeed, attractive and strong. But the fact is that we are not sure of either. The important thing about Jesus is not his appearance, but the significance of what he said and did." (Argus Communications, One DLM Parkway, Allen, Texas 75002. 1978. \$7.95.)



is

synagogue

fully

Jerusalem
did gather
in at specified
courtyard and
roes.

ound, it
understand
en, while
illage, Jesus
the sabbath

as a lay
y qualified
ch. One can
milies were
ighest caliber,
out-of-the-
reth. But
ch in the
that kept his
zed."

is interesting:
all this? What
re endowed
Apparently
re that Jesus
oling: He had
his life until

(Father Castelot teaches at St. John's Seminary, Plymouth, Mich.)