



# LOOKING BACK TO SEE AHEAD

By Ron Harmon, *Council of Twelve Apostles*

Imagine the year is 2050, and you discover a time capsule dated 1955. Among various artifacts you find a folded piece of paper. On it, you see these words written by an Alabama seamstress named Rosa Parks.

People always say that I didn't give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn't true. I was not tired physically, or no more tired than I usually was at the end of a working day. I was not old, although some people have an image of me as being old then. I was forty-two. No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in.

—Rosa Parks: My Story

Without a historical perspective on the civil-rights movement in the USA and the Montgomery bus boycott organized by Martin Luther King Jr., you would have no context for this statement. You might conclude buses must have been overcrowded, or that Rosa Parks decided she was going to take care of herself at the expense of others. What you would miss is that her action became pivotal in the battle against racism.

Have you ever misread a person or event because you didn't have the full story? Context is like the rest of the story surrounding an event, statement, or idea. It helps us better understand its full meaning. Context is challenging because even when we attempt to grasp the rest of the story, we bring our own story with us. This story, a collection of our life experiences, forms our interpretive lens and shapes how we see and interpret events.

I have come to understand that I don't see things as they really are. As much as I try to look beyond the interpretative lens of my personal story (i.e. context), it always limits me. I need others to help broaden my

perspective. This acknowledgement is the first step in any authentic pursuit of truth.

God chose to reveal suffering and transforming love in the middle of an unfolding story in first-century Palestine. In John 1:14 we read from the Message Bible, "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood." The revelatory experience is never separate from our individual and shared story. They're connected inseparably.

This is our challenge as we strive to faithfully interpret and apply the message and mission of Jesus in our time. We can't separate the witness of the Gospel accounts from the rest of the story—the story of Jesus as a first-century Jew from Nazareth.

One of my favorite theologians, David Bosch, put it this way, "If we are going to take the incarnation seriously, the Word must become flesh in every new context." This implies our task of interpreting and applying what God did and is doing in Christ is ongoing and essential to pursuing the peaceful One in each generation.

## Looking Back to the First Century

What might life have been like in the first century? Was Jesus only a religious figure? Was he unaffected by Roman rule? Was he not also human? Did he identify with the suffering of his own people? Studying the historical context of Jesus helps us address these questions.

A brief sketch of life in the first century helps us with the rest of the story as we interpret and apply the message and mission of Christ to our day.

- There were significant class and economic divisions between multiple layers of rulers (i.e., Roman, Herodian, and priestly) and the general population of Jerusalem and surrounding cities.

A huge gap existed between those of power, privilege, wealth, and those who served the ruling groups. This gap created unrest, multiple conflicts, and rebellions.

- Judaism was not understood separately as their religion, like we describe Christianity today. Ancient Jewish life was much more than religious experience. It was economic, social, and political. It was as much a national identity as religion. The temple and high priesthood are examples. The temple was religious, economic, and political. It was the center of life in ancient Palestine. High priests, for example, were responsible for collecting taxes (i.e., tribute to Rome). In short, there was no separation of church and state.
- The social and economic reality was primarily subsistence-level agriculture and fishing. The majority of produce went to the ruling class as tax. Rulers primarily engaged in village affairs only to collect taxes. Communities like Nazareth were semi-autonomous with village councils.
- The conditions during Roman rule were crushingly oppressive. Under extreme pressure families provided loans to other families just to pay their tribute (tax). Inability to pay loans back would cause serious conflict. Everyone was trying to survive without losing their produce and/or ancestral land. People were being driven into deeper debt and hunger. They felt increasing hopelessness and despair under Antipas, Herod's son, who had settled in Galilee. In addition, because Galilee would have been on the empire's frontier, the support of the army also fell on the backs of the nonruling class.
- Rebellion of any kind was not tolerated. According to Richard Horsley in *Jesus and Empire*:

There is no way we can understand such practices as crucifixion, mass slaughter and enslavement, massacres of whole towns, and annihilation of whole peoples, than as purposeful attempts to terrorize subjected peoples.

Deterrence by terrorism was the Roman way. The practices, hideously barbaric, were meant to punish and terrorize people into submission.

This was the context of Jesus' life and ministry.

The Roman killing or enslavement of thousands of Galileans and Judeans in response to a revolt around the time of Jesus' birth would have been etched in their collective memory. The accounts, truly horrific and disturbing, were a tragic reality.

### **The Ministry of Jesus in his Context**

In light of these realities, was Jesus preaching a spiritual kingdom, or did it also have structural, economic, and political implications? As we gain appreciation for what it might have been like to live under Roman rule, is there any doubt why Jesus was anointed in Luke 4:18–19 to proclaim good news to the poor, release captives, restore sight, and set the oppressed free?

These are important questions. For while the poor and oppressed get a lot of attention in the Bible, it seems the nonpoor usually end up in charge of our political, economic, and religious institutions. If the poor and oppressed were in position to be heard, their interpretation of Jesus' words probably would be considered radical and impractical—code words for threatening to the status quo.

In Matthew 22:15–22 we find Jesus confronted by some Pharisees and Herodians, attempting to trap him with a question, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" I have heard many interpretations of this scripture through a 21st-century lens. The interpretation suggests Jesus is telling people to pay taxes to their government and pay tithes to the church. That would, after all, maintain the status quo.

It would not have been lawful according to Mosaic law to pay tax to Rome. The Herodians and Pharisees who challenged Jesus with the question would have known this. They also would have known that not paying tax to Rome would have been equal to rebellion.

In his response, Jesus cleverly avoids the trap and their desire to arrest him. "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." Note that Jesus does not directly answer the question and does not use the phrase "it is not lawful" in his response.

Jesus' response clearly would have been heard as "it is not lawful" to every Israelite listening. If the Israelites lived under the reign of God, then all things

belonged to God. What was left for Caesar is intuitively obvious—nothing. Jesus is asserting that Caesar, or any other ruler, has no claim on the Israelite people. This would have been a deeply subversive statement to his hearers.

In Matthew 26:11, John 12:8, and Mark 14:7 Jesus states, “For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me.” If we read this through a 21st-century lens we might conclude that Jesus is saying, we just need to accept poverty as a condition that will always be present.

If we read this passage through a first-century lens and connect it with other Hebrew scriptures like Isaiah 58 and Isaiah 61, we arrive at a different conclusion. Yes, we always will have the poor among us unless we participate with God in changing the structures, systems, and practices that oppress the many for the benefit of the privileged few—the mission Jesus proclaimed in Luke 4:18–19.

Richard Rohr in *Jesus’ Plan for a New World: The Sermon on the Mount* suggests there are three kinds of cultures: “political cultures based on the manipulation of power, economic cultures based on the manipulation of money, and religious cultures based on the manipulation of some theory about God.” We find all three in the first century. Jesus’ message and mission presented an alternative for all three. He called it the kingdom of God, and there was no place for Caesar as ruler over this new world order.

Jürgen Moltmann perhaps sums up best the importance of our interpretative lens:

Reading the Bible with the eyes of the poor is a different thing from reading it with a full belly. If it is read in the light of the experience and hopes of the oppressed, the Bible’s revolutionary themes—promise, exodus, resurrection, and spirit—come alive.

We forget at times that Jesus was not immune to this reality; it was his reality.

### **Moving Beyond our Limitations**

The more we understand the context of Jesus’ ministry the more we see a pattern of speaking truth to power, calling for a radical reorientation of economic priorities, and living faith that embodies

suffering and transforming love. His life, ministry, and death on the cross demonstrate a radical but nonviolent path to the future.

John Dear in *The Nonviolent Life* reminds us:

He does not try to respond with violence, lose his faith, or rage with anger. Instead, he forgives his killers and surrenders himself in peace to the God of peace. His death becomes a spiritual explosion that continues to disarm millions across the centuries.

Our modern world tends to attach spiritual significance to the life and ministry of Jesus while dismissing the oppressive social, economic, and political realities he sought to address. Focusing solely on spiritual significance as though it’s separate from the injustices of our day results in a shallow form of private spirituality, while suffering occurs outside our doorsteps.

The inconvenient truth is the words of Jesus are disruptive in each generation and call us to become a new creation. We often hesitate to struggle with the deeper meaning and application of Jesus’ life and ministry in our gatherings. We settle instead for safe conversation that is disconnected from personal practices, economic systems, and political policies that contribute to human suffering. As difficult as these conversations may be, they are essential to discovering and living Christ’s transformative message and mission today.

Paradoxically, we will know we are moving toward Jesus the peaceful One when our words and actions upset the status quo for the common good of all. Jesus was not crucified for spreading God’s love. He was crucified for his conviction that such love required a radical reordering of social, economic, political, and religious priorities.

We will need to look back to the first century often to gain perspective on an alternative path to our unfolding future. As we move closer to Jesus the peaceful One, may we have courage to go where he leads us.