



JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN

THE CHALLENGE
OF JESUS

THE PARTICIPANT'S PAGES

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THE CHALLENGE OF JESUS
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The World of Jesus

Session 1, "Peace Through Victory"

Discussion Starters

In summary in this first session of THE WORLD OF JESUS, "Peace Through Victory," John Dominic Crossan offers the following:

Before Jesus of Nazareth existed, and even if Jesus had never existed, there already was in the first century Mediterranean world a human being who was called Divine, Son of God, God Incarnate, God from God, Lord, Redeemer, Liberator and Savior of the World. Those were the titles of Caesar Augustus before Jesus ever existed. The titles are written in the stones scattered on the ground throughout the Mediterranean world. When the titles of the Roman Emperor in the palace on the Palatine Hill in Rome were taken from him and given to a Jewish peasant on the Nazareth ridge in Galilee, of all places – was this some kind of a joke?

Octavian (soon to be Augustus) defeats Anthony and Cleopatra at The Battle of Actium on 2 September, 31 BC. That evening following the battle, while onboard his boat, Octavian has "a dream" and the God Apollo, who is reputed to be the divine father of Octavian, appears above his ship and says to him, "Savior of the World. Now conquer at sea, the land is already yours." That title is quite clear. Octavian, Augustus-to-be, has saved the Roman world from an absolutely self-destructive civil war. Julius Caesar also appears to him and says, "You are of my blood. This victory proves it." We are beginning to see an emphasis on victory. It all depends on victory. Everything would be totally different if that battle were even a draw.

In this session, we begin to see clearly and succinctly the Roman mantra of "RELIGION, WAR, VICTORY, PEACE!" That was the Roman program, and the program of every Empire that has ever existed in the history of the world: PEACE THROUGH VICTORY. Dr. Crossan points out that "Rome, by the way, never claimed to have invented that program of peace through victory. They would only claim to have perfected it, to have received it at the will of the Gods, and to have universalized it to the 'whole world.' Rome would have said that peace through victory was the way of the world, of civilization itself. What other way, it would have asked rhetorically, could you ever get world peace except through world victory?"

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The World of Jesus
Session 1, "Peace Through Victory"

Discussion Questions

1. What happens when the titles of the Emperor in Roman Imperial Theology are taken from Caesar and given to a Jewish peasant who lives on the Nazareth ridge in Galilee? Did the Romans recognize this act of bestowing imperial titles on Jesus of Nazareth as an act of high treason?

2. On 16 January, 27 BC, C. Julius Caesar Octavianus became Imperator Caesar Augustus. The title Augustus, "the exalted one", was a word that rang with religious (augur) and social (auctoritas) meaning. How does Octavian become "Master of the World," and what is the significance of the title "Augustus" for the people of the Roman world?

3. Six silver coins, or denarii, are prepared at the request of Caesar Augustus (Octavian). "The coins are simply beautiful and beautifully simple." Three types show the head of Octavian on one side and a full-bodied Goddess on the other. The other three types show the head of a Goddess on one side and the full-bodied Octavian on the other. There is only one inscription on every coin. All it says is, "CAESAR DIVI F[ILIIUS]" in Latin. "Caesar, Son of God." Why use the Goddesses Pax, Aphrodite, and Victoria on the coins? What is the message of these coins? What is the significance of the divine titles and the incarnate program of Rome?

4. The theme of the Roman Imperial Theology and Roman program is "RELIGION, WAR, VICTORY, PEACE." Why does Rome make such a dramatic commitment to "peace through victory"? Is victory the only way to peace? Is violence the only way to non-violence? Is there another way?

5. After a successful battle when the General addresses the troops, one can imagine the Roman soldiers beating their shields with their swords and shouting, "Imperator! Imperator! Imperator!" "Imperator" does not mean Emperor. It means Victor or Conqueror! They were making the claim that the Emperor is "World Conqueror." This became THE title of Caesar. Why is this claim important? Who was eligible for the title of "World Conqueror" and what is the significance?

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The World of Jesus
Session 2, “On Stone and Marble”

Discussion Starters

Dr. Crossan reminds us of “a place called Priene, just south of Ephesus, on the western coast of Turkey, where in approximate the year 9 BCE a great Temple was built high above the Meander Plain. The Temple was dedicated to Athena, the Greek Goddess of Wisdom and War and to Caesar the Augustus. Above the entrance to the Temple you would have seen on the architrave the dedication written in large Greek capital letters:

**“THE PEOPLE DEDICATE THIS TO ATHENA POLIAS
AND TO THE IMPERATOR CAESAR, THE SON OF GOD, THE GOD
SEBASTOS.”**

Dr. Crossan tells us that “Caesar is called ‘the Son of God.’ That is exactly the same Greek title that is all over the New Testament for Jesus as Theou Huios. Then the inscription concludes with “the God Sebastos” or Augustus. In Greek or Latin that is the “God To Be Worshipped.”

Dr. Crossan reminds us that “the Proconsul or Governor of the Roman province of Asia Minor asked what could his province possibly do to thank Caesar Augustus adequately for what he had done for “the world.” The Proconsul’s own suggestion was to start the New Year on the birthday of Augustus. Time should submit to Augustus as place already had. Augustus’ birthday, the 23rd of September, would be New Year’s Day from now on in Asia Minor, the richest of Rome’s many provinces. Those inscriptions are striking because, if you take out the name of Caesar Augustus, they sound so very Christian.” The proposal of the Proconsul and the decree of the League of Asian Cities are written as follows:

Proposal of the Governor of Asia Minor

“[It is a question whether] the birthday of the most divine Caesar is more pleasant or more advantageous, the day which we might justly set on a par with the beginning of everything..”

Decree of the League of Asia Minor Cities

Since the providence that has divinely ordered our existence has applied her energy and zeal and has brought to life the most perfect good in Augustus, whom she filled with virtues for the benefit of mankind...”

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The World of Jesus
Session 2, “On Stone and Marble”

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think Dr. Crossan goes to such length to tell us about the ruins of Roman temples throughout what was the Roman Empire and is now the modern State of Turkey (Actium, Priene)? Why is this important? Dr. Crossan describes Roman Imperial Theology as ubiquitous throughout the Roman Empire. Dr. Crossan thinks it is important to see what the Romans wrote on stone and marble. Why does Dr. Crossan emphasize what is written on stone and marble more than what is written in sacred text?
2. Dr. Crossan pays specific attention to an inscription found in a Priene shrine room in which the governor in that region during the time of Caesar Augustus initiates discussion within his community about how to duly honor Caesar Augustus for being “The Savior of the World.” The governor suggests that the birthday of Caesar Augustus be celebrated as the beginning day of the new Roman age of prosperity and peace. What do you think Dr. Crossan’s purpose is in telling us about the governor’s inscription?
3. Leaving Priene in Turkey for Rome in Italy, Dr. Crossan takes us to the Altar of Augustan Peace. Clearly Crossan is on a mission. He describes the images on the walls of the Altar of Augustan Peace. What do you make of his descriptions of the images found on the walls of the altar? Were you struck by his description of any particular image? Remember, the principal images include the panels depicting the Roman Imperial family, the Roman Senate, Aeneas’ flight from Troy to Italy, and the Roman gods Mars, Venus (Aphrodite), Victoria, and Paz.
4. Imperial Rome held that there is only one way to get peace—that is, prosperity, fertility, security, safety on land and sea, earth and sky. That only way is by victory in war. The question that Jesus proclaimed to the Roman Empire is whether PEACE THROUGH VICTORY is the only way to obtain world peace. Is “Peace through Victory” the only realistic way, or can you imagine others just as pragmatic?

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The World of Jesus
Session 3, "Acts of the Divine Augustus"

Discussion Starters

In Theme 1, Session 3, "Acts of the Divine Augustus," Dr. Crossan makes the rather startling claim that if we do not know something about Roman Imperial Theology, we will not be able to understand Christian theology. For example, consider the term "incarnation." Most of us are so familiar with the word because of our exposure to Christian theology have assumed that the word "incarnation" has belonged peculiarly to the Christian tradition. It is, therefore quite surprising to learn that the idea of "incarnation" was implemented in Roman Imperial Theology before Paul employed it in describing Jesus.

Here is what Dr. Crossan says is so worth understanding: The Romans created the notion that Augustus was the human "incarnation" of the Roman devotion to the Olympian gods. Dr. Crossan tells us that Augustus, near the end of his life, showed that he understood himself as that divine "incarnation." This is revealed to us in "the Acts of the Divine Augustus." In the "Acts," Augustus recounts the victories he had experienced over his enemies, i.e., the enemies of Rome. He tells of the ways that he was empowered by the gods to become the Emperor and "The Savior of the World." When he had completed the writing of the "Acts," Augustus decreed that they would be "posted" throughout the Empire, both in Greek and in Latin, inside and outside the temples to Roma and Augustus, the divine couple of the New World Order. Dr. Crossan even shows us how, for the Romans, this was equivalent to, "the Good News."

It is interesting to note that the ruins of the temples to Roma and Augustus which were scattered across the Empire, are most concentrated in that area of modern Turkey that in the 1st century was known as Gallatia. Of course Gallatia, was the area of ancient Asia Minor in which the Apostle Paul concentrated much of his own work. It is so interesting, that ancient Roman religion and early Christian faith shared such similar language and structures. And yet, as Dr. Crossan explains "incarnated" such radically different programs.

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The World of Jesus

Session 3, "Acts of the Divine Augustus"

Discussion Questions

1. Dr. Crossan says, "If you do not know Roman Imperial Theology you will not be able to understand Christian theology or Pauline theology or New Testament theology." Each of these theologies is set over against Roman Imperial Theology. Crossan reminds us, "If you think of Caesar as an incarnate program of 'Peace through Victory,' then Jesus is an alternative incarnate program." Jesus' incarnate program is "Peace through Justice."

- a. How do you react to the term *incarnate* being applied to Caesar Augustus when it has been preserved in Christian tradition to Jesus, the Christ, understood to be the "incarnate Word of God?"
- b. Is this troubling to you?
- c. Are you surprised?
- d. In what way does Dr. Crossan's information open up your own thinking?

2. Dr. Crossan says, "The glue that held the Roman Empire together was Roman Imperial Theology." He says, "The emperor was divine. And divinity depended on victory. No victory, no divinity." How does it strike you that in the Roman imagination the divinity of the emperor depended on his being victorious in battle. If this idea lay at the core of their theology, what does this tell you about the world view of the Roman people?

3. Dr. Crossan tells us that shortly before Caesar Augustus died he dictated a short biography that he called "The Acts of the Divine Caesar." It should be clear that Augustus believed the things that were said about him in his day, such as, "He is Savior of the World." Reflecting on Dr. Crossan's comment, that their theology was the glue that held the Empire together, it makes sense that Augustus had a strategy in mind. So, he commanded that copies of "The Acts of the Divine Caesar," written both in Greek and in Latin, be displayed in the temples to Roma and Augustus that were built in cities across the Roman Empire. In what ways did your church or the church you attended as a child, glorify the sacrifices made by soldiers who were members? Were their names posted in prominent places? Did your church hold services that commemorated their lives? What do you think about this now?

4. The theme that characterized "The Acts of the Divine Caesar" was a kind of mantra: RELIGION, WAR, VICTORY, and PEACE. Apparently, it was widely believed that if Roman people were faithful to their religion, i.e. their gods, the gods would not only protect them in battle but would insure their victory. In such a theology, what is the motivation for religious belief?

5. Dr. Crossan tells us, "Augustus subjected the whole world to the rule of Rome." How does this impress you? What are your thoughts about such an idea? Do you see the arrogance in such an imperial claim? Do you see this kind of arrogance in any of the nations of the world today?

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The World of Jesus
Session 4, "Olympian Imperial Gods"

Discussion Starters

In Theme 1, Session 4, "Olympian Imperial Gods," Dr. Crossan is completing his presentations on Roman Imperial Theology. He is doing this in order that we understand that the Roman's had already developed a "world wide" theological system to undergird its program of Religion, War, Victory, and Peace, by the time Jesus was born. Roman Imperial Theology was not a small and esoteric preoccupation of a selected few. It was literally woven into every aspect of Roman life. It was everywhere present in its language; in its politics; in its economics; and in the arts. The village into which Jesus was born was literally at the backdoor of a Roman imperial city.

To demonstrate the omnipresence of Roman Imperial Theology in the empire of the 1st century, Dr. Crossan takes us through the ancient city of Aphrodisias. Perhaps the clearest and most detailed example of the way Rome disseminated its imperial program is preserved in Aphrodisias to this today. Remember, that just as the so called "Old Testament" provides context and background to the Christian "New Testament," Homer's *Odyssey* and Virgil's *Aeneid* provide the same context and background for Rome's imperial history and theology. For example, the Christian's story found in Matthew's Gospel, "The Flight into Egypt," is reminiscent of Virgil's hero, Aeneas, and his flight from Troy.

So it is useful to continue to be reminded that so much Christian story, symbol, and language models the structures of Rome's imperial religion. Imagine what will happen when the news of the claims that will be made about Jesus hits the Roman media.

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The World of Jesus
Session 4, "Olympian Imperial Gods"

Discussion Questions

1. Dr. Crossan goes to some length to detail the understanding of Roman Imperial Theology regarding the divinity of Caesar Augustus. Does it seem strange to you when you hear Dr. Crossan saying that Caesar Augustus was divine? Do you see parallels between the way Roman Imperial Theology describes the divinity of Caesar Augustus and the way Christian Theology describes the divinity of Christ? Can you think of historical events in which early Christians tried to define the divinity of Christ?
2. Why do you think Dr. Crossan goes to such extent to explain how Roman Imperial Theology defended its claim that Caesar Augustus was divine? Why do you think the Romans build the Sabasteion in Aphrodisias? Can you think of a Christian counterpart to the Sabasteion? As Christians, why should it matter what Romans believed about their gods? Where do you think Dr. Crossan is headed with all of this history about Roman Imperial Theology?
3. If you combine all of the messages that are inherent in the imagery of the Sabasteion, the overarching idea is very direct. Consider Dr. Crossan's closing questions. What is our human destiny? "Is the human species every bit as magnificent and as doomed as was the saber-toothed tiger? Are we destined for extinction because we want peace, but can only obtain it through the violence of victory? Is there no alternative to that ancestral vision?"

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The Life of Jesus
Session 1, "Empire and Eschaton"

Discussion Starters

In *Empire and Eschaton*, Dr. Crossan goes to considerable length to describe the historical position of Israel as the crossroads between empires from the west and empires from the east. In such a position, tiny Israel was repeatedly used as a highway through which aggressive empires moved against other peoples. In such a position, the people of Israel developed a theology that contained an expectation that God would someday come and end their oppression, their enslavement, and the invasion of their homeland.

Dr. Crossan wants us to understand terms like eschatological, eschaton, apocalyptic, and apocalyptic eschatology. These terms can seem very academic and esoteric and therefore of no importance to real people. He unravels the terms so that we can understand that apocalyptic and apocalypse did not mean in first century Israel what these words have come to mean in modern Christian theology. For instance, the term "eschaton," from which we get "eschatology," refers to the end of something. Dr. Crossan says that whatever else these terms refer to, they are not referring to the end of the world. Rather, they are referring to God's intervention and Great Divine Cleanup of our world.

Dr. Crossan describes the tension that existed between Israel's faith and Israel's experience. On the one hand, he says that they, the people of Israel, believed that God is just; on the other hand, it was their thousand-year experience that the world is vastly unfair and that as a people they had experienced a great deal more than their share of suffering. Therefore, their theology kept them in limbo between their belief in God and the reality of the world in which they lived.

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The Life of Jesus
Session 1, "Empire and Eschaton"

Discussion Questions

1. Dr. Crossan emphasizes Israel's history of invasion, oppression, and the resultant trauma in generation after generation. How do you understand the theology that developed in Israel in the thousand years leading up to the birth of Jesus? What ways do you see this developing theology creating the idea that Israel's history of invasions is divine punishment for their sins?
2. In Chapter 7 of the Book of Daniel a vision is created in which the prophet sees the invading empires as feral beasts of unspeakable violence. Then Daniel's vision imagines God's alternative Kingdom being manifest on the earth. What do you think of Daniel's alternative kingdom manifest on earth? How does this vision of The Kingdom of God compare to the understanding you had growing up?
3. What do you make of Dr. Crossan's claim that "Jewish eschatology" does not deal with the destruction of the earth? What argument would you make against Dr. Crossan's claim that the Kingdom of God does not mean the end of the world?
4. Dr. Crossan says that the term "apocalyptic" refers to special revelation. He then says that apocalyptic eschatology addresses the question, "When will God bring God's Great Divine Cleanup of the World?" Do you think God's promises, depicted in Daniel 7, are believable? How believable is it to you that God will initiate a "Great Divine Cleanup of the World"?
5. In the history of the ancient world, Dr. Crossan claims that Rome was the most powerful and violent empire of all the preceding empires. Yet, each succeeding empire has become more powerful, more violent, and more efficient with violence and destruction. What are your own ideas about God's intervention into our present day world? Do you think God will make such an intervention by God's self? If yes, then when? If yes, then how?

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The Life of Jesus
Session 2, "Herod 'King of the Jews'"

Discussion Starters

For many Christian people the title "King of the Jews" is very familiar. It is used in Matthew's gospel in his narrative of the crucifixion of Jesus. Christians are very familiar with the story in which Pilate orders that a sign be nailed to the top of the cross upon which Jesus is to be crucified that reads, "The King of the Jews." In this context, that title is meant to be Roman mockery of the people's claim that Jesus be recognized as their true king. Dr. Crossan however, describes the historical meaning of the title in a way that will surprise many. He explains that the term in fact was a Roman invention meant to make clear to the people living in Israel that Herod the Great was Rome's choice to rule and govern Judea. The Romans reserved the right to designate someone, "King of the Jews."

Dr. Crossan tells us that Herod the Great represents the "Romanization" of the Jewish homeland. His programs dominated public awareness of the reality of Roman rule. Dr. Crossan demonstrates Herod's absolute power by describing the monumental building programs that took place in Judea. These included the palace-fortresses, the Herodium near Bethlehem, and Masada just west of the Dead Sea. The two palace-fortresses represented massive building projects. Then, Dr. Crossan says Herod turned his attention to two different world-class building projects; the creation of a new port city called Caesarea-Maritima on the Mediterranean coast, and a full-scale refurbishing of the temple in Jerusalem including the addition of the Court of the Gentiles. Dr. Crossan says that these two building projects were impressive in the ancient world by any standard. It was Herod's ambition to solidify the favor of his Roman overseers and placate his Jewish subjects.

Dr. Crossan describes the events set into motion by the death of Herod the Great, around 4 BCE, about the time Jesus was born. He tells us that at Herod's death a series of revolts erupted throughout Judea. Rome responded by doing what they always do with Jewish revolts; they deployed three or four Roman legions stationed to the north in southern Syria, which came south to repress the rebellions. Dr. Crossan tells us that in the Roman capitol city of Sepphoris just over the hill from Nazareth, a rebellion occurred there resulted in the legions devastating populations in nearby villages. He says that when the Romans came to suppress a rebellion, they came to teach the people a lesson so that they would not have to return for two generations. Dr. Crossan ends this session by making the claim that Jesus must have grown up hearing stories of the day the Romans came and killed the men of Nazareth, raped the women, and sold the children into slavery. Crossan says that Jesus must have grown up asking the question, "Where was God when the Romans came?"

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The Life of Jesus
Session 2, “Herod ‘King of the Jews’”

Discussion Questions

1. Dr. Crossan explains that the term “King of the Jews” was the official title given by Rome to Herod the Great as the governor of Israel. Dr. Crossan says, “Always hear that title as a Roman gift – only Rome could declare anyone ‘King of the Jews.’” Does learning this surprise you? What has been your understanding of the title “King of the Jews?” How does this fact alter the Christian story of Jesus’ crucifixion for you?

2. Dr. Crossan says that Herod the Great dominated the generation of people in Israel in the years preceding both the birth of John the Baptist and that of Jesus of Nazareth. What are you learning about the figure of Herod the Great and his impact on the Jewish homeland? How do you understand Dr. Crossan’s description of the Romanization of Israel in the 1st century BCE?

3. Based on Dr. Crossan’s lecture, how do you understand the political ambition of Herod the Great? What situations influenced that ambition? How did the various building projects of Herod the Great contribute to Jewish life in this process of Romanization?

4. At the death of Herod the Great in 4 BCE, we are told that revolts broke out in various places throughout Israel. We focus on the revolt at Sepphoris. Can you give any explanation to why these revolts, including the one at Sepphoris, took place? Think of it this way: You are a Jew living in Israel during the reign of Herod the Great. What do these revolts tell us?

5. Dr. Crossan shows us the proximity of Nazareth to Sepphoris and describes what must have been the effect of the crushing punishment brought to the area by the Syrian Legends. We are told that the birth of Jesus occurred about the time that Herod the Great died. What do you think Jesus was hearing and thinking as he grew up in Nazareth?

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The Life of Jesus
Session 3, "By the Sea of Galilee"

Discussion Starters

Dr. Crossan begins by asking questions about fish, boats, fishermen, boat rights, and Jesus' deliberate move from Nazareth, land locked between Sepphoris and the Sea of Galilee, to the fishing villages on the Lake. Dr. Crossan claims that the movements of John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth in the 20's CE in Galilee and Perea occurred in direct response to the programs instituted by Herod Antipas. Dr. Crossan calls Antipas, "The man who would be King," and makes a good case for the obsession that gripped Herod Antipas and drove him to extraordinary measures. Dr. Crossan says, "We must try to understand the plans, purposes, and intentions of Herod Antipas," if we are to understand why Jesus showed up by the Sea of Galilee proclaiming that the Kingdom of God is here.

Dr. Crossan takes time to thoroughly discuss the motivation that lay behind Herod Antipas' political ambitions. Crossan says that all his life Herod Antipas dreamed of becoming "King of the Jews" like his father Herod the Great. Herod Antipas studied his father's efforts to maintain his own position as Rome's appointed "King of the Jews" and set out to emulate his father's program. Like his father, who built a new city on the Mediterranean coast and named it Caesaria, Herod Antipas decided to create a new city on the coast of the Sea of Galilee and call it Tiberias. Then, as his father had done in order to cement a relationship with the Hasmonean dynasty, Antipas married the Hasmonean princess Herodian, the granddaughter of Herod the Great's wife, Mariamme. Dr. Crossan says that by the year 20 CE Antipas had put his program to become "King of the Jews" into action. With the opening of his new sparkling city of Tiberias, and his marriage to Herodias, Antipas had everything in place. Into this scene stepped John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth.

Dr. Crossan says, "I am suggesting that since Jesus' message is that since the Kingdom of God is about distributive Justice on this earth, it speaks to people who have just experienced what unfair distribution looks like." One can imagine people nodding approval of Jesus' claims and deciding for themselves this is not fair; this is not just. What they were saying was that Rome's program of Romanizing the Jewish homeland was unfair and unjust. In the generation before Jesus, Herod the Great brought the program of Romanization to Judea. In the generation of Jesus, that Romanization hit Galilee hard.

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The Life of Jesus
Session 3, "By the Sea of Galilee"

Discussion Questions

1. Dr. Crossan begins Theme 2, Session 3 by the Sea of Galilee, by asking several questions: "Why did Jesus happen when he happened? Why then? Why there?" Do you find his questions to hold any kind of challenge to the understanding of Jesus that you have maintained as an adult? What does Dr. Crossan imply about the Jesus of history by asking these questions? Hint: Reflect on Dr. Crossan's concept of matrix. If the matrix of Jesus' life determined his destiny, what do you make of the Church's historic insistence that God chose when Jesus was born?
2. What response do you have to the portrait of Herod Antipas that Dr. Crossan draws? Are you surprised at any part of Dr. Crossan's description? How must Herod Antipas' ambition to become "King of the Jews" impact the people Jesus knew? Much has been made in recent years of Mary of Magdala's involvement with Jesus and his followers. What new insights do you have about Mary of Magdala and the other followers of Jesus?
3. Dr. Crossan goes to some length to describe the fishing business that supported people who lived in northern Galilee. Does this change any of your thinking about what Jesus was up to during his life? Are you surprised that Dr. Crossan seems uninterested in describing Jesus as a spiritual leader? What sense can you make of that?
4. To hear Dr. Crossan tell it, Herod Antipas seemed to think that the biggest part of his job was to raise money for the Empire. He believed this would ensure his position of power and ultimately lead to his being given the title "King of the Jews." How did Jesus respond to the ambition of Herod Antipas? What new ideas have you found in Dr. Crossan's description of Herod Antipas and Jesus' reaction to him?
5. As Dr. Crossan has suggested, try to imagine how the activity of Jesus and the things he said impacted his followers. What do you think could have been Jesus' greatest challenge? Do you think it came mostly from Antipas or mostly from Jesus' followers?

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The Life of Jesus
Session 4, "A Collaboration With God"

Discussion Starters

Try and imagine the scene the first time John the Baptist and Jesus meet. If Jesus is indeed baptized by John, what does that suggest? Now imagine the process by which Jesus begins to disagree with John about the when and how The Kingdom of God happens. You can bet that the followers of John and the followers of Jesus are seeing this disagreement firsthand. Imagine how the followers respond. Put yourself at a table in the presence of Jesus and his followers the day they receive the news that Antipas has executed The Baptist. Think about what Jesus is saying. Think about what his followers are saying. Think about what you would have said.

Consider how many generations of ancient Jews experienced the world. What favorite stories were told and retold? Think about how they understood themselves in relation to God. Think about how popular The Baptist Movement of John would be to first century Jews. Imagine what these same people might think when they heard Jesus describe The Kingdom of God and human participation in it.

Imagine yourself as Jesus. You have seen Herod Antipas execute John. You have seen the followers of John confused and disillusioned. You are making some decisions about how to go on with The Kingdom of God movement. Think about the kinds of decisions you are making. What are you fearing the most?

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The Life of Jesus

Session 4, "A Collaboration With God"

Discussion Questions

1. In Theme 2, Session 4, "A Collaboration With God," Dr. Crossan begins with a comparison of the Baptist Movement of John and the Kingdom Movement of Jesus. Dr. Crossan says, "In this Session I will compare, delicately, gently, carefully, the program of John the Baptist and the program of Jesus. This is not any sort of cheap exaltation of Jesus over John and absolutely not, of course, of Christianity over Judaism." What do you make of Dr. Crossan's insistence that his comparison does not exalt Jesus over John and absolutely Christianity over Judaism? As a Christian one is typically taught that Christianity is superior to Judaism. What do you think?

2. Dr. Crossan thinks that the shadow of John the Baptist protected Jesus in Galilee, and he says Jesus watched John and learned what to do and what not to do. How do you respond to Dr. Crossan's notion that Jesus learned from John what to do and what to say? Why would Jesus think this was important? Many Christians are used to hearing the phrase, "The ministry of Jesus." Dr. Crossan deliberately changes the language. Instead of referring to "the ministry of Jesus," he refers to "the program of Jesus." What do you think about Dr. Crossan's continued reference to the "program" of Jesus?

3. As a 21st century person, what is your current understanding of The Kingdom of God? Reflect on how you understood it growing up. How has this understanding changed for you as an adult? Reflect on the differences between John's vision of The Kingdom of God and Jesus's vision of The Kingdom of God. Which one do you find more appealing? If you reject both, what is your own vision of The Kingdom of God?

4. Dr. Crossan maintains that The Baptist Movement of John depended on John. Then he says that The Kingdom Movement of Jesus depended on his followers duplicating what he said and did. Crossan describes Jesus taking his program "on the road." How does this understanding of Jesus' life and work differ from what Christians are normally taught? Do you find Dr. Crossan's argument about Jesus compelling?

5. What do you think about Dr. Crossan's concept of a divine and human collaboration? Christianity has typically taught that an all powerful, all knowing God is in complete control of when and how The Kingdom will come. What is your response? Dr. Crossan's explanation describes Jesus as autonomous and self directed. How do you respond to this? Next, Dr. Crossan insists that Jesus is proclaiming that The Kingdom is already present when the divine human collaboration is at work. He also insists that The Kingdom of God is not violent. How do you respond?

FAITH ^{AND} REASON®
THE CHALLENGE OF JESUS
JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN

The Death of Jesus
Session 1, “Why Blood Sacrifice?”

Discussion Starters

Remember the biblical story of the prophet Nathan and King David. For some time now, David has felt a growing alienation from the old prophet. Nathan had been a mainstay for David. David had come to see the old prophet's approval to be the approval of God. As they had shared in a pleasant meal so many times before, David decides that he will invite Nathan to the palace for a great meal. The most succulent lamb will be prepared. A sumptuous meal will be built around it. David had every reason to think that if he and Nathan could share a meal together like the old days everything would be all right.

Imagine yourself living in Ireland as part of a Celtic community in 1st century CE. You are the wife of the tribal priest. The priest comes to your hut and the decision is made. Your oldest son is to be made sacrifice to the gods. Times have been hard. A “perfect sacrifice” has to be made. Imagine the emotions and the thoughts and the inner struggle you must feel. You ask, “Why my son? Why does he have to be sacrificed? How can I agree to this?”

FAITH ^{AND} REASON[®]
THE CHALLENGE OF JESUS
JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN

The Death of Jesus
Session 1, “Why Blood Sacrifice?”

Discussion Questions

1. Dr. Crossan begins this session by asking us where the practice of slain animals as sacrifice to God, or the gods, comes from. Why is it that blood sacrifice seems to be ubiquitous among all cultures dating back 6,000 years? Then he explains the word sacrifice. He says it simply means to make something sacred. Are we to understand that we can make anything sacred? What happened to the notion that something is sacred because it comes from God? How does one make something sacred? Has there ever been anything in your life that you have “made sacred?” Dr. Crossan asks, “Why, from basic anthropology, cross-culturally, across time and place, did different religions invent blood sacrifice?”

2. Dr. Crossan says that “the gift” has historically been a way to maintain good relationship or repair bad relationship with people or the gods. He says gift has always some sort of reciprocity in it. Have you ever considered that the gift of the sacraments has included the notion of reciprocity? If so, do you think God knows that we’re making the gift expecting something in return?

3. Dr. Crossan describes the fundamental recognition across time and place that “the meal” represents an opportunity for the mending of relationships. He says that if I have had a row (Irish, for “fight.”) with you I will invite you to a reconciliatory meal. This practice is very familiar to us all. Can you think of a time in your own life where this worked for you? Then Dr. Crossan says that after such a row, if you come to his house, he’s probably not going to “serve you humus and pita bread,” but he’s probably going to throw steaks or lamb chops on the grill. He says that it is true across cultures that the reconciling meal will happen only after an animal has died. How does this strike you? Does the blood of a dead animal have to flow in order that there be reconciliation?

4. Next, Dr. Crossan draws examples from both Celtic and Jewish traditions. He says that in the Celtic tradition there is historical evidence for sacrificing to insure good favor with the gods. He presents the archeological discovery of the Lindow Man as evidence that when a particularly crucial sacrifice is needed, a human being will be sacrificed. And, in the case of the Lindow Man it appears that the sacrificed human was unblemished. In the Christian tradition what does this remind you of? Then, Dr. Crossan points to the tradition of sacrifice in the Jewish tradition. He says, in ancient Judaism, if one wanted to share a meal with God, then he or she would go to the temple, purchase an unblemished lamb or a goat, and make sacrifice to God. Why is the idea of “unblemished” show up in both the Celtic and Jewish traditions?

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THE CHALLENGE OF JESUS
JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN

The Death of Jesus

Session 2, "Jewish God and Norman Lord"

Discussion Starters

As a way of entering into a discussion of Dr. Crossan's presentation, reflect on your own religious awareness. Can you remember the first time you actually thought that God punishes people for doing bad things? How old were you? What were the circumstances? Who first told you God punishes? What feelings, if any, do you remember having?

Imagine yourself as a young theological student under the spiritual direction of Anselm. As an exercise, Anselm has directed you to answer the question, "Why did God choose to become human?" Based on your own experience, what images are in your mind that can help you respond to this assignment? Remember, the idea of substitutionary sacrifice has not yet been developed. You have not heard Anselm's lecture titled, "Cur Deus Homo?"

You are a member of the parish of Canterbury. Your parents saw to it that you receive a decent formal education. You are literate and have read various commentaries on biblical texts. The year is 1098. It is the season of Lent. On a Sunday, you attend the mass and Archbishop Anselm gives a brief homily in which he seeks to explain why God decided to become a human. He compares the character of God to that of the Norman King who must always uphold the order of your society. For God to do less would make a mockery of our understanding of sin. Therefore, God must act decisively and the incarnation of Jesus is the result.

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THE CHALLENGE OF JESUS
JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN

The Death of Jesus

Session 2, "Jewish God and Norman Lord"

Discussion Questions

1. Dr. Crossan begins the discussion "Jewish God and Norman Lord" asking the question, "Where did substitutionary sacrificial atonement as an interpretation of Jesus' death come from?" He says that people assume the idea comes out of the Bible. But, he says, the idea of substitutionary sacrifice does not come out of the Bible. Nor was it present during biblical times. How can this be explained? Why do you think are so many "Christian people" convinced that substitutionary sacrificial atonement have its origin in the Biblical text?

2. Dr. Crossan makes two startling claims. First, he claims that the idea of substitutionary sacrifice appears nowhere in anthropology of human culture. It simply does not exist. Dr. Crossan says that the idea of substitutionary sacrificial atonement does not appear until the very end of the 12th century CE; one thousand years after the life and death of Jesus. Why do you think the idea of substitutionary sacrificial atonement is so important to so many Christians? Is it important to you? Why?

3. Dr. Crossan says that it was Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury, in the year 1098, who first articulated the idea that the meaning of Jesus' death was in his substitutionary sacrifice. In your own words, describe why Anselm developed the idea of substitutionary sacrifice. What was Anselm trying to accomplish?

4. At one point, Dr. Crossan says that Anselm's theology was the single most unfortunate successful theology in the Christian tradition. Why does Dr. Crossan think Anselm's theology is bad theology?

5. Dr. Crossan says that according to Anselm, God's dilemma is that no suitable punishment can be found to satisfy God for the sins of humanity. How does his statement strike you? Can sin be allowed to go unpunished? Or, does punishment for sin come in another form? What if Dr. Crossan is right when he says, "God never punishes anyone, but there are always terrible consequences for what humans do?"

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THE CHALLENGE OF JESUS
JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN

The Death of Jesus
Session 3, “The Last Week”

Discussion Starters

In order to understand Dr. Crossan’s historical staging of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, it is helpful to place one’s self in the historical scene. Try to imagine yourself as a Jew living in Jerusalem, having traveled from your home to Jerusalem for Passover. There is plenty of information abroad about how the Romans govern Judea. Like any occupied society, the news of the latest Roman affront travels throughout the city quickly. Therefore, you are aware of how Pilate and his cohorts from the coast are arriving in the city to ensure order. You are aware of this standing in the crowd of people welcoming this Jesus from Nazareth who is so popular. Like those around you, you know the stories of the Prophets well. As you watch Jesus ride through the crowd on the nursing female donkey and see her foal alongside, your mind is racing. You are excited. You are afraid. You are caught up with the crowd.

In the same way, imagine yourself at the Temple watching Jesus make his demonstration. Imagine what you are experiencing as you watch Jesus confronting Temple practice. Many thoughts and feelings are coming to mind. You have a growing sense of uncertainty.

Dr. Crossan describes the events of the last week of Jesus’ life and he shows us the growing frustration of the Roman authorities who are deliberating on how to neutralize Jesus. Dr. Crossan says that over and over the Romans decide not to take Jesus because of the crowds and their obvious attraction to Jesus. Finally, an opportunity presents itself. Judas steps forward with an offer and promises to locate Jesus for the Roman authorities, as he travels by night between Jerusalem and Bethany. Now, in the hands of the Romans, Jesus comes face to face with Pilate. Dr. Crossan says that the interchange between Pilate and Jesus is parabolic, not historical. At the end of the argument, Jesus says to Pilate, “Your Kingdom of Rome, Pilate, is based on and protected by violence.” “My Kingdom of God is based on non-violent resistance to your Kingdom. No violence, Pilate, not even to save me from you.”

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THE CHALLENGE OF JESUS
JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN

The Death of Jesus
Session 3, “The Last Week”

Discussion Questions

1. As Dr. Crossan begins Theme 3, Session 3, “The Last Week,” he describes in some detail the contrasting ways that Pilate and Jesus enter Jerusalem at the beginning of the last week of Jesus’ life. In your own words, explain the contrast that Dr. Crossan draws. List the specific points that make up the contrasting scenes. What questions are you left with when Dr. Crossan has made the contrast?

2. Dr. Crossan tells us that the prophecy taken from Zachariah 9 is found both in Mark and again in Matthew. What do you think? Did Zachariah’s prophecy predict that Jesus would ride into Jerusalem on a donkey and a foal? Or did Jesus have an awareness of the prophet Zachariah and take the clues from that prophecy to model his public demonstration that day in the streets of Jerusalem?

3. Next, Dr. Crossan focuses on the traditional “cleansing of the Temple” story with which we are so familiar. Dr. Crossan says that the Temple did not need cleansing. He explained that the Temple was supported by offerings from all over the Roman world. What surprises you about Dr. Crossan’s description of the Temple and what was taking place there when Jesus made his demonstration? Traditionally we’ve been told that the money changers were thieves and scoundrels. Why do you think this has been the traditional understanding? How does Dr. Crossan’s description of the money changers change your view of what Jesus found at the Temple? Dr. Crossan says that Jesus is symbolically shutting down the sacrificial activity of the temple. In your own words explain Dr. Crossan’s arguments.

4. Dr. Crossan continues his alternate understanding of Jesus’ demonstration at the Temple. He says that Jesus was also influenced by Jeremiah 7 that includes the admonitions, “truly act justly with one another;” “do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow;” “and do not shed innocent blood.” Dr. Crossan says that the prophet is insisting that sacrificial worship alone will not substitute for distributive justice. How does Dr. Crossan’s explanation about how Jesus uses the phrase, “den of robbers,” change your understanding about Jesus’ so-called, “cleansing of the Temple” story?

5. The story of Judas’ betrayal of Jesus is familiar to us all. How does Dr. Crossan’s explanation of Judas’ action change your understanding of the story and the meaning it has had for you? When Jesus tells Pilate that, “My kingdom is not of this world,” what new understanding and meaning does Dr. Crossan’s explanation create for you? Are you now seeing Jesus in a different way?

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The Death of Jesus
Session 4, “The Sacrifice of Jesus”

Discussion Starters

Dr. Crossan begins this session by asking a question about Jesus’ sacrifice for sin. He says, “What has the execution of Jesus by Roman Imperial have to do with the theological concept of sacrifice for sin?” Then he devotes considerable time to reminding us that the Biblical story began during a time when human society was creating the initial structure of civilization. He says that civilization emerged when human beings discovered agriculture and the settled life. Dr. Crossan also reminds us that in the Biblical story the concept of sin emerges for the first time when the farmer, Cain, kills the herdsman, Abel.

From this simple story of fratricide, Dr. Crossan demonstrates how human violence escalates with succeeding generations. Within five generations, Cain’s descendant Lamech is promising vengeance to anyone who should kill him and saying, “If I am killed, then my tribe will kill 70 people from the tribe of the killer.” The escalation is obvious. Dr. Crossan combines this awareness with our own experience of escalatory violence in our development of evermore precise and efficient weapons.

Dr. Crossan then begins to create a new perspective on the sacrifice of Jesus. He argues that Jesus died because of escalatory violence. He says that Jesus lived a life of non-violent resistance to evil, and for that he is executed. Dr. Crossan says that human destiny seems to be an ever-increasing devotion to escalatory violence—that this is what killed Jesus and this has nothing to do with substitution of any kind. Jesus died for our sins because violence is the normal way we run our lives, but our species will not be able to survive if violence keeps escalating.

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THE CHALLENGE OF JESUS
JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN

The Death of Jesus
Session 4, “The Sacrifice of Jesus”

Discussion Questions

1. In “The Sacrifice of Jesus,” (Theme 3, Session 4) Dr. Crossan sets the stage for the question, “What is sin?” How does sin relate to the sacrifice of Jesus? Make yourself comfortable with the 6000 year timeline that Dr. Crossan describes. Do you remember a time in your life when you accepted the 6000 year timeline? Maybe you always knew about and accepted the timeline of modern science. Does it make sense to you that Christianity has held its story to the 6000 year timeline? What kind of problems has this caused Christianity? What kinds of problems related to the timeline is it still causing today?

2. Dr. Crossan asks the question, “When is sin first mentioned in the Biblical story?” Clue; It wasn’t in the Garden Story in Chapter 3 of Genesis. Dr. Crossan returns to the question about the 6000 year history and says that the 6000 year timeline began with the birth of civilization on the plains of ancient Mesopotamia, when humans first invented irrigated farming. Dr. Crossan says that in that ancient setting the Biblical story of the origin of sin is set. Review the story of Cain and Abel. In that story, what is the sin? Who commits the sin and why? In Dr. Crossan’s words the first act of sin was fratricide. How do you respond to Dr. Crossan’s claim? Do you agree or disagree?

3. Dr. Crossan advances his argument by saying that the first sin not only dealt with violence, but with escalatory violence. For example, a descendant of Cain named Lamech promises that if anyone kills him, his tribe will take 70 lives from the tribe of the killer. How do you respond to Dr. Crossan’s definition of sin as escalatory violence? Does it make sense to you? Do you think he is incorrect? What about sins that do not involve violence? Are any of these non-violent sins important to you? Why?

4. Why does Dr. Crossan say, “On the worst day of Roman slaughter, they didn’t threaten to destroy the Mediterranean?” Next, Dr. Crossan says that since the Romans, we have steadily increased our level of violence. “We have never invented a weapon that wasn’t worse than the one that preceded it.” How do you respond to this claim? How do you respond to Dr. Crossan’s statement, “I’m going to equate sin and escalatory violence”?

5. Dr. Crossan says, “Jesus died for our sins because violence is the normal way we run our lives.” Then he says, “It has nothing to do with substitution.” How do you respond to this? Dr. Crossan then likens the sacrifice of Jesus to the person Arland Williams, Jr. who, when the lifeline attached to the helicopter that hovered over the crash site of Air Florida’s flight #90, kept passing the line to the next person waiting to be lifted to safety. He says that this was the kind of sacrifice that Jesus made of his life. What is your response?

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THE CHALLENGE OF JESUS
JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN

The Resurrection of Jesus
Session 1, "Why Bodily Resurrection?"

Discussion Starters

It is worth considering that although the four Gospels are positioned at the beginning of the New Testament, the accounts of Jesus' appearances following his crucifixion were actually preceded by the accounts of Jesus' appearances that Paul included in his letters as much as 40 years earlier. Notice that in Paul's account (1 Corinthians, Chapter 15), Jesus appears to individuals and groups of people. However, in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the first accounts of Jesus' appearances begin with an empty tomb.

You are a follower of Jesus. It is the day after Jesus is crucified. You know about his death and how he died, because you were there. Your name is not recorded in the Gospels or in Paul's letters, but you were there. Your aspirations and hopes were as vital as those of Mary of Magdala, Peter, James, and John. What are you thinking? What are you feeling? Where are you? Are you in Jerusalem? Have you fled? If so, where?

As post-modern people, we are keenly aware of what it means to say something is "real." We tend to equate "real" with "fact." Of course, for this to be true, we could not trust or rely on any observation that cannot be demonstrated empirically, like a scientific laboratory experiment. When you think about it, what we regard as "real" extends far beyond the laboratory, and qualitative and quantitative analysis. Dr. Crossan makes the argument that when a person has a "vision" it is an historical event. He makes the claim that it is as "real" an event as stopping suddenly at a stop sign to avoid a collision with a city bus. Therefore, Dr. Crossan can say that the women at the tomb in Matthew's Gospel "saw" Jesus.

In western Christianity, we place the emphasis of the "resurrection" on Jesus' bodily resuscitation. Traditionally, we think we are to believe that Jesus did not stay "dead." This has left us wondering what to believe next. Many seem to believe that just as Jesus experienced bodily resuscitation, so will all those who accept this belief. Dr. Crossan is making the case that the bodily resurrection of Jesus is not about bodily resuscitation, but rather something else. Reflect on "that something else" and what "that something else" might be.

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THE CHALLENGE OF JESUS
JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN

The Resurrection of Jesus
Session 1, “Why Bodily Resurrection?”

Discussion Questions

1. Dr. Crossan begins the discussion, “Why bodily resurrection?” by reminding us that we ask historical questions about the crucifixion. We should also be willing to ask historical questions about the resurrection. We should be willing to ask, “What really happened?” Why did the early followers of Jesus use the word “resurrection?”

2. Remembering that Paul wrote his letters before the Gospels were written, we recognize, for instance, in 1 Corinthians, Chapter 15, Paul describes a variety of appearances made by Jesus to various members of the community. Referring to 1 Corinthians, Chapter 15, review those appearances. Also review the appearances of Jesus in the last chapters of the four Gospels. What differences do you notice between Paul’s description and the descriptions found in the Gospels? What does this suggest to you?

3. Dr. Crossan introduces the idea of, “Vision.” He recognizes that as post-modern people we are typically uncomfortable in talking about the resurrection as an historical event. As an exercise, ask the members of your class or group how many accept a literal interpretation of the resurrection, and how many are more comfortable with a metaphorical interpretation of the resurrection.

4. Dr Crossan says, “A person has a vision, an altered state of consciousness, and it happens in time and place.” He also says, “Do not, by the way, confuse vision and hallucination.” Are visions real?

5. Dr. Crossan flatly states, “I am not negating the supernatural. I am just denying the distinction between natural and supernatural.” How can this be? Hasn’t this distinction been at the heart of Christian theology?

6. Dr Crossan says that there was one understanding shared by all those that reported seeing Jesus. Their experiences were real. If that was the case, why did early Christians settle upon the word “resurrection” to describe their experiences? Why have we been taught as Christians to think about resurrection as referring only to Jesus as an individual?

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THE CHALLENGE OF JESUS
JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN

The Resurrection of Jesus
Session 2, "That First Easter Sunday"

Discussion Starters

Dr. Crossan begins the discussion, "That First Easter Sunday," with the information that: 1. Images of Jesus did not show up until almost 200 years after his death; 2. Depictions of the crucified Jesus did not appear until C.400 CE; 3. Images of the resurrection of Jesus did not begin to appear until C.700 CE. Dr. Crossan says that artists were hesitant to attempt to depict the human and divine Jesus because they did not know how. One can imagine an artist thinking, "How can I show Jesus as both human and divine at the same time? What does that look like?" The Romans solved this problem for their divine Emperors by depicting them in the nude. This seems not to have been an option for Christian artists.

Dr. Crossan says that there was a fundamental issue for the people that would depict Jesus as both human and divine and that was because they were trying to imagine how to combine the crucified Jesus with the resurrected Christ. Typically, they chose to illustrate the resurrected Christ as a solitary figure. Dr. Crossan tells us that in eastern Christian art, the risen Christ is never alone. If the risen Christ is never alone in eastern Christian art, who is with him?

Dr. Crossan introduces a theological concept absent in eastern Christian art and theology, but very present in western Christian art and theology, and that is the Harrowing of Hell. In western Christianity the Harrowing of Hell stands alone between the crucifixion and the resurrection. It is often understood as a kind of "visitation" Jesus makes to people in Hell before he is resurrected the following day. In eastern Christianity, the Harrowing of Hell is equated with Jesus' resurrection itself. In eastern Christianity images of the risen Christ always present him in the company of others. It would be a very helpful exercise to list the people who are shown with Jesus in the resurrection scenes in eastern Christian art.

Dr. Crossan makes a surprising claim when he says that the resurrection of Christ depicted in eastern Christian art is reminiscent of historical Jewish tradition of the general resurrection where there is no concept of individual resurrection. For Jews living in the 21st century, Dr. Crossan would argue the understanding of general resurrection would involve the justice of God. He explains that for the Jews it is unimaginable that the resurrection of anyone would not include the complete, public vindication of the martyrs who died unjustly.

Consider the fresco image in the Anastasis (Resurrection) in the Chora Museum in Istanbul, Turkey. Christ's resurrection includes his grasping the wrists of both Adam and Eve, and he is surrounded by a host of others. Jesus is not alone. He is surrounded by a crowd and is pulling, urging them forward to begin the general resurrection, which will affect the past, present, and future.

FAITH ^{AND} REASON[®]
THE CHALLENGE OF JESUS
JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN

The Resurrection of Jesus
Session 2, “That First Easter Sunday”

Discussion Questions

1. Dr. Crossan begins the discussion, “That First Easter Sunday,” by telling us that early Christians were initially reluctant to depict Jesus. Dr. Crossan can imagine a would-be artist asking the question, “How do I show the humanity and divinity of Jesus at the same time?” How can I show Christ crucified and resurrected? Do you see why such an artist would be reluctant? If you were charged with the responsibility of creating an appropriate image, what might you create?

2. What do you make out of Dr. Crossan’s claims that in the earliest accounts of Jesus’ appearance to people following his crucifixion, i.e. Paul’s 1st Letter to the Corinthians, little mention is made of the empty tomb. And yet, by the time the Gospels began to be written, no earlier than 70 CE, the “empty tomb” has become a problem that Mark, Matthew, and Luke have to solve. How can you account for this? Are the empty tomb accounts challenging to you?

3. Dr. Crossan says that there is a great difference between western iconography and eastern iconography. Simply stated, Dr. Crossan says that typically in western Christian art, the risen Christ is depicted alone. He contrasts this with eastern Christian art where the risen Christ is always depicted in the company of others. Jesus is never alone in eastern Christian art. What do you think is going on? What are the implications?

4. Review Dr. Crossan’s treatment of the classical Christian idea of “the Harrowing of Hell.” Remember that the term “harrow” means “to rob” and “the harrowing of hell” refers to “the stealing” of those from hell. “The Harrowing of Hell” is not a prominent feature in western Christianity. However, Dr. Crossan says that in eastern Christian art and thought, “the Harrowing of Hell” is synonymous with the resurrection of Christ. Why would the eastern Christian tradition have such a different depiction than the western Christian tradition of resurrection? Which of the two interpretations of the resurrection do you find most compelling? Why?

5. Near the end of his lecture, Dr. Crossan makes yet another comparison between western Christian art and thought and eastern Christian art and thought. As an example, he refers to the painting by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel where God’s hand is extended toward Adam, Adam’s hand is extended toward God, and their fingers almost touch. He then contrasts this image with a scene found in the Chora Museum in Istanbul. In that scene the rising Christ is shown firmly grasping the wrist of Adam in his right hand and Eve in his left. How is this image of the resurrection of Christ significant? Do you find this image of Christ to be compelling?

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THE CHALLENGE OF JESUS
JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN

The Resurrection of Jesus
Session 3, "Ascension Into Heaven"

Discussion Starters

As post-Enlightenment people, Dr. Crossan says it may be difficult for us to understand the thinking of ancient people who lived in a pre-Enlightenment world. Dr. Crossan explains the "process" used in the Roman world to deify one of its Emperors. As post-Enlightenment people we have difficulty with things being "literal." We seem obsessed with the question, "Did this really happen?" Dr. Crossan says the ancients were "absolutely capable of telling a story or a parable and using a symbol or an image, and getting the meaning or claim that was being made without necessarily asking if it was literal." We always want to know, if I had been there could have I seen it happen?

Dr. Crossan tells us that people in the 1st century had no problem with making a human being divine. Whether in the case of the deification of a Roman Emperor, or the deification of Jesus, they simply wanted to know, "Why should this person be deified?" They would want to ask, "What remarkable thing did the person in consideration do for humanity?" They would want to know this because this is the only way a human could achieve divine status. So, the term "ascension" that refers to Jesus' ascending into heaven has mainly to do with the idea that Jesus will now take his place alongside God. Jesus has earned the right to be considered divine.

Dr. Crossan says Octavian (the not-yet Augustus) had his face inscribed on one side of a coin and an image of a comet on the other. He did this to call to people's minds the memory that on that day in the year 44 BCE, when Julius Caesar was being buried, a comet was seen streaking across the heavens. This made Octavian the heir apparent to his adopted father's deification. Dr. Crossan describes how the Romans advertised the deification of their Emperors. The Romans believed it was essential for the people to understand the Emperor was divine because of the great benefit he had brought to the people of the world.

Dr. Crossan says the Christians said the same thing about Jesus. "If Jesus is seated at the right hand of God, the Christian claim is that Jesus is the heir apparent of God; that everything belonging to God and God's whole dream of justice comes to us through Jesus." As Christians we say, "Jesus' life is the revelation of God." If this is true, then it matters very much if God is a violent or a non-violent God.

FAITH ^{AND} REASON[®]

THE CHALLENGE OF JESUS
JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN

The Resurrection of Jesus
Session 3, "Ascension Into Heaven"

Discussion Questions

1. Dr. Crossan begins by clarifying the persistent problem that post-enlightenment people have in dealing with the way the ancients understood the religious claims they made about the deification of human beings. Did ancients literally believe their own claims that Julius Caesar was divine? Did they take Caesar's divinity literally? When an Emperor died and they built a funeral pyre on which the Emperor's body would be cremated, and a slave kneeling, out of sight behind the pyre, released a young eagle that soared towards the heavens, did they literally believe that the Emperor's spirit was ascending into heaven to dwell among the Gods?

2. Think about the claims of Christianity that you have been aware of. Have you ever thought a Christian claim to be silly because some people interpret it literally? Or, have you understood these claims to more about meaning than about fact? Have you known anyone who has experienced rejection in his or her own community because they insisted on a literal interpretation of Christian claims?

3. How many times have Christians stood together, made a public confession of faith, and claimed, "He ascended into heaven, and is seated on the right hand of the Father," or something to this effect? Did you know that by making this confession they had been claiming that Jesus did something remarkable for the people of the world and therefore is now elevated to be the heir-apparent of God? Think about this claim. If Christianity has been commissioned to represent and act on behalf of a non-violent Jesus, how has it done? What grade would you give it?

FAITH AND REASON®
THE CHALLENGE OF JESUS
JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN

The Resurrection of Jesus
Session 4, “New Earth & New Heaven”

Discussion Starters

Dr. Crossan begins the discussion of “New Earth & New Heaven” by saying it has been a perennial question throughout the history of Christianity, “When will the Kingdom of God come and how will it happen?” Dr. Crossan says that in earliest Christianity people believed God’s Kingdom had already started and the general resurrection had already begun. But, for most of Christian history, that belief has been largely ignored and people have busied themselves with speculating about when the “end of the world” would come and what would happen when it did. Dr. Crossan notes that this kind of “questioning the future is a fine way to avoid facing the present.”

Dr. Crossan says there have been two major models in the New Testament providing differing answers to the questions about the consummation of God’s Kingdom and what it might be like. The first model he describes is the one he takes from the writing of Paul. Paul addresses the question of “when” the Kingdom of God will come in his 1st Letter to the Thessalonians. As in all his letters, Paul is addressing a specific question or problem that has arisen in a congregation from which he has been absent for some time. In 1 Thessalonians he is dealing with the anxiety of some people about their loved ones who have already died when Jesus returns to consummate the Kingdom of God. Paul takes pains to assure them that their loved ones who have died will be “raised first” to join Jesus in the Kingdom. Reflect on Dr. Crossan’s earlier comments that it was very much a part of Jewish tradition to be concerned about martyrs, family members, and friends who died before the consummation of God’s Kingdom on earth.

Dr. Crossan says: “Paul tells his readers that, when Christ comes, it will be like an imperial visitation, and, therefore, the first to greet him will be the most honored dead—namely, for Christians, their martyrs.” Paul likens his vision of the coming of Christ to a Roman Imperial visitation when the Emperor comes to celebrate the success of the city and to show pleasure and approval for people who have promoted the program of Imperial Rome. Christ, says Paul, will come to celebrate with people their success in carrying out his program of non-violent justice.

In stark contrast to Paul’s vision, Dr. Crossan cites the vision of John of Patmos (the author of the Book of Revelation) as a ghastly one: “John’s model is not the peaceful Emperor coming to celebrate a job well done, but the violent Emperor coming to punish you for not doing it.” John of Patmos’ vision has become even more ghastly in the popular children’s books, the Narnia Chronicles of C. S. Lewis, and the Left Behind series of LaHaye and Jenkins. The images depicted in these books are even more violent than the ones described in the Book of Revelation. Dr. Crossan states, “I cannot imagine a greater act of treason to the non-violent Jesus as the revelation of the non-violence of God.”

FAITH AND REASON®

THE CHALLENGE OF JESUS
JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN

The Resurrection of Jesus

Session 4, "New Earth & New Heaven"

Discussion Questions

1. If you are Christian, how important are questions about when the Kingdom of God will come and how it will take place for you? If you are non-Christian, how much have such questions influenced your perspectives on Christianity? Do you think that the Christian concerns about these matters have created hostility towards members of your own faith traditions? Within Christian circles, what effect have arguments about the Kingdom of God had on people you have known?
2. Consider Dr. Crossan's description of Paul's vision for the Kingdom of God. Is the information about Paul using the model of contemporary imperial visitations new to you? What effect does this have on your own thinking? Do you find Paul's vision found in his 1st Letter to the Thessalonians helpful? Dr. Crossan says, "Paul has a brilliant solution to the question posed about the Thessalonian martyrs." Do you consider Paul's solution to be brilliant?
3. Dr. Crossan emphasizes the character of the imperial visitor in Paul's vision. That character is not described as a violent figure of wrath and punishment, but rather as a benevolent leader who comes to congratulate citizens on a job well done. How does Dr. Crossan's explanation impact your own theological awareness? How are you challenged by it?
4. Who is not already familiar with the general picture that the Book of Revelation paints of Christ's triumphal return to inaugurate the Kingdom of God on earth? How do you respond to the image in the Narnia Chronicles by C. S. Lewis, of children participating in the violent destruction of evil? How do you respond to the concept in the Left Behind series of LaHaye and Jenkins, describing Christian people joining in the violent destruction of evil? Reflect on the "Myth of Redemptive Violence." This myth is not only in the Bible; it's in everything: television, film, fiction, and even in our responses to the daily events reported by the media. Do you think we can ever move beyond it?
5. Dr. Crossan says that Christian people are going to have to make a choice. Both visions of the Kingdom of God, what it will mean, and how it will happen, are in the New Testament. It's not a matter of which vision is right or wrong. It's a matter of the choice we make as to the character of God and the life, witness, and death of Jesus. Which one will you choose?