

Contact

ISSN: 1352-0806 (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/yprt19>

Jesus and Pastoral Care: Strangers or Friends?

Gordon Oliver

To cite this article: Gordon Oliver (2006) Jesus and Pastoral Care: Strangers or Friends?, Contact, 150:1, 26-30, DOI: [10.1080/13520806.2006.11759046](https://doi.org/10.1080/13520806.2006.11759046)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13520806.2006.11759046>



Published online: 02 Sep 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 12



View related articles [↗](#)

Jesus and Pastoral Care: Strangers or Friends?

GORDON OLIVER

Summary

In this article I want to ask the question as to whether the conversation between Jesus and pastoral care today takes place between strangers or friends. To do this I look at three approaches: Jesus as example; some theological models; and the core values of Jesus. We end with a suggested outline reflection on a text.

Pastoral Care and the Example of Jesus

Resonance

One way to connect Jesus and pastoral care is to read the Gospels while listening for resonances between them. The implication is that the same Jesus who showed love, compassion and acceptance to people in the Gospels is present and active now.

A leper comes begging in desperation and Jesus reaches out and touches him as he speaks the words of healing (Mark 1.40). The word used by the leper is significant – he is a filthy mess and he wants to be ‘cleansed’. The touching and the speaking of Jesus make all the difference in the world. In a scene that seems to combine comedy with mystery the roof of the house is torn open to the heavens and a paralyzed man is lowered to Jesus’ feet. Jesus sees the connection between the man’s bodily paralysis and his need for forgiveness so he offers healing for both (Mark 2.1-12). Jesus hurries toward the bed of a dying child, surrounded by people. Suddenly the action is freeze-framed as a woman with a haemorrhage reaches out and touches his cloak. He stops, gives her the attention she needs, speaks to her about the connection between her faith and her healing and moves on (Luke 8.43ff.). Jesus has time for people nobody else has time for. In another piece of Gospel comedy Jesus, again surrounded by a crowd, notices the little man up a tree. Jesus calls him down, accepts his hospitality and gives him the strength to get his crooked life sorted out (Luke 19. 1-10). Even as he is himself hanging on the tree of the cross Jesus prays for his killers; speaks words of assurance to the thief dying next to him; and commends his mother into the care of his closest friend.

The teaching of Jesus also gives examples of pastoral care. The ‘Nazareth manifesto’ of Luke 4. 16ff., with its commitment to good news for the poor, release for captives, and sight for the blind, resonates with the commitments of many today. His stories about the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son contain vivid imagery that remains compelling. (Luke 15. 1ff.). His tender and tough-minded invitation to ‘Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.’ (Matthew 11.28-9) comes very close to the kind of hospitable and fruitful welcome pastoral carers want to offer their clients. The long conversation with the woman at the well in John 4, which starts with a request for a drink, leads to an abrasive discussion about the state of her relationships and her need for ‘living water’.

Such examples in the actions and teaching of Jesus may be used to legitimate the claim that Jesus and pastoral care are an obvious pairing, that they belong together like close friends. But the very selectivity of the examples shows that there is a problem. What about the other side of the coin?

Dissonance

Pastoral care today is characterized by commitment to sustained longterm helping relationships with individuals and by non-judgemental, even 'value-free', approaches. The theory is that pastoral carers provide their clients with a safe place, a safe person and a safe time. Unconditional positive regard, accurate empathy and non-directive attitudes are at a premium. But to find these characteristics of contemporary pastoral care in the ministry of Jesus as the Gospels present him requires skills of imagination and projection. The core values of pastoral care, including those of much Christian pastoral care, have to be read into the ministry of Jesus first, if they are to be found there. But if the reading is turned round the other way – from the Jesus of the Gospels to contemporary practice – and if Jesus is looked to as the foundation of pastoral care, a very different kind of pastoral care could be the result.

The encounters of Jesus with people in the Gospels are episodic, mostly without apparent prior preparation, with few accounts of Jesus engaging in sustained listening, and with no follow-up by him of the individuals concerned. People like the leper, the Syro-Phoenician woman, the Gerasene demoniac, Zacchaeus, the woman at the well, Bartimaeus, Simon the Pharisee, Nicodemus, the rich young ruler, all come onto the scene, have some kind of life-transforming encounter with Jesus, serve their purpose in the story of his ministry and disappear. Jesus is portrayed, especially in Mark, as casting out demons (unusual but not unknown in pastoral care). He is shown as interventionist, confrontational, directive, and angry – as well as accepting, tender and compassionate.

The point is this. The purposes of the Gospel writers and editors in bringing together their stories about the actions and teaching of Jesus were not pastoral but missiological. Pastoral care towards vulnerable members of the earliest Jewish and Christian communities was certainly practised – abundant evidence is found in other parts of the New Testament. The central purpose of the Gospels was and is to preserve and promote the mission of Jesus. It is important to recognize that when present-day pastoral care and the Jesus of the Gospels are brought into the same conversation they speak together as strangers.

Theological Models of Jesus and Pastoral Care

Perhaps, however, some bigger-picture thinking in the shape of some of the main theological 'models' would have more mileage.

Incarnation

When Christian pastoral carers explore the biblical foundations of their work they are more likely to describe what they do as 'incarnational ministry' than to appeal to any other theological model. By 'incarnational' they mean being present with people in their suffering and their struggles.

Frequently pastors will describe this 'presence ministry' as more important than anything that they might be able to say or do. It is certainly true that people are often greatly helped by having this kind of pastoral care. It is also central to any Christian belief and action to receive the teaching of the Gospels that in Jesus 'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.' But there is a real problem with describing this 'alongside' type of pastoral care as 'incarnational'.

In John's Gospel the notion of the incarnation is as much about confrontation and alienation as it is about strengthening presence. The Word comes as light against darkness; to a world and family that will not have him; to reveal the glory of God. The Word comes bearing a loaded agenda – carrying grace and truth. The grace of true speaking as part of pastoral care requires real tough-mindedness, even the willingness to be appropriately confrontational – certainly more than 'just' being alongside. I do not argue that the incarnation has nothing to say about pastoral care – far from it. But as a key theological model used to illuminate the meaning and the agenda of practical pastoral care the incarnation comes heavily loaded with freight that needs to be unloaded before it can be got into the place where it can best be used. As conversation partners pastoral care and 'incarnational ministry' are very likely to find themselves talking together as strangers. This presents the strong possibility that the nature, purpose and agenda of Christian pastoral care may stand in need of major reconstruction.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd

The 'good shepherd' model of pastoral care seems easier to visualize and work with than the previous one. From reflection on Jesus' description of himself as the good shepherd in John 10 characteristics of the pastoral carer are easy to identify – commitment, tenderness, skill, self-sacrifice, courage, integrity. The association of the strong and gentle shepherd with vulnerable sheep who are prone to wandering off is attractive, understandable, reassuring. That is all fine, but it is far from an adequate interpretation of Jesus' self-portrayal in John 10. The expression 'the good shepherd' is a direct reference to Ezekiel 34 and the Ezekiel passage is about the leadership, nurture, welfare and blessing of the people of God (see esp. vv. 15-17, 30-31). It resounds with the language of the judgement to be visited on the bad shepherds and with the determination of the true Shepherd to separate sheep from goats (the true sheep from the false ones). Again I am not suggesting that this model cannot be used to reflect on the relationship between Jesus and pastoral care; but I am insisting that the conversation will be between parties who are essentially strangers to one another.

Comforter

The less frequently used model of the 'comforter' from John 14 and 16 is nearer to what pastoral carers mean when they talk about 'being alongside' people in need. The Latin-based 'comforter' and the Greek *parakletos* suggest someone who is called alongside to make a needy person strong by their presence. But this model also needs to be interpreted in relation to the text itself. The role of the Comforter is to be with the disciples of Jesus, to

remind them of what he has taught them, to witness to the truth that Jesus has spoken. The purpose of the paraclete, closely identified with the Holy Spirit, is to strengthen Jesus' followers as they carry forward his mission after he has left them. There is no getting away from this reality - that pastoral carers who seek to understand their work in the light of the witness of the Gospels will have to do so in the context of the mission of Jesus and therefore the values that Jesus himself embodies and expresses. Even with the model of Comforter the conversation between Jesus and pastoral care will have to be engaged in, on the basis of both familiarity and strangeness.

Pastoral Care and the Values of Jesus

If taking examples from Jesus' actions and teaching, or seeking sufficiently malleable theological models from his ministry, are going to make the conversation a challenging one, perhaps it would be better to seek a family likeness between the values of Jesus and present-day pastoral care. This sounds promising as long as it is limited to de-contextualized general principles, such as God's love for all people, Jesus' care for the marginalized and oppressed, the call to serve rather than be served, the commitment to love yourself and your neighbour as yourself. But this last phrase gives the clue to the challenge that is to come. As soon as you ask 'who is my neighbour?' you move from the general to the particular - and it is always the particular that makes pastoral care challenging. One of the most demanding of the core values of Jesus for pastoral carers comes from his commitment to taking seriously the notion of sin (as distinct from dis-ease) and forgiveness (as distinct from insight gained through therapy).

In the synoptic Gospels Jesus often expresses his core values in terms of the coming of the Kingdom of God (or of heaven). The 'Sermon on the Mount' connects these values with poverty, bereavement, humility, purity, peacemaking, suffering persecution; then it goes on to show them being worked out in stridently expressed practical situations, including the need for family reconciliation, and teaching about anger, murder, adultery, exploitation, almsgiving, etc. The passage ends with a story warning that building your life on hearing the word of God without being committed to living by it is as stupid as building a house without foundations. Another sequence of teaching about the values of the Kingdom is presented in Matt. 25.31-46, where Jesus describes the criteria for the 'last judgement' in terms of service offered in contexts reminiscent of the Lukan 'Nazareth manifesto'. Whether we think in terms of following the examples of Jesus' life and teaching, some of the major 'theological models', or simply (!) his core values, the commitment to a connection between pastoral care and the Jesus of the Gospels cannot escape careful engagement with his mission and therefore with his eschatology. The conversation will be between strangers who are somehow familiar with one another and discovering what it means to be friends in Jesus' sense of that term (John 15.12ff.).

Pastoral Reflection on a Gospel Text

Christian pastoral carers are likely to read and reread Gospel texts as part of their devotions individually or in the congregation. When called on to run workshops about the Bible and pastoral care they tend to run for the familiar passages - Luke 4; Matthew 5 - 7; John 10 etc. The problem is that

Christians are so familiar with the words of the Gospels that they come as *expected* words with no surprises, which is often why they lose their capacity to challenge. I suggest that taking a Gospel text not normally associated with pastoral care, such as the Prologue to John's Gospel, as a base text for reflection could enable the essential strangeness of the conversation between Jesus and pastoral care to do its particular kind of work.

I have already hinted at some of the major themes that could be brought into dialogue with this passage, so I will only offer here some suggestions for further reflection by highlighting some of the key themes. The reader can then explore them further with colleagues.

- The Word – Logos – the reason behind it all (whatever 'it' is) is at the heart of the searching that is central to much pastoral care. Connecting the Logos to any particular person or circumstance, even Jesus, was no more automatic for his followers at that time than for his followers now.
- Light and the darkness that cannot overwhelm (comprehend) it.
- The man called John – who are the storytellers we find worth listening to and why?
- Not accepted in his own home, but to all who did receive him he gave power to become children of God.
- The Word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth – what are the pressure points that start to hurt or to be healed when grace and truth are brought together?
- Jesus makes God known and knowable: what knowing-of-God gets made possible through Jesus?

A Stranger's Blessing?

I have emphasized that I believe that the conversation between Jesus and pastoral care will normally be a conversation between strangers. This is not at all negative, as if one or the other is necessarily deficient. I find that when I am talking with familiar friends it is easy for me only to half-listen, to pick up the bits I am interested in, not to give quality attention. But when I am listening to strangers who speak my language with a strong accent because their own background and language are from somewhere else, I have to listen very carefully so that I can hear my own speaking interpreted by them in ways that make the familiar story full of new possibilities for fresh understandings, new directions to travel. For pastoral care to have legitimate claims to be *Christian* pastoral care it must be committed to embracing the strangeness of Jesus and the challenges of its context in the mission of Jesus. This throws up lots of questions, including the need to reshape what we mean by pastoral care and by mission.