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# On the Road with Jesus Today

John Dear S.J. | Oct. 24, 2006 On the Road to Peace

**F**or years now I've been crisscrossing the country like a new-fangled, post-modern, itinerant preacher, speaking to tens of thousands annually about the gospel of peace.

The past week was no different. I spoke at Princeton and Fordham, led a retreat in Maine, toured the devastation in New Orleans, and visited my friends and teachers, Fr. Daniel Berrigan and Sr. Helen Prejean.

Both have extraordinary new books out - Dan's scripture commentary, *Genesis: Fair Beginnings, then Foul* (Rowman and Littlefield), and Helen's latest exposé on the death penalty, *The Death of Innocents* (Vintage). Both Helen and Dan lament the state of the church, the nation and the world -- especially now at the news that in the last three years the number of Iraqi civilians killed has reached some 623,000. Yet they both rejoice in Jesus and exult in the call to announce his gospel with gusto.

I too feel blessed talking about the nonviolent Jesus. Everywhere I go I meet good people struggling to keep the gospel alive. I hear about their local vigils against the U.S. war on Iraq. I hear about their urging priests and bishops to speak on Catholic social teaching. I hear about grass-roots projects to serve the poor and thwart injustice. And when I speak of the God who says, "Blessed are the peacemakers," the God who says, "Put down the sword," the God who says, "Love your enemies," I often see in eyes relief and gratitude. And consolation comes back to me.

These days on the road, I take along a new book by one of the worlds great theologians, Albert Nolan, the South African Dominican priest who helped abolish apartheid. His ground-breaking book from the 1970s, *Jesus Before Christianity*, reminded the world of the Christian requirement to serve the poor and pursue social justice Thirty-five years later, he has written the sequel, *Jesus Today: A Spirituality of Radical Freedom* (Orbis). Here he explores Jesus spirituality and how to live in our post-Christian age. And he interprets the signs of the times.

Nolan's reading of the times is the best I've heard in years. Church attendance plummets, he argues, yet the world has never spiritually hungered more. We possess vast knowledge, yet humanity's discoveries -- cosmic and subatomic -- throw scientific thinking into the pre-modern realm of mystery. Our individualism is rampant, our poverty extreme, our planet perilously warming and the American empire spreading. Case in point: the U.S. has established 745 military bases among 120 countries.

But best of all, Nolan makes Jesus come alive. His summary of familiar gospel stories freshens one's surprise at Jesus' disregard for his reputation, his respect for every marginalized person, his ruining every class and distinction by teaching universal love. And the biggest affront of all, his relationship to an intimate, compassionate, personal God. St. Francis said Jesus turned the world upside down. Nolan teaches that Jesus is turning the world right side up.

Jesus, prophet and mystic, read the signs of his own times. And his reading spurred him to offer his life in pursuit of God's reign of love, compassion and peace. Nolan says we can do the same. First, by reclaiming the self-identification of the earliest Christians -- people of the Way. Here isn't another set of rules or obligations but a path, a journey.

And we know the path is divergent. It's the path, he says, of eschewing the busyness of the world and its day-to-day violence. It's a path of silence, solitude, meditation, even relaxation and playfulness. It's a path of self-examination, of peering fearlessly at our hypocrisy, egotism and selfishness. Thus will emerge our true self and a spirit of gratitude. He writes:

> *Jesus was conscious of everything in life as a gift from God, a blessing. There is no evidence that he just took things for granted. What we need are specific prayers of thanks for specific things: my health, my eyesight, my mind, my experience of life. A grateful heart will thank God for everything that is good -- in my life or in the lives of others. When we learn to see everything in life as a free gift, we no longer move around with the long face of those who experience life as drudgery, a boring struggle with one problem after another. Instead of being full of complaints, pessimistic, and impossible to please, we become happy, contented, and grateful for what we have. Instead of being cynical and seeing only the negative in people and events, we learn to appreciate the goodness in other people.*

The book concludes with an invitation to the highest stage of mysticism -- the practice of oneness. Oneness with God, with ourselves, with others and with creation. Therein one apprehends something essential -- that we are infinitely loved by God. Knowing that, we'll be at peace with ourselves, and we'll realize our common unity with every human being. From that follows the wherewithal to treat those around us with compassion, forgiveness and justice. And we'll find the freedom to side with the poor, empathize with everyone, share what we have with one another and give our lives, like Jesus, for the coming of Gods reign of peace.

"Until we transcend our egos and discover our oneness as humans," says Nolan, "we will continue to compare and compete, to make one another suffer, to fight and kill. Our species will survive only if we begin to recognize that we are all one flesh and one family."

But there is one step more. We must, as Jesus did, discover oneness with the universe itself. "Identifying with nature and the universe as a whole is not an optional extra," Nolan writes. For mystical spirituality, it is absolutely essential. It needs to become an experience.

Only then can we hope to lay claim to the fearless, radical freedom of Jesus, who walked with the poor, loved his enemies, resisted injustice, and gave his life for humanity and creation. In mystical union, we can trust God as Jesus did and seek God's will and join God's work.

Nolan concludes:

> *God is at work in the ongoing history of structural change and in the globalization of the struggle for justice. The new movement for peace and the quiet development of compassion for all are clearly part of God's work in our times. Our participation in it cannot be postponed.*

I see people participating wherever I go. They're joining in God's work of disarmament, justice and peace, just like Daniel Berrigan and Helen Prejean, but also in anonymous groups and church basements and community centers. And I'm heartened that despite the grim news, the good news bears up, the example of Jesus still shines, and every day, more people become people of the Way. For this, I am, like Albert Nolan, full of gratitude.

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