

Christianity Climbing the Social Register

In this class I want to think about how and why **the early Jesus movement climbed the social ladder** from its **peasant beginnings** in the lifetime of Jesus to the **top of the social ladder** in the Roman world of Constantine.

That climb **changed Christianity** in striking ways that **can never be reversed**.

That matters because we - **all of us here at Westminster** - who **live far up the social/cultural ladder in the USA**, are trying to follow the faith and practice of what began as a movement of folks who were poor, uneducated, illiterate and lower on the social scale than rural farmers.

It also matters because **it will demonstrate what happens** – and has happened repeatedly - **when Christians try to gain control of the power structure in society** (aka Christian nationalism).

It is amazing that **we never seem to learn...**

The Social Register of Antiquity

To begin thinking about the climb we need to **remind ourselves of the social register of antiquity** – the world into which Jesus was born, lived, taught and died.

That **Jesus was born at the bottom of the social scale** is news to no one. We have gone through this in detail in other classes and I don't want to beat it to death. But...

I do want to go through it quickly today in order to **draw new information from it** that we have not talked about before.

The 1%

At the top of the social pyramid were the 1%. At its upper levels it included the royals, the highest-ranking military officers, ranking priestly families, the Herodians and other ranking aristocratic families.

Their **wealth** was based primarily on **land ownership and taxation** which effectively drained the resources of the rural areas.

They maintained **total control** of **writing, coinage, taxation, the military and judicial systems.**

They lived in mansions in the **central areas of the cities**, enclosed by locked, guarded walls... and ...owned large, walled country estates to which they could retreat as needed.

Think **Trump Tower** and **Mar a Lago** and you have the idea.

They used **religion** to justify their **(“God-given”) authority** and have it **regularly put in front of the entire population.**

Their Role in our Story

- **Their role in the Jesus story is very small.** They appear primarily in the trial and crucifixion stories
- They also **play a minor role in Paul’s story** – mostly at the time of his **arrest and imprisonment.**
- But they play an **enormous role** in the Christianity of the **Constantinian era.**

The Retainers

This includes **lower-level military officers, officials and bureaucrats such as clerks and bailiffs, scholars, lawyers and the lower-level lay aristocracy.**

They constitute **5% - 7% of the population** and **work primarily to extend control of the 1%** to cities, villages and rural areas alike.

They use **religion** as a principal means of **displaying their loyalty to the system and staying in the good graces of the 1%**, on whom their life chances, wealth and status depended.

Think the professional and managerial class in America - including the current role of many **American evangelical leaders in government positions** - and you have the idea.

Their Role in our Story

- These folks play a **significant role in the Jesus story**. They are the principal **antagonists** he encounters.
- They also play an important role in the **world of Paul**, becoming the **congregational leaders of Pauline churches**
- They play a huge role in the **Christianity of the Constantine era** where they become **a key constituency in the governmental bureaucracy**

The Nameless Urbanites

These were the **non-elite of the cities**. They were about **85% of the city population** but between **3 and 7% of the total population**. This group included **merchants, artisans, day laborers and shop keepers and service workers of various kinds**.

Their **economic situation** varied from **extreme poverty** among day laborers and certain artisan groups to **considerable wealth** among some merchants.

Yet even the rich among them bore **little social or cultural influence**. Almost all were **illiterate**.

Among the urban poor, **health and nutrition** were often worse than in **the villages** and **life expectancies were shorter**.

For them, **religion** was a way to **gain support from the groups above them**.

Think the **slums and run-down areas of modern cities** and you have the idea.

Their Role in Our Story

- These folks play a **very small role** in the **Jesus story**, simply because, aside from the passion narrative, Jesus is never in a real city.
- They are a **primary group** among whom **Paul's ministry** takes place.
- In the **Constantinian era** they play **no public role** in Christianity but continue to be important in local congregations.

Rural Peasants and Other Villagers

These folks were **85-90% of the total population**. Most were engaged in **farming and extracting raw materials**.

Small economic survival margins meant that **debt, leading to loss of land, was epidemic**. **Jesus' own family was likely one of the victims**.

Fishermen and herders were common as well. **Both were despised occupations**.

And, of course, there were **village artisans or craftsmen**: potters, weavers, blacksmiths, shoemakers, carpenters, etc.

Many were **day laborers** and **few could make a living in the smaller villages like Nazareth**.

ALL were illiterate, so **oral communication** was their only option.

Religion for them was a **desperate plea for grace and mercy** from God – or anyone.

Degraded, Unclean and Expendables

Outside the walls of every preindustrial city lived the folks at the bottom, the **degraded, unclean and expendables**: **beggars, prostitutes, the poorest day laborers, tanners** (forced to live outside the cities because they smelled), **peddlers, bandits, sailors, gamblers, ass drivers, usurers, dung collectors and even some merchants.**

The **degraded and expendables** were about **10% of the total population** and were **present around both villages and cities**, though much more numerous around the cities.

The living conditions and life chances of most of these people were **simply appalling.**

For then **religion** was a desperate hope that God would **save them.**

Think the **“homeless” in American cities** and you have the idea.

Their Role in Our Story

- **Peasants**, together with the **degraded and expendables**, were the **primary focus** of the entire **life and work of Jesus.**
- They play a **minor role in Paul's story** and almost **no role in the public story of Constantinian Christianity.**

Before moving on, let me note the striking ways in which **Jesus' actions and teaching spoke to these people...**

- Blessed are those who **hunger...**
- Blessed are those who **thirst...**
- Blessed are the **poor...**
- Blessed are you that **weep** now...

- Blessed are the **lowly ones**
- Blessed are you when **people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil...**

How about the **Lord's Prayer**

- Give us this day our **DAILY bread**
- Forgive our debts as we forgive our **debtors**
- Save us from the **Evil One** (debt court judges) ...

Think about the importance of a Jesus stories or like:

- **Healing** the sick, the lame and the blind
- **Feeding** the 5000,
- Casting out a **demon called "Legion"**
- **Breaking bread** together...

Think about **Jesus' own mission statement...**

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring **good news to the poor**. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free." Lk. 4:18

That is where the whole thing began, but...

BIG CHANGE was coming!! (Our big story next week)

- Within **20 years**, Paul was **writing letters to literate Christians**, in large cities, in a different culture (Greco-Roman) and a different language (Greek).
- Within **40 years** Mark was **putting the whole Jesus story into writing**, once again in a different language, for literate folks in a different culture.

That one change – **writing** – was **absolutely earth-shaking**, and is what began Christianity's climb up the social ladder of antiquity – our story next week.

Our Challenge in this Class

Looking in detail at **huge and irreversible changes** in Christianity from what Jesus began to what it ended up in the time of Constantine ... **and what that means for us.**

But... before we can grasp the enormity of that change, we need to think carefully about **a critically important concept** - what scholars call the **“social location of thought.”**

Social Location of Thought

The **“social location of thought”** is the idea that ways of thinking, speaking, language, and even vocabulary are all **shaped by the social location in which they appear.**

The concept is **easy to illustrate with language.** Because words have multiple meanings, a word's meaning depends on the context in which it is used.

If I use the word **“bank,”** am I talking about the **edge of a river** or a **financial institution**? It depends on the context.

If I use the word **“diamond,”** am I talking about something **on your finger** or a **place to play baseball**?

Here are **two quick examples** in the Bible of vocabulary being changed because of the location of author and reader:

This first one is simply a **change of cultural location:**

And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, **they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it,** they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. (Mk. 2:4)

But finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and **let him down with his bed through the tiles** into the middle of the crowd in front of Jesus. (Lk. 5:19)

This second one is a **change of social location**:

Matthew 6:12 And forgive us our **debts**, as we forgive our **debtors**

Luke 11:4 Forgive us our **trespasses**, as we forgive everyone who **trespasses** against us.

A changed social location resulted in a **changed text!**

Tempted to think **a change of social/cultural location** does not really **change the meaning of words?**

Here is what can happen when a biblical text re-locates from **ancient Israel** to **modern America**:

Here is **Psalms 121:1**, on a signpost **at the top of the chairlift at the Mt. Ashland Ski area** in southern Oregon:

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. (Ps. 121:1)

Someone obviously thought this was referring to the **uplifting inspiration of the beautiful mountains**.

But that is **not what it meant in ancient Israel** – where there are no lofty or inspiring mountains. **The hills** being referred to are those on top of which **the Canaanites built their altars to pagan gods**.

Here, then, is the same verse, punctuated properly:

I lift up my eyes to the hills. From whence does my help come? (Ps. 121:1 RSV)
Note that it is a question! And **the answer** – in the next verse?

My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth. (Ps. 121:2)

The **changing social location** of **Christianity** is what we are going to think about in more detail next week.

We need to think about the social location of the **oral, Aramaic story of Jesus**, recounted face-to-face in **small Israelite villages** ...

And then... just 30 years later... think about **Pauline letters** and **written Gospels ... in Greek** – being read by literate people living in **large Greco-Roman Roman cities!!!**

Talk about a **new social location!**

- We are in **cities** rather than **villages**
- In a different culture: **Greco-Roman** rather than **Israelite**
- Using a different language: **Greek** rather than **Aramaic**
- With a different audience: the **urban poor and a few retainers** rather than rural **peasants and expendables**
- With a Jesus story in **writing** rather than **oral and face-to-face**

Think for a minute about this one indisputable fact:

Before ANY of our earliest WRITTEN sources on Jesus, on early belief, or early practice...

Christianity had spread to what is now Syria, Turkey, Iraq, Egypt, Greece, Italy, north Africa and as far away as Spain, and had done so **ENTIRELY by word-of mouth among illiterate people.**

- There was no New Testament
- There were no written Gospels
- There were no letters of Paul or John, or Peter
- There was no book of Acts, Hebrews, James or Revelation

It spread as **oral tradition** – people recounting stories, and memories, and hearsay and viewpoints – **as fluid, vibrant and varied as oral tradition always is.**

In fact, our evidence suggests that at a very early time **the disciples went off in widely scattered directions**, when there was ...

- **No fixed set of Christian beliefs or rituals**
- **No fixed way they should think about Jesus**
- **No set idea of what they should tell folks about Jesus.**

In other words, **Christianity did not start out as a unified movement.**

But the implications of that reality is **our story for next week!**