



# Just Jesus Extras 1: background notes



## The world of Jesus

The society into which Jesus was born was under military occupation: a colony of the Roman Empire. Heavy taxes were imposed on the people both by the Romans and by the religious institutions of the day. The result was severe poverty among much of the population.

While the rich and powerful became richer, the poor became poorer. Many of them were destitute and homeless. The wealthy elite consisted of the priestly class, large landowners and the Romans. Any attempt to change the situation was met with extreme violence by the authorities.

It is important to remember:

- Jesus grew up and lived under this political, economic and military oppression. No wonder the rebels wanted to make him their leader.
- He was a layman, not a member of the religious elite. His family had spent time as refugees and he lived his adult life in relative poverty alongside the poor.
- He challenged the political and religious system so resolutely that he was eventually arrested, tortured and executed in the most degrading way possible as a criminal.
- Many of his contemporaries found his death scandalous and deserted him.

## Who did Jesus befriend? Who did he seek out?

Albert Nolan, a theologian working in South Africa, says in answer:

“The poor, the blind, the lame, the lepers, the hungry, the miserable, those who weep, sinners, tax collectors, demoniacs, the persecuted, the downtrodden, the captives, those who were overburdened, the crowds, the little ones and the least.”

Jesus generally refers to this unmistakable group as ‘the poor’ or ‘little ones’. The Pharisees refer to this same group of people as unclean, as sinners or simply the rabble who know nothing about God.

When Jesus encountered those crushed by the burden of poverty and debt he was not simply moved with compassion. He was deeply angered. Some translations take the force out of such descriptions, saying that he “took pity on them”. But what the words really mean is that “Jesus was moved with compassion from his guts” (from the Greek meaning bowels).

In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus speaks of “the Kingdom” of God. This is the reign or rule of God. So we pray: “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”. The Kingdom, the rule and sovereignty that Jesus is living out day by day, is about faithfulness to the love and justice of God.

But this is not about mere survival; it is about life in abundance. It is where human life becomes whole, where love is present, where injustice and anything which enslaves us comes to an end. To help people to grasp something of the generosity of God, Jesus often pictures the Kingdom as a banquet in which all can share – especially the poor.

### The Jesus agenda

Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had grown up, and went according to his custom into the synagogue on the Sabbath. He stood up to read and was handed a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the passage where it was written:

“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 liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the Lord’s year of favour.”

Rolling up the scroll, he handed it back to the attendant and sat down, and the eyes of all in the synagogue looked intently at him.

He said to them, “Today, in your hearing, this scripture passage is fulfilled.”

*Luke 4: 16–19*

What is good news for those we call the poor? To simply give them handouts and hope they will go away? Or to give them respect as children of God? To treat them justly and fairly as we ourselves would wish to be treated? How can we say we love our neighbour if we stand aside while our neighbour suffers injustice?

In this dramatic and fateful passage Jesus nails his colours to the mast. This is why God has sent me, he seems to say. In doing so he places himself in the turbulent tradition of the Old Testament prophets in which love and justice for others the poor, the alien and the outcast is paramount. This is the Word of the Lord, they proclaimed: a word which was not optional.

Jesus also lines himself up with the idea of “jubilee” or the Lord’s “year of favour”.

This was a time when debts were to be cancelled, slaves set free and land redistributed. This radical tradition of social justice is at the heart of Jesus’ proclamation of the rule or Kingdom of God.

