

JESUS OF SAN FRANCISCO: CAN JESUS CHRIST BE A RESOURCE FOR QUEER MASCULINITIES?

ROB DAY-WALKER

“I’ve stayed in the Christian tradition because the Jesus of the Religious Right is not the one that I experienced when I was five years old, nor the Jesus found in the pages of the Bible. Therefore, I write what follows in the service of communities I know and love: those who follow Jesus (especially if they disagree with me about queer sexualities), and queer men of every description.”

Opening Space for Conversation

In many queer male communities, talking about Jesus smells a bit like sleeping with the enemy. I would like to think that I understand the queer academic allergy to listening to Christian discourse about sexualities or the nature of God. After all, invoking God, it seems, is the ultimate power move—the ultimate unanswerable argument. If heterosexism has divine sanction, then queer males are off to hell in a hand basket, right? Some queer men conclude that it’s much better to focus on how God is used as a weapon against us, continuously expose why this happens, and then set aside all the rhetoric and get on with thinking intentionally about our own bodies and identities. God—or any conception of the transcendent realm—is better left to private imagining. Anything else seems to smack of universals, of grand, scientifically validated stories that supposedly explain the whole universe (metanarratives). Contemporary culture, claims scholar Jean-Francois

Lyotard, experiences “incredulity” toward such grand visions of reality. This is understandable, especially when so many of these visions leave no room for our experiences as queer men. Yet, here I am, writing an essay about Jesus, the central figure in our culture’s major “metanarrative,” as though queer men should pay attention to him!

I am certainly not the first to suggest that Jesus can be—and is—the ally of queer people. I write as a Christian, a queer man who wants to be a friend of Jesus; I want to stay affiliated with the Church, even (and especially) if some Christians are heterosexist homophobes. I fear, though, that most of my queer brothers will dismiss this essay with justifiable anger: “Of course Jesus has nothing to do with San Francisco. Next!”

I grew up in a Christian home for most of my life. I prayed the “sinner’s prayer” at five years old with my Dad on the way to kindergarten, the day after my birthday. I think I’d lied about something and gotten caught by my dad. So, as I sat with tears streaming down my face, he asked me, “Bobby, do you want to know *why* you do bad things?” I really did (which might figure when I was trying to avoid being disciplined again!). But I was totally unprepared for what happened next. Somehow, I understood what my dad was saying to me about Jesus dying to take away my sin and give me new life with God, though I’m quite sure, as I look back, that the language was probably beyond my comprehension at Kindergarten age! I started bawling, and as I prayed to Jesus for forgiveness of sin, it wasn’t guilt that I felt lift from my shoulders—it was fear. You have to understand: my step-dad and I never really got along—I was sometimes petrified with fear of him—but during that prayer, I experienced Jesus’ love for me, and his complete welcome.

People like Richard Dawkins¹ claim that children cannot have true experiences of conversion because their parents have indoctrinated them. All I know is that after my prayer, the constant fear in my life was never quite so crippling. Despite all the grown-up sceptics who pooh-pooh’ed my

¹ Author of *The God Delusion*, a recent bestseller that defends hard-line atheism.

conversion, I never expected the kind of mystical experience I had that day with my step-dad. Afterward, when I was scared or frightened, I would sing songs to Jesus because I knew that he loved me even when I doubted my dad's love. Later, when I was a teenager, I would forget the welcome of this simple Christ as I battled with a Christ who seemed to ask me to change my sexual orientation. I often thanked God the Father several times a week for not killing me outright whenever I came crashing down from the bliss of sexual fantasy about boys.

After attending Bible College for a year and a half (while living in dorms with beautiful men!), I was suspended because of issues surrounding my sexuality; I couldn't put off dealing with it any longer. I enrolled in counselling to change my orientation, and also saw a secular social worker once or twice a month. From the age of nineteen until the age of twenty-two, I snapped like a yo-yo between what my emotions and body told me and what my conservative theology dictated. It was a brutal struggle, but in the end, I concluded that Scripture didn't say anything about homosexuality being sinful, *per se*. Despite the so-called "clobber verses" (e.g. "Man shall not lie with man, for it is an abomination") that most of us have heard before, I found that a contextual reading of the Bible does not support homophobia any more than it does the oppression of women or ethnic minorities.

I've stayed in the Christian tradition because the Jesus of the Religious Right is not the one that I experienced when I was five years old, nor the Jesus found in the pages of the Bible. Therefore, I write what follows in the service of communities I know and love: those who follow Jesus (especially if they disagree with me about queer sexualities), and queer men of every description. Some of us queers, I find, wish that we could find a way to cut through the Church's bullshit, longing to find some solace in a Christ who really is "good news" for us. We are tired of being hit over the head by a heterosexual, heterosexist, pro- ("traditional") family Christ (and His misogynistic, abusive Father) whom certain kinds of Christians portray as "saviour"—well, as long as we look like *them*.

A close reading of the canonical Gospels shows, in contrast, that Jesus said absolutely nothing about homosexual sex between men; was decidedly disinterested in patriarchal marriage; asserted the necessity of faithfulness in marriage for both men and women; and de-emphasized "blood family" to a shocking degree for his culture and time period. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are "theological biographies" that contain the historical witness to the life and teachings of Jesus. Some Jesus scholars believe these documents contain very little "history"; instead, they tell us quite a lot more about what early Christians thought of Jesus. In contrast, others believe that the authors knew the importance of truthfully recording history (albeit with a "believing" bias). In other words, some scholars say that the writers made up stories because they had a particular theology; others say that the happenings reported in the Gospels are the concrete historical basis for the theology that developed in early Christian communities.² I fit into the latter category.

Granting this assumption, I will use material drawn from the Gospels to suggest ways in which Jesus can become a resource for queer masculinities. My reading critiques many aspects of queer masculinities or queer male communities; a queer Jesus still challenges all who love justice and peace—especially those who name the name of Christ—to live in a way that actually reflects what we say. "The personal is political," – so the feminists tell us – and in a culture where personal faith in Jesus supposedly props up a great deal of political activism on both the right and left, that is all the justification I need for my investigation.

I can't make the entire Christian tradition safe for queer men. A project that ambitious would take several volumes and even then isn't guaranteed success. I can only sketch an outline of Christ as a friend to queer men – someone capable, with our help, of undoing the damage of Christian theological heritage *from the inside*. With this modest goal, perhaps others more

² When dealing with history, I consider myself a critical realist. This means that while there is something external to the observer to actually report, the experience of observation is always mediated by language and the subjective consciousness of the observer. It is most accurate, then, to speak of statistical probabilities (approaching certainty) rather than "what actually happened"—as though there is no interpretation involved. This position is similar to that of Jesus scholar NT Wright in his several academic works, especially his *Christian Origins and the Question of God* series published by Fortress Press.

capable than I can join the continuing project of “befriending the text,” reading it from their own experiences of queerness to see if it can express “good news” for our queer lives. When quoting the Gospels, I use the New Revised Standard Version, which employs inclusive language when referring to humanity and reflects a mainstream (rather than right-wing Evangelical) method of translation.

Jesus and Women

Luke 10:38-42 (New Revised Standard Version)

38 Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. **39** She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. **40** But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."

41 But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; **42** there is need of only one thing [or *few things are necessary, or only one*]. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." [Brackets indicate an alternate reading found in the margin of the NRSV text.]

I have a confession to make. I *loved* the story of Mary and Martha growing up, because I *hated* chores. I live with a disability—Cerebral Palsy. It leaves me a wee bit gimpy; though I get around reasonably well, I hate pushing around a vacuum cleaner, standing at the sink doing dishes, or sweeping floors. I was thoroughly incompetent at sports (despite my stepdad's efforts to “toughen me up” by teaching me to bicycle, play baseball and soccer, and even to jump rope). Neither did I like drawing or piano very much—mostly because I felt that my dad pushed me way too hard. I just felt clumsy, lazy, and stupid.³

Instead, I found joy in reading and creative writing – and, oftentimes, you might've found me in my room, singing about Jesus. My dad figured that I wasn't busy enough around the house—he once accused me of “sloth” for sleeping in past 10 AM on a weekend—but I would remember that Jesus was

³ Thanks to neuropsychological testing, I now know my “spatial orientation” is in the fifth percentile, far below average.

on *Mary's side*. Neither chores nor obsession with productivity, I decided, were of first importance, after all.

At first blush, this text would probably rankle most feminist men or women from any number of angles: Martha is in the kitchen, the traditional domicile of the woman, supporting the evidently more important work of a man (even one as nice as Jesus). Her sister Mary isn't much better—why is she sitting at the feet of a man, simply accepting what he says? From this position, we might think that Martha *rescues* Mary from abject intellectual servitude; if Mary is in the kitchen, she is in woman-space, at one remove from direct manipulation by a man (even one as nice as Jesus).

Or taking another tack, doesn't Jesus sound like an intellectual snob? In this circumstance, isn't he being a little unreasonable? *Oh, come on, Jesus, we might say. Who's going to cook dinner if we're all just sitting around? Aren't you tired after a long day preaching revolution in the countryside? Besides, we might add, who's going to throw this fabulous party without any food? Mary chose “the better part”? Surely, Jesus, your rebuke is a little harsh!* Martha (Stewart) fits a latent Protestant work ethic that many of us—including me!—carry in our hearts.

It was a rebuke all right, but maybe not as harsh as we might think. As scholars acknowledge, Jesus' culture was unapologetically hetero-patriarchal. Martha is, indeed, doing the culturally acceptable thing—what's expected of her. A visiting rabbi is in her home, and she has to make sure her hospitality is at least adequate, even if she's not the “hostess with the most-est.” Technically, she's in the right when she says to Jesus about her sister, “Tell her to help me!” Can't you hear her? “If you want supper, tell her to get up off her ass and get in the kitchen!”

Rather than a universal condemnation of practicality, Jesus interrupts Martha's usual thinking, warning her in advance to pay attention by repeating her name: “Martha, Martha.” He offers Martha the chance to break out of several unjust systems that hold her captive. Prepping food, of course, is women's work, freeing the men for the “real work” of intellectual conservation or studying Torah. In fact, in the world of Jesus, women are not

taught the Torah as the disciples of rabbis, but rather have to ask their husbands about anything they don't understand.

In fact, some scholars suggest that this story represents the Lucan community's response to a debate about whether or not women can be disciples. Can they be trusted with the teachings of Jesus? Remember: in Jesus' world, if you can be taught, you are qualified to teach. The answer is a definite *yes*, for both Luke and Jesus. Jesus calls Mary and Martha out of rigid gender roles by according them the respect that a man would have. By recognizing their equality with him, he subverts the gender hierarchies that would merely leave Mary and Martha "safe" in the kitchen, rather than as active participants in revolution. By calling them to be "useless" or socially inappropriate in the moment, Jesus undermines sexist norms by focusing on a wider vision of revolution.

Jesus calls on Martha, and on us, to either subvert or critically adopt society's expectations of gender. Feminist theory tells us that these expectations are not "natural" or inborn; rather, society teaches us ways of "performing" gender with socially acceptable "scripts." Jesus recognized Mary and Martha as his equals (in contradistinction to his culture at large!). To Jesus, women have equal moral agency with men; equal ability to teach and critique the received tradition; and equal share in shaping his kind of revolution – the kind that leads people to new cultural, political, and spiritual understandings and patterns of life.

Jesus, who bent gender boundaries and empowered women, suggests to queer men that we can and should be feminists; we should resist and overturn language, attitudes, or social mechanisms (like gender-role rigidity or the notion of a single "feminine" or "masculine") that oppress women. This happens in the revolutionary "preaching" of organized activism and daily conversations, which we can use as invitations to adopt a more radical and liberating way of life. We see in the Gospel of Matthew, however, that Christ's affirmation of women does not come without a cost—without an adjustment or clarification of his own values.

Matthew 15:21-28 (NRSV)

21 Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. **22** Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." **23** But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." **24** He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." **25** But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." **26** He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." **27** She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." **28** Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

Oddly enough, as we read the passage above, we realise that Jesus doesn't seem to have a problem with the "Canaanite" woman's gender; her ethnic background seems to be the main issue. Is it possible that the one whom Christians call Messiah, the Son of God and even the (sinless) Second Person of the Trinity, is a racist?

Many Christians (including myself) find this story very uncomfortable indeed: the messiness of this passage (which is arguably less messy than the Gospel of Mark's version) doesn't square with our expectations of a truly good human being, never mind God-in-Flesh! I suspect that part of many Christians' discomfort is a refusal to really think through the implications of Jesus' *humanity* (whatever we might say of his deity). The key point seems to be this: if Jesus cannot really learn (i.e., if knows everything because he's God), in what sense can he be called *really* human? And if he, being God, really is being racist, what does that say about God? To put it mildly, in the words of transmale theologian Justin Tanis, this story "is not the image of Jesus I was taught in Sunday school."⁴

Christian angst aside, Jesus does open himself to new insight and ways of performing his mission in the world. Dr. Walter Deller, a respected Canadian Anglican theologian, once asked me about this passage in a personal conversation – "Is holding the beliefs of your culture a sin *before* or *after* someone raises your consciousness about them?" Justin Tanis claims,

⁴ Justin Tanis, "Eating the Crumbs That Fall from the Table: Trusting the Abundance of God," in Goss, Robert E. and Mona West, eds, *Take Back the Word* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2000), 43.

“This story details Jesus’ one and only trip outside Palestine.”⁵ Is it also possible that this encounter with the Canaanite woman is Jesus’ first opportunity to evaluate his beliefs and the extent of his mission?

Whatever we conclude about the awkward scenario of the text, it is clear that Jesus is a different person at the end of the encounter. His own masculinity, we could say, proves flexible and secure enough to let down his guard to see this woman and her daughter as whole persons; further, Jesus acts to restore dignity to this woman by relieving the oppression (indicated by demonization) that her daughter suffers. Tanis agrees:

Jesus’ ability to make a radical shift in how he interacts with this woman speaks of the depth of his relationship with God, his sense of self, and his own expansiveness of vision. It takes a person of enormous courage to change like this, to admit that he is wrong, to do things so differently than he had done them even one minute before.⁶

Jesus’ “expansiveness of vision” stabs at the widespread misogyny (let alone racism!) that I have experienced in queer male communities. I wish I could say that hatred of or disgust with women was limited to a particular group of people, but it doesn’t seem so. In my own experience, young “effete” or “twink” males, who are just coming out, often literally say, “Ewww!” when I attempt to discuss close relationships, including sexual ones, with women.⁷ This view is almost understandable in young queer men who are still finding a secure queer identity (assuming there is such a thing as a stable queer identity!). But I have encountered it also in men who are old enough to be my father—and I’m in my late twenties. I have even met queer men who experience castration phobia straight out of Freud’s case files. Could it be that many queer men hate and fear women because we actually want to retain the vestiges of heterosexual male privilege? Do we fear being castrated by straight men and being forced to play the part of woman, or some even lower social role?

⁵ Ibid, 45.

⁶ Ibid, 50.

⁷ Trevor Hoppe let me know that “the late great Eric Rofes” concludes much the same thing. He calls it the “ick factor.”

San Francisco queer activist and sexualities scholar Trevor Hoppe offers a trenchant analysis of the cultural assumptions behind queer male sexism:

Where the hell are all the feminist queer men?...

Many people simply fail to make the connection between sexism and heterosexism.... Our popular culture has connected non-straight sexualities with feminine men and masculine women. In a society where these stereotypes are coupled with the widespread sexism that values men and masculinity over women and femininity, it is only logical that gay men, who are considered weak and feminine, will be treated with less respect than straight men, who are considered strong and masculine.⁸

Hoppe argues that these sexist attitudes exist alongside our disgust, especially when queer men “[question] lesbians as to how exactly they have sex. Underlying this seemingly innocent question is a phallogocentric sexist mindset that represses female sexuality and makes it difficult to fathom sexual intercourse without a male.”⁹ Is it not ironic that queer men, utterly uninterested in sex with women or playing with the vagina, can’t understand why some women don’t find cock as fascinating as we do?

We can’t have our cake and eat it too, boys. Queer men committed, like me, to Christian spirituality need a biblical and feminist analysis that owns our part in prevalent sexist and heterosexist cultural attitudes that derive from Christianity. Such analysis begins, I expect, with a fresh, contextualised reading of the Bible. As I have sketched above, such readings uncover what many hundreds of years of white, straight, male theology have missed: Jesus was/became a feminist; was willing to change his views; and he worked for the freedom of his sisters by dismantling the socio-political forces that held them in subservient position to men. Such a Christ can undo the misogyny and sexism of Christendom from the inside, as long as we are willing to follow where he leads. And to the degree that sexism, gender essentialism, and heterosexism interrelate, such a Christ can, and does, act as a resource for queer masculinities.

⁸ LAMBDA vol. 27, issue 14 (2004). Accessed 29 May 2007.

<http://www.unc.edu/glbtsa/lambda/articles/27/1/feministqueermen.htm>.

⁹ Ibid.

Jesus the Victim-Revolutionary

A few years ago, Mel Gibson ignited a firestorm of controversy in Canada, the UK, and the States with the release of his film, *The Passion of the Christ*. Its graphic depiction of the crucifixion of Jesus, coupled with accusations of the film's (and Gibson's) anti-Semitism, roused many tempers. In gay and lesbian communities, this film seemed to strike a particularly raw nerve because of the murder of Matthew Shepard. His death took on mythic proportions in the so-called US "culture wars" as gay and lesbian interest organizations positioned Shepard as a kind of political martyr. You may remember, as I do, reading op-ed pieces or seeing photographs that described Shepard's murder as a crucifixion. Indirectly, gay and lesbian activists claimed, this quiet Episcopalian college student was a victim of Christians following a homophobic, heterosexual Christ, whom most ethically well-adjusted people would not recognize as the real Jesus at all. Canadian popular musician Jann Arden brings this sentiment into focus in her song "Into the Sun":

Smack dab in the middle of sin,
the whole world's in trouble again.
You feed a wicked heart and you kill a decent man:
Jesus Christ, JFK, Martin Luther, amen.
Jesus Christ, John Lennon, Matthew Shepard, amen.¹⁰

We sense a kind of religious fervour (all the more powerful for Arden's understated melody) in her "amen"—literally, "I agree." Her chorus encourages each victim of violence to "hold your head high" and "turn your face into the sun."

Given our cultural reaction to Shepard's murder (whether in mainstream society or as queer men), it is easy to see why queer men identify with the crucified Christ. Depending on how we interpret the reasons behind his execution, Jesus was either crucified for who he was (Israel's Messiah or the Son of God) or for what he supposedly was doing (plotting the

revolutionary downfall of Rome's occupation of Palestine). Just so, queer men find themselves persecuted for who they are (in older, so-called essentialist rhetoric) or for what they (allegedly) are trying to do (rip apart the family, displace Christian values, destroy America, or whatever else).

Many Christian queer men identify with Jesus, sensing a kindred spirit or an alternative set of masculinities available to them within the Christian tradition. Christian institutions, as a whole, continue to ignore this crucial fact, because it severely problematizes traditional homophobic and misogynist theologies. In Roman Catholic theology, for example, the allegedly celibate priest is seen as the bride of Christ. Former Jesuit queer scholar Robert Goss suggests that, in offering himself as a sacramental channel to Christ, a priest performs an alternative masculinity—Goss calls it a "femascularity."¹¹ The priest both "births Christ on the altar"¹² and consummates (as a male) an erotic act with a male Christ! Are we at all surprised by the instabilities and contradictions of such "homodevotion to Jesus,"¹³ especially if a primary image of God's relationship to His people throughout the Hebrew and Christian scriptures is that of Bridegroom to bride?

What I mean is this. Throughout the biblical text, we have an image of heterosexual marriage as a primary metaphor of relationship with God, usually viewed as male. But in the hetero-patriarchy of Biblical times, only men were considered full persons (though there is an ever-increasing strand of liberation for women). So we've got allegedly heterosexual men trying (and probably failing) to relate romantically to their male deity while simultaneously forbidding homoerotic acts (as in the book of Leviticus) because the penetrated man symbolically becomes a woman, and the penetrator is a bastard for stealing his victim's manhood! Is it any wonder that tensions and contradictions should arise within such an angst-ridden metanarrative?

¹¹ Robert Goss, *Queering Christ: Beyond Jesus Acted Up* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2002), 37.

¹² *Ibid.*, 44.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 113-139.

¹⁰ Lyrics accessed 30 May 2007. <http://www.sing365.com>.

Despite this angst, subsequent Christian history also includes stories of queer male lovers of Jesus. St. Aelred of Rievaulx (1110-67), for example, “struggled with...sexual attraction to his fellow monks,” but “transferred [his eroticism primarily] to his contemplative practice.”¹⁴ This contemplation was a highly imaginative form of prayer that engaged the senses. Goss himself admits that such visualization allowed him to experience Christ’s welcome to him as a gay man: “I finally admitted to myself that I loved Jesus because he was a male and that it was OK to love Jesus passionately and erotically as a man.”¹⁵

Even before I knew I was gay, I longed to be the Beloved Disciple of John’s Gospel, lying close to Jesus’ heart. There was a period within the last few years when erotic visualization of Jesus’ presence was a great help to me in my journey to integrate my sexual life, my sense of personal devotion to Christ, and my theology. Like many male Christian mystics, I wanted Jesus to be my lover, a top to this mostly-bottom.¹⁶ When Goss describes “men lying joyfully on their backs with their feet ecstatically in the air,” I blush because that playfulness, that *jouissance*, describes me!¹⁷ When I have sex, I often sense the presence of the Holy Spirit so intensely that (s)he makes my orgasm even better than normal! Other times, there is a quiet peace, a sense of being wrapped in a blanket, or of being kissed. Visualising Jesus as my lover actually scared me a little bit—it is easy to make Christ in one’s own image. (Certain Christians I know find my experiences very strange or blasphemous.) But these experiences helped me to reject the idea that Jesus would be indifferent or hostile to me as a “gimpy”—a disabled man—who finds a deep childlike joy in seeing beautiful men everywhere! As an old Sunday school song says, “Jesus loves even me” in my queer gimpy masculinity.

This erotic contemplation becomes possible for many queer men with the aid of Christian artistic representations of Jesus, especially on the cross.

¹⁴ Ibid, 125ff.

¹⁵ Ibid, 17.

¹⁶ Goss, 130-131.

¹⁷ Goss, 79.

There is a strange androgyny—Goss’ femasculinity, perhaps!—in early Christian art about Jesus.¹⁸ Queer men may be right, it seems, when they intuit Christ’s welcome as their lover and identify with him as a victim: he is male, and a queer male at that, who accepts his own sexuality, and the sexual interest of other queer men, as part of being fully human. Homodevotion to Jesus on the cross seems rather shocking in light of any challenges that Jesus presents to queer masculinities, because we seem to forget a central and disgusting fact: *the cross is an instrument of torture*.

It is difficult to imagine a more terrible implement of torture than the cross. With its development, the Roman Empire created one of the most painful, humiliating, and effective forms of public execution in human history. Yet, Christian queer men often seem to forget how horrible a fate befell their Lord. Historically speaking, Jesus would not have been beautiful and pristine on that crude device, with a look of exquisite agony upon his face. On the contrary! Based on historical data about crucifixion (confirmed by the accounts in the Gospels), we can imagine the scene. Jesus’ back is raw from being scourged brutally with a metal-tipped whip; he scrapes against the wooden cross’s unfinished surfaces; he gasps for breath, slowly suffocating, tensing his muscles to push against the nail through his ankles so he can draw air; he sags back down to relieve the pain, except that, without the support from his ankle, he is again unable to breathe. He begins again. Whatever the problems of *The Passion of the Christ* as a portrait of Jesus, Gibson’s film shows us clearly how horrible was the penalty of crucifixion for Jesus or anyone else under Roman rule.

Non-Christians rarely miss the absurdity of the Church’s glorification of torture as the supposed means of salvation.¹⁹ It is not, of course, the

¹⁸ Veneration of the crucifix was not part of my experience of Christ, but when I did encounter crucifixes, they always seemed eerily beautiful. Christ was always white, thin, and lanky, with a loincloth tastefully arrayed. Though I never fetishized the cross, I know that many queer Christian men look “upon images of Christ with a homoerotic gaze and erotic longing.”

¹⁹ The essays in the book *Consuming Passion: why the killing of Jesus matters*, edited by Simon Barrow and Jonathan Bartley, raised my consciousness about the intersections between Christian theology about the cross and the potential for religious violence.

torture that the “good news” acclaims,²⁰ but this fact is easy to miss in a society where the cross is a piece of jewellery on the one hand and a weapon to perpetuate anti-queer (anti-Muslim, anti-Semitic, etc.) violence on the other. Do, or perhaps better yet, *should* queer men find a tortured Christ physically appealing?²¹ Does our sexualised fascination with an androgynous Christ blind us to our own hypocrisy? Is it possible we over-identify with Jesus on the cross, or Matthew Shepard on his fence, and thereby forget that *we* are capable of the same kinds of violence?

The Crucified Christ critiques what queer men consider beautiful, as well. He challenges us to include in our communities those who are queerer than us, especially in their aesthetics. Would we have mourned for Matthew Shepherd if he’d been plain looking? A person of color? A flaming drag queen? Gimpy? Trans? Did we become aware of him because the straight world thought he was “safe” or “asexual” enough to make into a public figure, a sweet little homosexual? Would we pay attention to Christ, would some queer men be so erotically fascinated, if he were hideously unattractive? Can we be saved—would we *want* to be saved—by a “fugly” Jesus?

I hasten to add that I often implicate myself in my own questions. My best friend and former Significant Other is a bear, but I fantasize about twinkles and guys with a swimmer’s build. I tend to be less attracted if guys look emaciated, though. I got angry when Shepard was killed because I wished I could have saved him, loved him, and had sex with him. He reminded me of me, except without the Cerebral Palsy. I, the gimpy who used to be insecure in his looks, have rejected (with a sneer!) perfectly loveable men who didn’t fit my physical “type.” Some open-minded queer boy I am, asking others to see past my disability to meet *me* when I can’t see past my own fantasies to meet *them!*

²⁰ Few Christians realise that “gospel” was originally a Roman political term that was “queered” by early Christian communities as an anti-Imperial statement: “Jesus is our Lord, *not* Caesar!” Would that North American Christians, in particular, would realise this explosive potential of “good news,” especially when faced with the local Empire’s self-justifying and ultra-nationalist rhetoric.

²¹ I don’t intend this question to exclude my queer brothers involved in BDSM; rather, I hope it is an invitation to examine queer male (erotic) responses to sexualised and/or brutal violence.

To this day, I don’t fully understand why my ex is so hot to me, but he is. How many of us have been cruel to twinkles, to bears, to flamers in drag, or to average Joes who use the hated phrase “straight acting and looking” without actually taking the time to fully understand their stories? Doesn’t that mean we’re capable of “crucifying” members of our own communities? Don’t we see the patterns of such violence in ourselves?

Stopping oppression sickness, and the cycle of violence, must include a key component: forgiveness. After all the self-care, after all the talk-therapy, after all the interventions and activist projects combating oppression, this is the only way to release ourselves and those who oppress us from the psychic and spiritual wounding of our pasts. Are we ever fully aware of the damage that we cause others or ourselves, even if we have good reason to stay angry, bitter, or cynical? Perhaps this is why Jesus claimed from the cross, “[My oppressors] don’t know what they’re doing.”

When we can ask for mercy upon those who have bashed us in the streets, who have inflicted so much pain upon us, we have forgiven. When we stop excluding potential partners on the basis of our fantasies and instead take time to hear each other’s stories, then we are truly welcoming and queer. When we stop treating each other as meat, even during casual sex, and realise that we, with our bodies, welcome people into queer community rather than simply perform a transaction, we can stop being so fucking mean and catty to each other.²² But living this way doesn’t happen overnight—we need the confidence to believe that such a world is possible. This is why we can’t, as queer men, leave Jesus on his cross to die. We need his resurrection, too.

²² Whether sex can be truly anonymous or casual if we take this idea seriously is, I think, a matter for serious discussion within queer male communities.

The Resurrected Jesus

Luke 24:1-3, 9-11 (NRSV)

1 But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices [that] they had prepared. **2** And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, **3** but when they went in they did not find the body. **9** [R]eturning from the tomb they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. **10** Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told this to the apostles; **11** but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.

I've struggled immensely with articulating why the resurrection of Christ should be important to queer men – even through four revisions, I still struggle to make my words do what I intend them to without alienating anyone either by rude dogmatism (baggage from my fundamentalist background) or by waxing poetic and theological (which Trevor Hoppe, my editor, is quick to point out!). On the one hand, the resurrection of Jesus is, for me, a tremendous source of hope; on the other hand, speaking of the resurrection of Christ immediately seems to mark one's position in the "culture wars" of the United States. If I believe in the literal, bodily resurrection of Jesus, most likely I will be homophobic, heterosexist, "conversionistic," and non-pluralistic: "Our God was raised from the dead; therefore, we're right, and therefore, *you queers* (or Muslims, Mormons, radical feminists, etc.) get to burn in hell." If I believe in the *spiritual* resurrection of Christ, on the other hand, I might seem rational, non-judgmental, and pluralist. After all, dead bodies don't actually rise, do they? Maybe there are many paths to the heart of the Sacred, and Jesus is just one of them – besides, we don't want the fundamentalists to be right about us!

I believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus²³ for many reasons, but one of them sticks out for me: my own body will someday be completely whole and free. Many people want to construct many kinds of disability as merely

²³ When I say resurrection, I am using the concrete image of indicated the Greek word *anastasis*, which is Greek literature, virtually without exception, means that something has happened to a corpse (which is why Greek philosophers, along with every other civilization that has any understanding of scientific observation, affirm that dead bodies don't rise). This is precisely what the early Christians are claiming, and as NT Wright notes, this belief is the only reasonable explanation for why the early Christian tradition took shape as it did.

constructive differences: "You're just 'differently abled,'" they say. But the way I see it, my brain is damaged, and the God I see in Jesus didn't curse me with Cerebral Palsy; neither will God leave me this way forever. If I were in a crowd in the Gospels, Jesus would have healed me, too, just like he healed everyone else who came to him. I used to think, for years, that Jesus would only heal me if I "repented" of "homosexual behaviour." But repeated experiences of Christ's welcome to me as a gay man—not to mention intensive study of the Bible—convince me that I was wrong. I look forward to the day when I can dance just as fluidly and sexily as any hotshot bar-star, thank you very much! If Jesus Christ has been resurrected bodily from the dead and is still alive, that kind of world, a world with no disability, no AIDS, no queer bashing, is not only probable—it's inevitable. As a Christian, believing in the Christ that will give us *that* kind of world gives me hope.

The spiritual resurrection of Christ, to me, seems far less compelling. On the surface, divorcing belief in Christ from whether his corpse revived has one advantage: it kills any Christian pretention to moral superiority; therefore we can join humbly join the rest of their brothers and sisters in struggling for a better world. But other implications of the spiritual resurrection view disturb me greatly. If Jesus' bones really are in the ground, what does that say about the power of death? Were the writers of the Gospels (and the early Christian movement) having a collective hallucination, which gave rise to the delusion that "goodness is stronger than evil/love is stronger than hate/light is stronger than darkness/life is stronger than death"? Was the death of Jesus, the feminist and queer struggler for justice, who believed he was the liberating agent of his God, simply a twisted cosmic joke? The implications for queer justice are no better. Do queer men who work for justice in our society really deceive themselves into thinking things will get better? What the hell does "justice" mean, anyway? Won't the homophobes and gender-enforcers win, in the end? Do we fantasize about a world that will never happen on the basis of non-existent evidence and next-to-nil probability?

I ask myself these kinds of questions all the time. I study history, critical and textual theory, and Christian writings as hobbies—some people say I’m a glutton for punishment. I participate in communal Christian worship regularly. And I also listen, when I’m able, to the intuitions of my own heart. All three of these aspects have a place for me, and the more they interact, the more convinced I am that the bodily resurrection of Christ serves as the basis for my own hope. Jesus did not come back as a ghost, but as a transformed, glorious, and still-physical person. The mystery and wonder of this reality pervades the Gospel stories about the appearances of Jesus, as well as the letters of Paul. Jesus scholar NT Wright, paraphrasing historian Ed Saunders, claims, “The New Testament writers are struggling to say something [about the physicality of Jesus], which they passionately want to affirm, but for which they don’t yet have language.” I submit that perhaps the resurrection of Christ can give hope to other queer men, as well. Jesus, the queer Christ, will lead us to a queer world where oppression, disease, and death have died. Christ himself will prove that he has always been a defender of queer men, against everyone who has called us unclean or consigned us to the fires of hell.

I guess, with that admission, I’ve ruled out being a full-blown postmodernist—someone who believes that grand stories or metanarratives don’t exist. Some queer men will have problems with this Christian story for many reasons. After all, they note perceptively, God-language is the ultimate power game. Isn’t the certainty I express a barely-veiled power claim that will, in fact, oppress queers who choose not to become Christians? There is a tremendous danger, they assert, in projecting our own stories outward onto the cosmos, as though *our* story is the only true reflection of the mind of God. They are right. These questions challenge us, especially those queer men who name the name of Christ, to exercise great humility in our knowledge claims. But the humble and defiant “incredulity” of Lyotard is *itself* a metanarrative based on improvable axioms, as any world-view is. The post-modern worldview tends towards nihilism (not to be confused with amorality). Nothing has fundamental meaning, claim the nihilists. Perhaps

the verbal diarrhoea of much (but not all) post-modern and queer theory masks a subtle existential angst—we sense, deep in our bones, that we will never be understood, and that our temporary victories are hollow.

Despite this strong post-modern lethargy, post-modern scepticism and deconstruction make an important point that Christians and queer men especially need to heed. The resurrection of Jesus is not an excuse to draw battle lines of us versus them on any issue. It is not an excuse to use our rhetoric as a weapon against real people to destroy their lives. AIDS is not God’s weapon against queer men. Homophobia and bashing (including outing closeted gay politicians who do not persecute queer people) are not forms of justice. And activism, whether Christian or queer, that cloaks assimilation and buying into an inflexible political agenda with the call to action isn’t worthy of the name; we should call it manipulation, instead.

Rather than rejecting metanarrative altogether with certain post-modernists, I argue that the resurrection of Jesus doesn’t give Christians—and Christian queer men—the right to oppress anyone. According to Robert Goss and other queer scholars, the resurrection is the ultimate vindication of Jesus’ message, and a demonstration of God’s very real and concrete solidarity with oppressed people. Jesus is vindicated—his message is real, his solidarity with women and queers unbroken, his victory of over death and oppression certain and coming soon! Death will not win. Empire (American, Roman, or any other) will not be able to stomp us out. Mainstream GLBT organizations that enforce the gender binary or try to squeeze all the colours of the rainbow into one mould have had their day: we do not need to be married, nor do we need to fuck without any sense of respect or hospitality, to achieve queer liberation. And best of all, our bodies and our sexual experiences have enduring value, because the body is a fluid and glorious site for interaction with the sacred, even with the God who raised Jesus from the dead.

What does this mean in practical terms? It means that queer men can have confidence that all our work will not fundamentally disintegrate, even if we must deconstruct and then reconstruct it until oppression ends. Before I

was born, the Stonewall Riots showed us that drag queens and leathermen could resist oppression, kick some ass, and change the world. There was a recognition—what the New Testament calls *faith*—that there was something liberating and right going on. The death of Matthew Shepard, horrible and ambiguous as it seemed, continued and perhaps accelerated a shift in public consciousness about violence against queer people. Trans Days of Remembrance open our minds to those who cross or blur the gender binary, sometimes at the cost of their own lives. Hurricane Katrina, though devastating, catalyzed a tremendous outpouring of love to a city full of queer people, contrary to the ranting of televangelists on the Religious Right. Do we recognize these events as moments and seasons of liberation and change? Should we? Do we have the courage for this kind of recognition? Are we willing to deal with reality but refuse to conclude that our actions are meaningless? Do we have the audacity to say boldly, “We see the spirit of Jesus Christ in this,” even if people disagree strenuously with us?

I hope that even my brothers who are not Christians can still take something away from this analysis. We can read the resurrection narratives strictly as a literary text without trying to do theology as such. Jesus’ empty tomb, which seems to the apostles (and to many of us!) “an idle tale,” seems to affirm, mysteriously, that death and oppression can never have the last word. Queer people have had these kinds of experiences by the score, and I think it’s time that we claim this profound and concrete intuition as knowledge of our own and as a source of empowerment for queer justice-making. To put it another way, not only straight people come back from the dead.

Jesus of San Francisco

This picture of the resurrected, embodied, vindicated victim and feminist that I see in the pages of the Gospels and in my own experience, I call “Jesus of San Francisco.” I have tried to show that queer men can know Christ as a friend and ally of our communities. The Jesus of the Gospels—the same Jesus that Christians claim God has raised from the dead—also challenges us to examine our ways of life and how we structure our communities. Christ challenges us to embrace and celebrate our feminist brothers and sisters, thus subverting misogyny and fear and contributing to our own liberation. He challenges our sense of beauty and asks us to honour our bodies and our stories. He asks us to defend and shelter victims of violence against queers while rooting out the seeds of that violence in ourselves by practicing forgiveness. Above all, I believe Jesus asks us to struggle for and celebrate the full liberation of all people, precisely because he has promised, by his boundary-breaking resurrection, that it shall happen.

The point of all this is hope. One thing I love about Jesus is that he always takes me by surprise. Right when I think I have him pegged down, when I am convinced he looks just like me, he shows me that I have in fact nailed him to the cross of my own of my expectations and pet theories. The amazing thing, though, is that he always rises again from the dead and lovingly shows me that I can never contain him, even within my best imaginings.

Even with this caveat in mind, I do feel that Jesus can be a resource for queer men and queer masculinities in several key ways. First, and most fundamentally, the Jesus of the Gospels and the one experienced in the lives of queer Christians leads to a boundary-shattering feminism, a “returning to roots” that asserts, loudly and concretely, the goodness of all members of the human family. All human beings, and most especially the destitute and oppressed, are subjects of God’s liberating concern and love. Queer male

discomfort with and hatred of women (or of minorities within queer male communities) must end if we take Jesus seriously.

Second, Jesus extends radically inclusive hospitality to outcasts, women, and children. Not only does he find his primary vocation in healing service to others, but he demonstrates solidarity with oppressed people by sitting down with them to eat. (The dinner table usually reflects the values and priorities of a given culture.²⁴) “Nice” Jewish boys of Jesus’ day didn’t eat with tax collectors, prostitutes, and lepers! He performs his own culturally subversive masculinity, broadening the definition from the “muscular Christian” singular definition commonly articulated by the religious right. By accepting and overcoming his victimization on the cross through forgiveness, Jesus further bends the definition of masculinity out of shape. Literary theorist Judith Butler calls this bending and redefinition “proliferation of genders.” The very notion of a single ‘masculinity’ collapses because there are so many “internally ambiguous” ways of defining ourselves in relation to others. Jesus allows people to tell their own stories and to live in ways that bring personal fulfilment and justice-oriented community building.

Third, Jesus rejects all forms of masculinity that have their basis in violence and oppression. Many scholars believe that Jesus knew his revolutionary message would lead to conflict with Rome. Yet Jesus, in contrast to the usual violent behaviour of Roman criminals, extends forgiveness to his murderers. In effect, Jesus stopped the cycle of violence with forgiveness. Christians believe that in Jesus, God declared that there would be an end to violence, victimization, and revenge.

Fourth, Jesus models for us in his life and his resurrection concrete manifestations of hospitality and hope. Healthy queer men, I submit, can learn much from Jesus’ “eating and drinking with ‘sinners’” and his message that God is active on the side of the oppressed, dismissed, and forgotten. Doesn’t Jesus already mirror many of the things that we see in our everyday experience of queer men? When we see queer men engaged in the healing

professions, when we see a friend do his best Martha Stewart impression while hosting a party, and when we see the easy welcome and powerful intensity of our bear and leather brothers, do we not see the same demonstrated by Jesus in his own time and place?

Last, and most incredible to me, Jesus demonstrates that being in touch with the sacred, with God, can be a life-giving way of being that has nothing to do with bashing women, fleecing the poor, or putting people on a guilt trip. Instead, Jesus’ awareness of God’s presence, fostered by a life of prayer, led him to profound and concrete action and prophetic speaking—he not only spoke of God’s heart for people, but also challenged others to buy into God’s agenda—not, as some would have us believe, an agenda of violent revolution, hopeless nihilism, or rigid religious observance. Instead, I believe that it is an agenda that brings concrete healing and justice to all those around us, including those who disagree with us. Jesus himself, as I’ve shown, has enough security and sensitivity to learn from an outsider, a religious heretic woman, how to think about God! Perhaps Jesus can give us the courage to engage again with the intuitive or spiritual side of our lives as queer men that we have compartmentalized or drowned out because of the lashings that religious fundamentalism – in all its guises – has imparted against us.

I’ve presented a strong image of Christ in this essay, one with which my queer brothers may disagree for any number of reasons. Perhaps my sketch is too radical, or perhaps not queer enough. Perhaps some of my brothers may still find “Jesus of San Francisco” useless to them. But the Jesus whom I’ve experienced, who always calls me to be his friend, doesn’t have a problem with that—he’ll always be better than I can ever comprehend. I suspect he is even queerer than I dare to hope, and because of this, I submit that Jesus can be a resource—a re-enlivening, blurring, and subverting source—for queer masculinities. I dare to pray that Jesus may be and become a resource for *you*. This Jesus, whom I find in the Gospels and in my own heart, still has me singing—even when I’m standing at the sink doing dishes. The peace of Christ be your’s.

²⁴ Left-wing Jesus scholar John Dominic Crossan calls Jesus’ table praxis, “open commensality.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rob Day-Walker is a 27-year-old English Major, lay theologian, and disabled gay man currently living in Winnipeg, Canada. He loves Battlestar Galactica, learning about radical social analysis, and singing about Jesus. When he grows up, he wants to be a good writer, a Christian clergyperson, and a happy member of a polyamorous family. He's learned one thing in particular from the submission process for this anthology: when all else fails, read the directions.