

Mutterings and murmurings disturbed the usually still and silent corridors of biblical academia; the occasional shout of outrage and cackle of derision disturbed the customary tranquil hush of learning when in 1991 John Dominic Crossan published "*The Historical Jesus*". Crossan is an Irishman with tonsils chiselled from the Blarney Stone to match his mellifluous pen. He comes from Tipperary and was a Servite monk who sang the Divine Office in choir with his brethren though, on his own admission, he could not hold a note. He studied Scripture before leaving the priesthood but continued an academic career in Chicago where he wrote about Jesus prolifically and provokingly.

The main point of contention in "*The Historical Jesus*", among much that was insightful and imaginative, was the proposal that Jesus was a wandering peasant-philosopher who could be characterised as related to that group of peripatetic thinkers and teachers called 'Cynics'. This was provoking because Jesus is a revered figure, whom many of us consider to be God-made-man, whereas the cynics were not entirely wholesome. The name itself is an accusation as it derives from the word for 'dog'. Many saw them as disreputable and unfit for polite society as one of their beliefs-put-into-practice was that they held no possessions other than that which was absolutely necessary. Their founder, Diogenes, was said to live in a barrel, naked, with just two possessions, a cloak and a cup. When he saw a boy lap up water from a stream he cursed himself for being so foolish as to have carried a cup with him for so long. Who needs a cup! He threw it away and lapped.

Now there were some points in common between the cynics' practices, as far as we can know them, and Jesus' life-style: both were peripatetic, they wandered from place to place, teaching those who would listen, and gave moral advice. And Jesus instructed his disciples to take nothing for their missionary journey that was surplus – no coins, no extra shirt. But they were only going for a weekend break, not setting out on a career. And there were more significant differences: The Cynics were Greek, lived in cities and were ascetic. Jesus was a Jew of Galilee, wandered the countryside and had a reputation as "a glutton and a drunkard". There is, actually, not much to connect them.

An examination of the philosophical trends of the centuries before and after Christ provides important background to the writings of the New Testament. Paul, the Apostle, was from Tarsus, a city in what is now south east Turkey. It was home to a flourishing school of philosophy. While there is no evidence that the young Paul attended, it is likely that the ideas generated there would have influenced his thinking to some degree.

In today's (final) passage from his letter to the Christians of Philippi we hear a statement that resounds with the beliefs of a group of philosophers we call Stoics. We are probably familiar with the heritage left to us by stoicism: the idea that we have to be big and brave in the face of pain, and really not let it get to us.

The name 'Stoic' comes from '*Stoa Poikile*' or 'painted porch' which was where Zeno of Citium taught his philosophy. It was the leading philosophy at this time in the Roman Empire. It sought to teach how to live according to nature and according to reason, while accepting one's ultimate fate which lay with the gods. Such a life would be virtuous; virtue being the only good that Stoics recognised. If one were truly virtuous then all other things which others valued, such as health, wealth, strength, beauty, even life or death, were of no value. The Stoic was 'indifferent' (*adiaphora*) to them.

Remember how Paul says, "I know how to be poor, and I know how to be rich too...I am ready for anything anywhere; full stomach or empty stomach, poverty or plenty." Paul accepts whatever comes his way and is indifferent to it. He accepts it without emotion. It closely resembles the stoic attitude.

However, there are significant differences. The Stoic was an individual who followed a self-centered pursuit. Paul is always orientated around Christ and Christ's people, the Church. He accepts whatever comes for the sake of Christ and his fellow Christians. And embraces it all for a purpose which reaches beyond the present: salvation, being with Christ and with saved humanity for eternity.

Paul was well versed in the thinking of his day. He uses the language of current fashion where it suits his purpose but he baptises it. He does not accept it uncritically, but re-orientates it to Christ. Similarly we must examine the philosophies and their world-views of our day critically. Challenging the wrong-headed; adapting what is good to bring people to Christ. With the strength of Christ in us there is nothing we cannot achieve.