

There were a lot of different expectations placed on Jesus. From the time of his birth people knew that he was going to do something amazing, something wonderful, something that would change the world forever.

But many people were confused or even disappointed by Jesus. He never did quite what they expected. He never quite fit in to whatever mold they wanted to put him in.

Few, if any, found Jesus to be what they expected. Some considered his words and actions so offensive (and even blasphemous) that they eventually had him put to death.

Many people responded to Jesus, and they responded in many different ways, even from the beginning. The magi who went to pay homage to him met with King Herod, who sought to have the baby Jesus killed. When he was 12 years old he stayed behind at the temple and his parents worried for him and when they came back and found him, all he said was “Did you not know that I had to be in my father’s house?”

They had a very different set of expectations.

There are times when I wonder if anyone who met Jesus fully understood what Jesus said or did. If so, there weren’t many and even fewer of them were recorded in the Bible. The disciples who gathered around Him didn’t understand very often. Peter once declared Jesus to be the Son of God, and then moments later tried to dissuade Him from following the road to the cross. The religious folk of his day kept trying to trick him in theological arguments and kept wanting to condemn him for breaking the rules.

Did anyone really get Jesus’ message? The answer seems to be “No” unfortunately. Those who believed in him all abandoned him at the cross, and even another man who was also dying on a cross challenged Jesus to step out from the path he had accepted as God’s will. But another condemned man asked Jesus to remember him when he entered the kingdom. Here, finally, was someone who seemed to believe in Jesus, even at the end of life, and yet we don’t even know anything about that man except for the few words he said, and the promise that Jesus made that he would be with him in paradise.

So prior to Jesus’ death, the only person who actually seemed to have faith enough in Jesus was a nameless man who confessed that he was being punished for sins he had committed. Surely that was a deathbed conversion if there ever was one.

So it may sound strange to talk about Jesus exceeding expectations. After all, it doesn’t sound like anyone understood what he was about. You’ve heard before about all the different expectations of

Jesus; how people thought that he would come to free the people from the Roman empire, but instead died a criminal's death.

He didn't give the people what they expected. He never did. The religious leaders wanted to trap him in theoretical theological discussions, he wanted them to treat one another better, even the undesirables of life. They wanted to know the greatest commandment, he gave them two. His disciples wanted him to call fire down on those who rejected them, he wanted to send the disciples into the whole world until everyone heard the good news of God. The woman at the well wanted to believe in a religious idea, Jesus wanted her to put her faith into action. The crowd who caught a woman in adultery wanted to throw stones, Jesus wanted them to think about their own lives instead of condemning others.

His followers thought that he was going to make life easier, and he made it much harder. They thought they could get places of high honor, and he showed them how to wash feet. They thought he was just going to change the world, and instead he changed their lives.

They thought that he was dead and that it was all over, and instead he came back to life and told them that it was just beginning. They had a little trouble believing that, of course. Most often they didn't even recognize him until he started doing the things that they recognized. When they did recognize him, they didn't believe that it was really him. Several times Jesus points out his hands and feet, and in today's reading he even eats with them to prove that he isn't a ghost.

In verse 44 he said "This is what I told you while I was still with you. Everything that was written about me must be fulfilled. " Verse 45 is remarkable: "Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scripture." Even after all the time they had spent with Jesus, they somehow hadn't understood the Scripture. We knew that already, of course, based on their actions, but Jesus wanted them to understand everything, and so he showed it to them so they could understand.

What they had hoped for, what they had thought that he would be and do, was a wish that was much too small. They were thinking mostly only about their life here on earth, and only about themselves. Jesus had a much bigger plan.

There is some connection to us and to our lives to be found in the lives of the disciples. We have probably had times when we haven't understood why God has done or has not done something. Prayers that seemed to go unanswered, bad things that happen to good people, good things that seem to happen to bad people.

The question of "why" may be the most difficult question for us, because we often have to struggle for an answer, and if we do get one we're not always sure that it is the right one. Why do those bad things happen? Why aren't the good folks who follow Jesus find themselves protected from the evils of the world?

I have yet to find an answer to that question that satisfies the heart and the mind. Theologians are still debating that issue, some saying that God can't stop the bad things from happening, others saying that God can stop the bad things but chooses not to... neither one of those answers offers much comfort in the face of real pain and suffering. Some have suggested that the best response we can have is to stop wondering why and just get about the business of helping each other deal with the realities of life and the fact that bad things do happen.

I would like nothing more than to tell you the ultimate answer to that question, to be able to solve that mystery. All I know is that Jesus suffered in this world too. Jesus was not immune from the terrible pain that this world can inflict. Jesus can understand our pain not simply as an omniscient being who knows everything, but from first-hand experience. All I know is that Jesus offered us a place with him in eternal life, an eternal life we know little about but which has been promised to us by our God. The words from the book of Revelation that "every tear shall be wiped away" leads me to believe that all of the pain from this world will be erased in the next life. All the tears and all of the pain from this world will be wiped away.

That may seem like too much to expect, almost too much to hope for; until we remember that while he was on earth, Jesus went far beyond the expectations of those who followed him. They thought he was going to bring a minor change in earthly leadership, and instead he changed everything they thought they knew. The spirit descended upon them and these men who had abandoned Jesus in his darkest hour were now prophets, speaking the truth of God to strangers in every tongue.

Who would have expected such a thing? No one. It was beyond their wildest expectations. It wasn't what they wanted exactly, it was much more than they ever could have dreamed.

May God continue to exceed our expectations in ways we cannot imagine.