Jesus the Fool: The Mission of the Unconventional Christ

By Michael Frost

Reviewed by Darren Cronshaw

I love reading and preaching from a gospel at the beginning of each year, and when it comes to resources for reading afresh and preaching from Luke, one of my favourite books is Mike Frost’s Jesus the Fool which grapples with Jesus’ radical and hope-giving messages.

People have such different pictures of Jesus. There is the bearded lady Jesus from Sunday School halls. Some movies present a vacant-eyed weirdo Jesus, unfearable and deadly serious. Twentieth-century activists portray a revolutionary type. Some postmodern artists have portrayed a more human Christ to the angst of many churchgoers. Michael Frost offers a fresh read of Luke to reframe Jesus, or more accurately shows how Jesus reframes our views - of our sin, our guilt, our relating to other people and our relationship to God. This reframing comes from seeing and understanding Jesus as a fool, not as unintelligent but like the medieval court jester who mischievously and provocatively undermined pretension and challenges the status quo.

When Jesus came on the Palestinian scene, people longed for a messiah in the image of Judas Maccabaeus the underdog revolutionary, or perhaps another John the Baptist ascetic type. Instead Jesus came quietly from Nazareth on the margins of Palestine and shattered people’s expectations with his refusal to take up arms and his eagerness to attend parties.

For his first miracle, he used ceremonial jars to lubricate an almost dry wedding. Many of his encounters with people were over food and drink in the midst of their culture. He was labelled a glutton and a drunkard and criticised for who he ate with. And he asked his disciples to remember him and to embody his life – by eating and drinking! His approach was so different to the expectations of the existing religious and political systems, but he was bringing new life and hope to both.

Jesus embodied an abundant, hope-full and hope-giving life. Luke shows how Jesus encountered people and gave them fresh perspectives. Through conversation and parable, he reframed how people can experience what really is good news:

- forgiveness as gift rather than reward
- community that values relationships over property
- generosity in a world that is stingy
- hospitality in a world of hostility.

Frost paints an inviting yet radical picture. He digs into the cultural background of Luke (drawing especially on Kenneth Bailey), tells inspiring stories and challenges the reader to join Jesus on the road and help others to reframe their views of church and Jesus. Jesus was out-of-the-box outrageous character, seemingly foolish at times and certainly a ‘fool’ in the medieval sense of questioning the status quo. Ash Barker comments, ‘This Jesus is one who may be out of place in boring and predictable churches, but is alive to the margins and true to the Gospels.’

This is a helpful book to read alongside Luke and provides a wealth of background material and stories for preachers, small group leaders and personal reading. But it comes with a warning – it may radically reframe your view of Jesus and how he calls us to relate to the world.

Michael Frost, Jesus the Fool: The Mission of the Unconventional Christ (Springvale: Urban Neighbours of Hope, 2007)