

## **Question:**

“The figure and teachings of Jesus are too often broken down, adapted, and then shaped to fit people’s own particular needs and desires. Who was the real, walking, talking, preaching Jesus and what lessons can we take from him today?”

## **Cynthia Bourgeault replies:**

Don’t get tricked into confusing truth with facticity — i.e., facts and figures that seem to prove an “objective” reality. We know little about the historical Jesus — other than that he seems to have actually existed in first century Palestine and created enough anxiety in the minds of his religious and political superiors that he suffered a criminal’s death. Beyond that it’s all speculation, and the “facts” we look for, whether by archeology or textual criticism — are themselves open to speculation. But what is true is **PRECISELY** the subjective element: Whoever this Jesus may have been, his teaching and his existence in and of itself made such an impact on people that they passed on his story like wildfire and even founded a new religion to carry his teaching to the world. Over twenty centuries, the explosive energy of the Jesus event has changed the world. That much is true.

It’s also true that people continue to meet him in their hearts and in their lives, and over the centuries, creating some of the most remarkable human beings who have been the model of the highest possible degree of what human dignity and compassion are all about. Think about St. Francis... Thomas Merton... Dorothy Day... Mother Theresa... Dag Hammarskjold. For all these people the encounter with Jesus changed their lives and rekindled the flame of human striving. Is this all just massive self-delusion? Or is it the actual working mechanics of how everything that’s really **REAL** in our lives — love, beauty, hope, forgiveness — always seems to change us from the inside out.

Facts remain facts, but our relationship to them is what reveals truth. So it is with Jesus, and all the great spiritual beings who from time to time visit our planet to awaken us to the vastness of the divine Mystery, and the human heart that receives it. The two are inseparable, and the cure for “delusion” is not facticity, but clear and luminous vision.

That, incidentally, is what the star above the manger in Bethlehem represents symbolically: the clear and luminous vision that can proclaim “Peace on Earth, Good Will toward humankind.” The story is perhaps a legend, but the message is utterly true. And it is the message I wish to each and every one of you **GOOP** readers in this magical, mysterious season of Christmastide. Blessings to one and all!

*Cynthia Bourgeault is an Episcopal priest, writer and retreat leader. She is founding director of the Aspen Wisdom School in Colorado and principal visiting teacher for the Contemplative Society in Victoria, BC, Canada. For more of her writing on Jesus, her book [The Wisdom Jesus](#) is available on [amazon.com](http://amazon.com)*