

Outline and Discussion Guide by Neil MacQueen

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for

## Jesus Christ Superstar

~the movie~

I've been a fan of Andrew Lloyd Weber's rock opera Jesus Christ Superstar (JCS) since it first came out and my family bought the record album. I've also had the good fortune to see JCS twice off-Broadway starring Ted Neeley and Carl Anderson –both of whom played the leads in the Broadway cast and the movie.

The stage play began in 1971 and was controversial. The movie was made in 1973 by Universal Studios and Director Norman Jewison (Fiddler on the Roof, Rollerball, Moonstruck). It was well received by many and was nominated for several Golden Globes. In 1973 the movie grossed 24 million dollars. Quite a sum back then. At the time, Andrew Lloyd Weber was still a rather unknown composer, rock 'n roll was still rather counter-cultural, and the lead actors/singers were unknowns. The movie and stage play, however, both gained a following which has continued to this day.

I first saw the movie as a teenager in the mid-70's. It influenced my young faith quite a bit. It was my first encounter with a Jesus who was cool and yet complex, a Jesus who sang but also cried aloud. When the video came out, I began using it with my youth groups and Sunday School classes. All totaled, I've probably taught with all or parts of this movie 20 times over three decades. The last two times –one was with a teen group watching the movie during Lent, and the other was using the Entry into Jerusalem (Hosanna Hey) with elementary school children.

Theologically speaking, Jesus Christ Superstar THE MOVIE is brilliant. In fact, many pastors and I have marveled at just how ON TARGET this production is. How did the Director who made Rollerball get it so right? Somewhere, God is smiling. You walk about from this movie truly understanding that Jesus' life stood out against enormous political, social, religious, and military expectations. The scene where Jesus responds to the dancing Zealots is the crux of the movie and of Jesus' life. "Neither you Simon, nor the 50,000, nor the Romans, nor the Jews, ...understands what power is, understands what glory is, understands at all." There's a week's worth of Bible study in the lyrics of that section alone. The odd scene and song "Could we start again please" (I've been waiting to see you) sung by the disciples to a distant Jesus is one of those other moments in the movie that is often overlooked because it's not in the Gospels, but is quite possibly the other leg which the story stands on. Our inability or unwillingness to fully comprehend Jesus and accept his way is at the heart of what ails us. Take your time there.

Back when the musical and the movie first came out, it was criticized for leaving out a resurrection scene. Personally, that never bothered me. The original ending to Mark's Gospel (16:8) didn't have a resurrection scene either! But the more I watched the movie, the more I realized that there IS a resurrection scene.... the lives we see looking sad or perplexed as they get on the bus --forever changed. And then there's the shepherd and the sheep silhouetted at the very end. In a way, I think it's quite appropriate for us today who don't get to enter the empty tomb, or have Jesus walk into the room. That's something to talk about for sure. Note: I've read that Weber and Jewison didn't intend them as resurrection scenes, and various Broadway stage versions of the musical have had different endings. In the 25th Anniversary restaging of the play with Ted Neeley and Carl Anderson, they did include a resurrection scene of sorts – Jesus floated off the cross and into the ceiling of the Chicago Theater. It was spectacular, but unnecessary. We know the ending. It is ok to follow Jesus just to the cross, God promises to meet us thereafter. Like the Emmaus Road Jesus, Jesus Christ Superstar will walk with your students and burn in their hearts. Down the road a bit, the Christ will reveal himself to them as the Risen Lord.

**How to teach with Video?** DO NOT just turn it on and sit down! The Pause button is your friend. PRE-BRIEF the scenes. Cue your students what to look for. It will make discussion more fulfilling. Especially with children, you'll want to identify the characters in the film early on. I have an extended article on lesson planning and teaching with video located at my website:  
[www.sundaysoftware.com/articles](http://www.sundaysoftware.com/articles)

My video copy of JCS doesn't have chapters to it. The DVD does have chapters you can go through but they aren't precise for teaching purposes. Instead, here in my outline I've broken down the movie into FIVE ACTS, --five logical sections for classroom use to watch and discuss. Each "Act" is approximately 35 minutes long.

- ACT 1: Who's Who
- ACT 2: Trouble Brewing
- ACT 3: Tough Choices
- ACT 4: Confrontations
- Interlude: Could we start again?
- ACT 5: Who is Jesus and What Just Happened Here?

## Act I: Who's Who

1. Opening Scene in the Ruins and Scaffolding, -the past is about to come alive
2. The Bus full of "hippies" and other actors, -those in power and those out of power.
3. The appearance of Jesus, -reminds me of how Jesus suddenly 'appears' on the road to Emmaus.
4. Judas' Song – Too Much Heaven on Their Minds  
Listen Jesus, do you care for your race? Don't you see we must keep in our place?  
We are occupied Have you forgotten how put down we are?  
I am frightened by the crowd For we are getting much too loud  
And they'll crush us if we go too far If we go too far  
What is Judas' mind clearer about?  
What were his expectations of Jesus and warnings?
5. Introducing the Disciples: What's the Buzz Tell me what's happening?  
Jesus' disciples are often portrayed in scripture as unknowing.  
"Buzz" is information. What do they hope to hear is happening?  
Why does Judas confront Jesus?
6. Introducing Caiaphas and Annas  
Annas: He's just another scripture thumping hack from Galilee.  
Caiaphas : The difference is they call him king, the difference frightens me.  
What about the Romans? When they see king Jesus crowned  
Do you think they'll stand around cheering and applauding?  
What about our people? If they see we've lost our nerve,  
Put yourself in my place.... What about our priesthood? Don't you see that we could fall?  
What is Caiaphas the High Priest worried about? Are his concerns reasonable?  
The established "church" often defends itself with Caiaphas' concerns.
7. Introducing the Women: Everything's Alright (Mary Magdalene)  
The women represent those who think Jesus is a warm fuzzy. Jesus' 'peace' is different.  
What kind of Messiah does Mary want Jesus to be?

## Act II: Trouble is Brewing --The Jews, The Crowd, The Zealots, The Romans

8. The Vultures -Circling Vultures represent the growing danger, and portend the death that's coming. In the Book of Revelation, the eagle cries "whoa" (in the Greek: "ouai! ouai!) –a sign of things to come.

### 9. Good Caiaphas –go call the Roman Guard

Caiaphas: I see bad things arising  
The crowd crown him King Which the Romans would ban, I see blood and destruction  
Our elimination because of one man, Blood and destruction because of one man  
How is Jesus dangerous to the leaders?  
What else could they have done to deal with Jesus?  
The pressure ratchets up....

### 10. Hosanna Hey --the rabble won't be quiet, the Priests anticipate a riot

This Palm Sunday scene is exuberant. Who are the "rocks" in our world that should sing?

### 11. Zealots Zealots Everywhere – Understand what Power is? What Glory is?

Simon the Zealot: There must be over fifty thousand Screaming love and more for you  
Everyone of fifty thousand Would do whatever you ask him to  
Keep them yelling their devotion But add a touch of hate at Rome  
You will rise to a greater power We will win ourselves come home  
You'll get the power and the glory  
Jesus: Neither you Simon, nor the fifty thousand Nor the Romans, nor the Jews Nor  
Judas, nor the twelve Nor the priests, nor the scribes Nor doomed Jerusalem itself  
Understand what power is Understand what glory is Understand at all  
If you knew all that I knew My poor Jerusalem You'd see the truth  
But you'd close your eyes But you'd close your eyes. While you live Your troubles are many  
Poor Jerusalem To conquer death You only have to die You only have to die

The Zealots scene is quite possibly the crux of the whole issue surrounding Jesus. Show it again after you debrief it. The people want Jesus to be one kind of Messiah, but don't understanding the meaning of power and glory. How does Jesus redefine those terms? What do you suppose he means when he sings, "to conquer death, you only have to die." (Jesus' cross is often understood as a victory over death. Paul, in particular, plays with the idea of certain attitudes, actions and ideas "dying" within you as new life in Christ blossoms).

### 12. Pilate's Dream

"I saw.. thousands of millions crying for this man...and leaving me the blame"  
Is Pilate to be pitied? Or despised? Why/why not.

This song is based on the little remembered verse in Matthew's 27:19: 'While Pilate was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him." Pilate tries to let Jesus go but gives in to the crowd's wishes. Know anybody like that?

## Act III: Tough Choices

### 13. Jesus clears the Temple

Note once again the mixture of new and ancient. What is the filmmaker trying to say? Jesus did chase the money changers and sacrificial animals out of the Temple, but this scene takes a poke at commercialism. It's also over the top to make a statement as there would have been no guns or prostitutes in the money-changers area.

### 14. Jesus is overwhelmed by the Lepers

The vultures make a second appearance. And now we begin to sense Jesus' own internal conflict about who and what his mission is about. While this scene isn't biblically based, it does raise the interesting issue of how Jesus felt about healing some but not all who sought him.

### 15. Mary M. sings "I don't know how to love him"

What kind of love does Jesus want from us?

How historical do you think it was that some women may have loved Jesus as a man?

### 16. Judas is pressured by tanks to betray Jesus

This is the most bizarre scene in the movie. Why did the director choose tanks to symbolize the forces that led Judas to betray Jesus? What could Judas have done? When this movie was made, the memory of tanks in the Holy Land was fresh.

### 17. Caiaphas and Judas ...just don't say I'm damned for all time.

Do you think Judas was damned for all time? Or was his eventual suicide admission of his guilt?

### 18. Hapless disciples ...Look at All My Trials and Tribulations

The drunkenness is a metaphor. What does it say? How are Christians today like these disciples?

## Act IV: Confrontations

### 19. Judas argues with Jesus – "Jaded Faded Mandarin"

A Mandarin is one who sits in the presence of an elite group. They think they are special. A Jaded person is someone who is worn out, apathetic and not given to action. What is Judas accusing Jesus of becoming? (He doesn't understand Jesus' mission. He thinks Jesus has lost heart for the takeover).

### 20. Jesus' Lament in the Garden, his agonizing cry

"I want to know my Lord" All right, see how I die"

(if this scene doesn't send a chill up your spine, check your pulse)

But if I die See the saga through And do the things you ask of me

Let them hate me, hit me, hurt me Nail me to their tree

I'd want to know I'd want to know my God

I'd want to see I'd want to see my God

Why I should die? Would I be more noticed Than I ever was before?

Would the things I've said and done Matter any more?

I'd have to know I'd have to know my Lord

Some are uncomfortable thinking of Jesus in this very human moment.

But for love or sacrifice to be real, it has to be a real choice.

21. Judas Betrayal --Jesus and Judas exchange harsh words.
22. The Arrest -
23. What's the Buzz ..we're gonna fight for you.
24. Jesus and the Press
25. Jesus and Caiaphas
26. Peter's Denial
27. Pilate's Trial
28. Herod's Palace & Honky Tonk

“prove to me that you're no fool, walk across my swimming pool”

Why doesn't Jesus try to impress everyone by doing miracles?

(He settled this question in Luke 4, the Temptation in the Wilderness, and in many other instances. It is faith which makes us whole, not by being 'wowed' by miracles.)

Note: Herod Antipas (King Herod's son), was something of an evil debauched laughingstock. Remember he had John the Baptist's head cut off to keep a promise to his step-daughter.

## Interlude: Could We Start Again Please?

29. “I think you've made your point now.” Really?

Mary Magdalene: I've been living to see you Dying to see you but it shouldn't be like this

This was unexpected, what do I do now? Could we start again, please.

I've been very hopeful so far Now for the first time I think we're going wrong

Hurry up and tell me this is just a dream Could we start again please

Peter: I think you've made your point now You even gone a bit too far to get the message home.

Before it gets too frightening we ought to call a halt So could we start again please

This song was not in the original score but was later added for Broadway as a chorus song. It seems stuck into the movie, but its visuals serve a point –the distance between us and Jesus, and the lack of understanding he received even from those close to him.

Why were his choices so difficult to understand?

## Act V: Who is Jesus and What Just Happened Here?

30. Jesus in Prison

31. Judas and the Priests

32. Judas “I don't know how to love him.”

Judas represents the extreme end of “not understanding.”

33. Judas' Death (“you have murdered me”)

33. Judas' Death (“you have murdered me”)

People have debated the degree to which Judas' betrayal was a necessary part of God's saving plan, and thus, the degree to which Judas was a “puppet.”

Do you think it was fair of Judas to say these words? (They are not in the Bible)

34. Pilate's Flogging of Jesus –the 39 Lashes

“you have nothing in your hands, any power you have comes from God”

Once again we return to the real issue of power, -what is it, who has it.

In many ways, this is “Jesus' Answer to the Zealots Part II.”

### 35. Jesus Christ Superstar

- who are you?
- what have you sacrificed?
- I only want to know (what?)

Judas: Every time I look at you I don't understand  
Why you let the things you did Get so out of hand  
You'd have managed better If you'd had it planned  
Now why'd you choose such a backward time And such a strange land?  
If you'd come today You could have reached the whole nation  
Israel in 4 BC had no mass communication

This song pulls together all the questions the movie has raised so far.  
And it asks some famous questions –not unlike those that get asked in Sunday School.  
What are the answers?

### 36. The Cross (father forgive them)

### 37. The Bus (a resurrection?)

- Who seems to be changed? Who seems unchanged?
- What does it mean that Judas gets back on the bus? In truth, people betray Jesus all the time and keep on living, regretting, anguishing. It's genius that they had him get back on the bus.
- What is going through Judas' mind?

Some thoughts:

Jesus' story changes many of us. It gives us the opportunity to grasp a new reality and understanding of what our life is to be about, and what God is about. Many of those getting back on the bus, including Judas, have been changed, or CAN change if they let Jesus' life and death speak to them. That's what I often tell youth: Jesus' story is meant to fill us with questions about our life and about ultimate realities. And when we make the decision to allow his life and teachings to challenge and transform our daily living, we too experience a resurrection, a newness of life. Or as Paul said, we begin to "work out our salvation". Resurrection was and is an event, and it's a process.

At the very end you can see a shepherd and sheep in front of the sunset and cross. Is that Jesus? The director said they didn't intend it to be. But even a non-believer would understand its metaphorical significance. Interesting!

(In various Broadway versions and revivals of the musical, there have been "inferred resurrection" scenes added to the show, but none with an actual empty tomb. Some critics don't like the fact that the movie/musical doesn't have an empty tomb scene, but do you think it changes the impact of Jesus' life or the musicals' meaning?)

This Outline and Lesson Guide to Jesus Christ Superstar is the copyrighted property of Neil MacQueen. It may only be used for non-commercial teaching purposes. For inquiries, contact me through [www.sundaysoftware.com](http://www.sundaysoftware.com), [neil@sundaysoftware.com](mailto:neil@sundaysoftware.com). I hope this outline helps you teach the ultimate story with this fabulous movie and great music.

Neil MacQueen is a Presbyterian minister with over 25 years of experience teaching children and youth. In addition to developing and publishing Christian education software ([www.sundaysoftware.com](http://www.sundaysoftware.com)), Neil is also one of the creators of the Workshop Rotation Model for Sunday School, and founder of [www.rotation.org](http://www.rotation.org).