De mortuis nil nisi bonum Does Not Rhyme With Rich

I posted this on the Twitter machine last night and took a little bit of grief for it. *De mortuis nil nisi bonum* goes the ancient admonition – Of the dead, speak nothing but good – and it was suggested that my comment was disrespectful and in poor taste.

On the other hand, I also got a ton of likes and retweets, with several commenters taking things farther and offering some truly savage comments about the late Mrs. Bush.<fn>Though none as toxic as the that offered by the odious Roger Stone. You'll have to search for it if you're interested.He gets no link from this bloggy vineyard.</fn> <fn>I also received numerous requests to define the word *encomia*, the plural of *encomium,* with one wag suggesting that I must keep a Word of the Day calendar on my desk. Peccant whereas criminated.</fn>

Respectfully, both reactions miss the point. I come neither to praise or bury Barbara Bush. In many ways, her passing is but a blip in the larger landscape of our rippling human drama. To her family and friends, certainly, this is a sad moment, a time for reflection and remembrance and mutual support. They deserve the space and respect to handle this however they see fit *within their own circle.*

But the lionization of Barbara Bush, a woman who is, at best, a footnote in history, does nobody any good. All the misty-

eyed reminiscences have thoroughly ignored the complexity of this flesh and blood creature. It doesn't take much googling to discover that Barbara Bush was prone to say things that were, if not downright nasty and cruel, at the very least oblivious and callous towards real human suffering.

Her thoughts after her wastrel son launched an unnecessary and illegal war in Iraq:

> *But why should we hear about body bags, and deaths, and how many, what day it's going to happen, and how many this and what do you suppose? Or, I mean, it's, it's not relevant. So why should I waste my beautiful mind on something like that?*

And here, in the wake of Dubya's incompetent response to Katrina:

> *What I'm hearing, which is sort of scary, is they all want to stay in Texas. Everyone is so overwhelmed by the hospitality. And so many of the people in the arena here, you know, were underprivileged anyway, so this is working very well for them.*

Oh, those lucky poors. They never had it so good.

Again, not to pick on Babs: we are all of us, at times, oblivious and cruel, some of us more than others, some of us more intentionally than inadvertent. On this score we are all certainly guilty to one extent or another.

But our society's penchant for painting rosy pictures of the dead is part and parcel of our unwillingness to face squarely the prevailing assumptions and privileges that are hurtling our nation headlong into third world debasement. Nobody wants to point out the Snicker bar floating in the swimming pool might not actually be a piece of candy. Nobody wants to be thought callous or unkind at someone's passing.

But we are a nation asleep, and telling comforting bedtime stories about a person, living or dead, does nothing to rouse our dulled sense of engagement. At my passing, I hope to be remembered fondly for things I have done that are worthy of endearment. I also hope that I can count on my closest friends to speak some hard truths about what went along with that. The story only partially told does the listener – and the storyteller – a grave disservice. I have some exceptional warts that are well worth the telling.

A few weeks back, writing about the JC Superstar production, I noted that depictions of the Christ as a flawed, deeply human character "do more to imbue the myth with the kind of layered meanings that encourage considered reflection and exploration than do the Sunday school bromides of my youth." I admit that the Barbara Bush story has some elements to it that are pretty admirable, amazing even. But presenting her as just this side of saintly only sets up the inevitable tension between discovering the heel of clay or turning ourselves inside out to maintain illusion. The first encourages cynicism; the latter, dishonesty. Both are corrosive.

The full Didion quote I reference in the tweet is "We tell ourselves stories in order to live." It's the opening line in her legendary essay *The White Album*. It is one of my favorite lines in all of literature: When I feel like not writing, I think of that quote. It emphasizes our need to craft a narrative, to strive to make sense of our world and ourselves. It is – like the first line in this blog's manifesto – a continual source of inspiration and strength for me. But it's worth noting that as *The White Album* essay unfolds we discover that Didion is exploring whether the utility we find in telling ourselves stories may be more to do with our ability to fool ourselves about what is really going on.

The Didion of *The White Album* is in serious psychic distress about a society that was every bit as fractious and self-destructive as is our current civis. In the final sentence,

she laments that “writing has not yet helped me to see what it means”. Perhaps as 40 years have passed, as she has grappled with telling herself (and us) these stories, grappled with – and wherever possible, resisted – the temptation to sugar coat the harder truths, she has glimpsed more accurately “what it means”. I like to think so, but that may be just another comforting bedtime tale. Only she knows for sure.

Didion’s is an exemplary path, a hard path. Her striving to understand “what it means” is a beacon for me. At the same time, I would be a fool to ignore the aspects of Didion that are less than admirable.<fn>I’ve got my own little list. You make your own.</fn> Ignoring the blemishes of our heroes – and ignoring the positive attributes of our nemeses – constitutes an error certain to keep my own “what it means” epiphany well out of reach. That epiphany is a destination that, for both the individual and the collective, is ill served by putting a false face on whom/whatever we choose as the subject of our stories.

So enough with the fairy tales about Barbara Bush. She was by all accounts a tough cookie. She can stand the harsh light of decent honesty.

Better South

I don’t really know where to begin to talk about this year’s

Word of South Festival. I could begin at the beginning, that moment when I had my photo taken with legendary Muscle Shoals bassist David Hood, creator of what is arguably the coolest bass part in the history of pop music.

Both these gents can play the bass part from
I'll Take You There.
Only one of them created that masterpiece.

Go on and check that endless groove behind Mavis Staples. Set it on repeat. Mercy.

Alright. Ain't nobody crying. Come on now, David. Little David.

Or I could begin at the end, when David's son Patterson, founder of the Drive By Truckers, laid us all flat with his invocation of Patti Smith during his solo performance of "What It Means", his no-holds barred response to the ongoing series of assassinations of Black men by law enforcement.

"Love each other, motherfuckers!"

It was all I could do to not dissolve in tears, but there's no sobbing on a bar stool, motherfuckers, so I did what everybody else did and damn near yelled myself hoarse in assent.

Either beginning works, so I'll go ahead and start in the middle of last year's festival.

Anybody who knows me knows that I love The Bitter Southerner. And you also know I pretty much love my now-and-future hometown of Tallahassee – especially the Word of South festival, our yearly mashup of music and literature. About a year ago, over breakfast with BS editor Chuck Reece and WoS

founder Mark Mustian, I watched an agreement take shape that made Bitter Southerner the host for a stage at the 2018 shindig. A full weekend of whatever Chuck and his crew could cook up. I had no idea what was coming.

A year later, the Bitter Southerner Stage was the center of gravity at a festival that had no shortage of crackerjack talent. Whether it was sax killer Darius Jones trading verses with novelist Catherine Lacey, or novelist (and Lacey's husband) Jesse Ball reading his austere prose from his latest novel, *Census;* or maybe a two-hour presentation from Guggenheim Fellow filmmaker Bill Morrison, or John T. Edge holding forth on the social and political implications of Southern Foodways, or civil rights activist and lawyer Ben Crump laying out harsh reality for the (lamentably) mostly white audience.

Maybe your high point came when 80s pop star Suzanne Vega lit up the night with her radiant voice and presence on the big stage. I sat down with a pal to "watch for one song" and move on, and one song became one more, and one more again until I had watched the whole show, amazed at the sheer beauty of Vega's language and sound.

When I stood up after Suzanne Vega, this is what I saw. Our town cleans up right nice.

It would be ridiculous to try and pin down my favorite moment, much less the best moment of the festival. Because like any good fest, I missed more than I could possibly fit in, and you just know that FOMO feeling you have is justified.

But still, I'll give center of gravity status to the Bitter stage, and not just because I love that crew like I love breathing. It's because Chuck and team put together the kind of cogently thematic program that makes a festival more than just a collection of cool events. It's the kind of thing that makes a statement, delivers a manifesto. BS teamed up with friend-of-the-publication Patterson Hood<fn>Himself the originator of the "duality of the Southern thing" concept that drives BS.</fn>, who hooked in his own pals – including the angel-voiced John Paul White, ex of the band Civil Wars – who each extended the network one by one until the program took shape.

The festival began with White, Hood pere and fils, and another Muscle Shoals legend, Funky Donnie Fritts in a panel discussion with editor Reece. Tales of how it all began, what it was like to hang and play with folks like Aretha and Percy Sledge and Wilson Pickett and Mick and Rhymin Simon and, and. And how the tiny towns of the Shoals somehow became one of the most prized places to make a record (remember those) in the 60s and 70s.

And then came guitarist Cedric Burnside, grandson of the legendary RL Burnside, with a set of deep in the groove blues from the Mississippi hill country. Serious roots.

Then it was set by John Paul White and a tribute to the great Muscle Shoals songwriter Arthur Alexander, and I had to miss them both and endure the looks on friends' faces when they said, "Dude, how did you miss that? It was amazing.", which it most surely was, and which would have crushed me had I not been getting my gob smacked by Jesse Ball, or Jeff and Ann VanderMeer and their trusty bird sidekicks. And that led to Vega, which led to a kind of amazing after-party event featuring Charlie Crockett playing some ass-kick Texas roadhouse music.

The threat of overnight storms – the same line of storms that flat out shut down the French Quarter Fest in NOLA – led organizers to scramble to find indoor spaces for Sunday. Word of South has had its share of weather woes, and the danger of losing the energy of a festival by dispersing around town is very real. Our Sunday began with the Morrison film program – well attended despite the rain – an absolutely captivating overview of his career that led me to immediately subscribe to the FilmStruck streaming service so I can watch his stuff over and over again. You can get a 14-day free trial. Go ahead and sign up and watch Morrison's *Decasia*. You can thank me later.

Then it was time to get back to the Bitter South, which had moved indoors to 5th & Thomas, a fine listening room that was just barely big enough to hold the crowd. I missed the all-star tribute to guitarist/songwriter Eddie Hinton, who wrote the second sexiest song of all time, "Breakfast in Bed"<fn>Marvin's "Let's Get It On" will never be beat.</fn>,

and again I had to endure the “Dude, how could you?”, and I arrived too late for Allison Moorer’s set that had everybody buzzing.

But I was in place for Patterson’s solo set. Now here’s where I drop a mea culpa and admit that I have never, not even once, listened to the Drive by Truckers before.<fn>This is where most of you are thinking, “Dude, what the hell?” I know, right?</fn> No reason, it just never happened.<fn>This gap, along w my ignorance of John Paul and Civil Wars, is going to change, and fast. Is there anything as wonderful as finding music you did not know about?</fn> So I was completely unprepared for the way Hood got inside my head and heart, heedless of the passion and social consciousness this guy has going on. His evocation of the shared complexities of human existence – and the particularities of the Southern thing – literally had me shaking and in tears. And then all the Muscle Shoals-grown talent took the stage, and Little David struck up the bass line to “Respect Yourself”, and nah-nah-nah, the place damn near exploded, y’all, we were in the presence of The Spirit, that thing that undergirds everything there is, whatever the hell that might mean to anyone, much less this heathen scribbler trying to make some kind of sense of all this.

Respect yourselves, motherfuckers

I was fortunate to be able to share this thought with Patterson later: He had taken my heart and shown me what was inside, a direct challenge delivered with love and compassion. And when he invoked Patti with “Love each other, motherfuckers”, I was rendered paralyzed with hope and fear and resolve to maintain my own small engagement with the larger world in vain hope that I can change something, even if it is only my own limited understanding of how we thrive and suffer together.

And that has been the mission of Bitter South from the jump: to show us where we connect, where we are all the same even while we honor and embrace our (and your) difference. The programming of the Muscle Shoals crew – hell, of Muscle Shoals as an ideal to live up to – delivers the kind of thematic resonance that can take a good festival and move it towards greatness.

Most of these musicians could have made a much better paycheck doing another gig elsewhere, but they chose this weekend to make a statement and take a stand. They made the world a better place for the several hundreds of people in their orbit, and their work went to support my pal Chuck and my hometown – and Word of South itself. I love all these things fiercely, and as such, I love my new friends Patterson and David, John Paul and Reed and Adam and Ben. Thank you gentlemen.

Word of South stands at a hinge point. Four years down, it faces the question of "what are we going to be when we grow up?" From the first time I heard about Mustian's idea, well before the first festival took place, I had a sense that this was the kind of event that could put Tallahassee on the cultural map, an event that would make people say, "We have got to go to Word of South this year". It has been a very good festival, with year after year improvement. And I take nothing away from the rest of the talent at the 2018 fest: it was loaded and fabulous. I elevate the Bitter South contribution because it has the internal logic and structure that, as I said before, can make a good festival great.

There is rumor of BS returning next year. Let's hope so. There is rumor of other collaborations of this sort. Bravo! As WoS celebrates its fifth birthday next Spring, I want my friends from Atlanta and NOLA and Knoxville, from Seattle and London and New York to look at the lineup, mark the dates and say, "Wild horses wouldn't keep me away".

The challenge is drawn, WoS. It won't be easy, but I'm with you 100 percent.

Your Electric Picture Radio Box Matters #3: The Critical Importance of Myth (#BlackJesusMatters)

“We tell ourselves stories in order to live” – Joan Didion

“We tell each other stories in order to live together” – i2b

People accuse the i2b team of elitist snobbery, of being blind and deaf to the kinds of entertainment that “real people” might enjoy. P’tah, saith the team: The i2b brow covers the full range, from low to high and all points in between.

In that spirit: NBC’s *Jesus Christ Superstar Live in Concert* was just about perfect in every way.

The sets and staging, the costuming, the direction: all of this was as good as it gets. The cast was superb, especially the Broadway pros. Better: the cast was determinedly multi-culti and scruffy as hell, all angular haircuts and tattoos.<fn>America’s grumpy pervert uncle Bill O’Reilly took to Twitter to decry this last bit. Get off his lawn.</fn> In this production, Jesus is a Black man, his “companion” a White woman. You better believe Black Jesus Matters.

Sara Bareilles and John Legend as Mary and Jesus

The expected troll backlash from the religious right never really materialized. A fair number of theologically inclined folks complained that JCS does not include the actual stone-rolling-aside episode, a resurrection<fn>See what I did there?</fn> of a now 48-year old gripe, but it is hard to see that anyone thinks this production short-shrifted the Christ's ascension. Not to blow the suspense with spoilers, but there has never been a more effective evocation of the Crucifixion than this.

A Black Man, dead at the hands of a brutal state, becomes a symbol

Of note: as Jesus ascended, every member of the cast Took. A. Knee.

The Christ myth may indeed be the Greatest Story Ever Told. I write this as a fully convinced atheist, but that really isn't germane, any more than are my thoughts about the reality of Hogwarts or Mordor. This is strictly about the narrative, and this story has it all: rebellion, romance, social justice, and brutal oppression. It's about class division and capital punishment and the mechanics of social movements. And crucially, it is about betrayal.

When the original JCS album came out in 1970, I damn near wore the grooves flat. Raised in church, indentured as an altar boy until such time as I could effectively object, I was taken by the representation of Jesus as a man, a mortal product of time and circumstance. Divine? Maybe, maybe not.

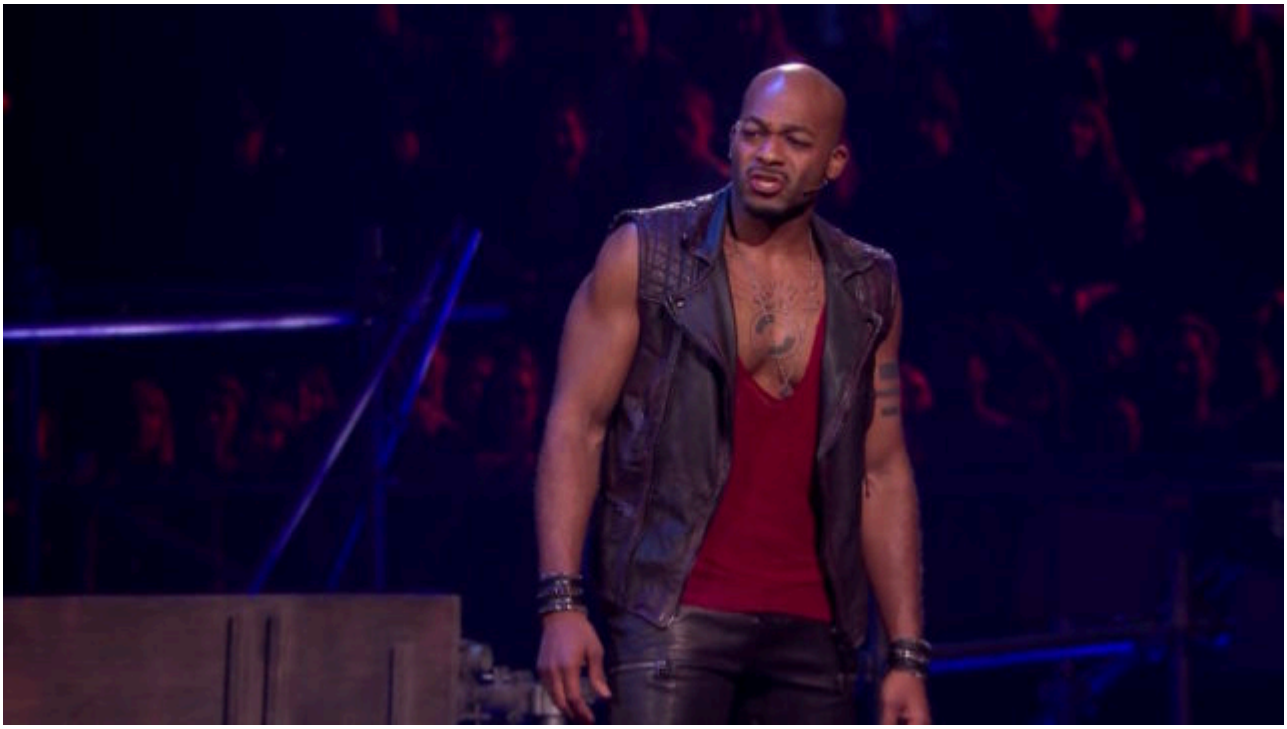
> *Die if you want to, you innocent puppet.*
> *– Pontius Pilate to Jesus*

And what about Judas? History's greatest villain, condemned by

Dante to the 9th Circle, he remains by far the most complex and interesting character in the myth. But I, like many others, was raised with a black and white conception of Jesus-good-Judas-bad, a stance that pointedly ignores the fact that without Judas, there is no arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection. No Judas? No Christianity. This was one of our earliest lessons in ambiguity, and it remains perhaps the most prevalent.

> *Through many a dark hour*
> *I've been thinkin' about this*
> *That Jesus Christ was*
> *Betrayed by a kiss*
> *But I can't think for you*
> *You'll have to decide*
> *Whether Judas Iscariot*
> *Had God on his side.*
> *– Bob Dylan, "With God On Our Side"*

As good as Legend was as Jesus, Brandon Victor Dixon's Judas stole the show. Already a Broadway giant, most recently as Aaron Burr in *Hamilton*, Dixon can write his ticket to any destination as of last night.<fn>The fact that Dixon was the actor who gave VP Mike Pence a public dressing down after a *Hamilton* performance only makes him all the more spectacular. And then the man offers the Wakanda Forever gesture during the curtain call?!?! FTW!</fn>



One of the great feats of JCS is the representation of Judas as something more than a cardboard villain, more nuanced than Palatine or Voldemort.<fn>The bad guy=pure evil equation has never offered much dramatic possibility.</fn> Judas had insight into the perils of personality cult. In the first song, he warns “all the good you’ve done will soon get swept away / You’ve begun to matter more than the things you say”, a timely caution for our favorites in current social movements as they navigate that assembly line of hero creation and defenestration that remains popular 2000 years on.

> *You’d have managed better if you’d had it planned.*
> *Why’d you choose such a backward time in such a strange land?*
> *If you’d come today you could have reached a whole nation.*
> *Israel in 4 BC had no mass communication.*

The depiction of the crowd as a gaggle of media hounds after the arrest of Jesus was a clever twist (as was the wide use of cellphones among the cast) that framed the events in relation to current movements like #NeverAgain and #BlackLivesMatter. The production may not have been conceived with these in mind, but you would have to deliberately choose to not see the

echoes.

> *Every word you say today.*
> *Gets twisted ’round some other way.*
> *And they’ll hurt you if they think you‘ve lied.*

Judas, famously, betrays Jesus with a kiss. In the JCS depiction, Jesus gathers Judas in a tight embrace, a clear display of affection for his old friend who, like himself, finds himself a pawn of forces beyond their reckoning. Is Judas, the universal symbol for betrayal and damnation, forgiven here by Jesus, the singular emblem of mercy and redemption in our canon? God, I hope so. Dante be damned.

I’ll go toe-to-toe with anyone to defend the premise that re-tellings like JCS – and Scorsese’s *Last Temptation of Christ* – do more to imbue the myth with the kind of layered meanings that encourage considered reflection and exploration than do the Sunday school bromides of my youth. Is Judas a man beyond redemption? Perhaps, although it’s hard to imagine a more vibrant redemption than Judas returning from the grave in a sequined tank top to tear the roof off the joint with the anthemic title song.

When I come back from the grave, I want to be this fabulous.

I have not listened to JCS in more than 20 years, not since the Atlanta music community<fn>Spearheaded by multi-talented Michael Lorant as a gun control benefit vehicle following his own shooting during a botched holdup; some things never change.</fn> mounted a terrific production of JCS with the Indigo Girls in the two lead roles. Presenting the out and proud Amy Ray as Jesus – and she killed it, from the moment her disembodied voice blasted into the Variety Theater on opening night – and the out and proud Emily Saliers, as Jesus’ “companion” Mary, was a provocative and daring move, well

beyond central casting's White Jesus, and surely the most daring JCS casting ever sold. Until now.

The diversity of casting and the representation of the apostles as scruffy misfits alone made the NBC production a statement. The presentation of Jesus as a Black man, and his female companion a White woman, could fairly be interpreted as a poke in the eye of America's conservative culture warriors. For centuries, Western culture has insisted on depicting Jesus as some kind of Nordic or Aryan icon. Not this night. I'll say it again: Black Jesus Matters, and the fact that NBC presented a depiction of the Christ myth that leaned hard on inclusion and diversity, and on the holiest day of the Christian calendar no less, is no small incident in the current climate.

Or maybe I'm wrong, and this is all about nostalgia and the willingness of a corporate behemoth like NBC/Comcast to manipulate us all for profit. It is certainly possible. No doubt, nostalgia plays a large part in my emotional response to JCS. A big part of my childhood, I know the lyrics and music to this show inside and out. Judging from Twitter, I am one among many. It is as firmly imprinted as any cultural artifact can be.

But it has to be more than that. The score, not astonishing by any measure, is filled with earworms and memorable lyrics, and the libretto is filled with doses of sly humor. King Herod's song is campishly funny, made even more so by the stunt casting of Alice Cooper. (How Legend managed to kneel in front of Alice Freaking Cooper through that piece without cracking up is beyond me.)

My favorite gibe comes during the Last Supper, when most of the apostles are drunk with wine and enthusiasm for a movement they do not fully comprehend.

> *Always hoped that I'd be an apostle*
> *Knew that I would make it if I tried*

Then when we retire we can write the gospels
So they'll all talk about us when we die.

Perhaps the Gospels were the first tell-all memoirs, the Apostles the creators of the genre. Scores of ex-White House staffers offer their thanks.

There was a ton of energy surrounding the performance, and the decision to have a live audience served JCS well where other recent broadcast musicals fell short. There was an apparent emotional connection at work in the venue, and that spilled over to the broadcast, even where it created technical issues with sound balance and such. But quibbling over mix problems is as beside-the-point as griping about commercial interruptions. Success for such a production comes down to a central concern: can the viewer emotionally connect?

So?

I admit it. I spent most of the evening with my cheeks wet. Mary doesn't know how to love him. Judas doesn't either. Jesus has galvanized a movement that is spinning out of his control. He recognizes too late that his followers are not up to the tasks of the movement, aside from Judas, perhaps, a man who is destined to betray Jesus to death. Jesus confronts the money changers and runs them from the Temple. For his trouble, Jesus is swarmed by lepers and other afflicted supplicants; pulling and tearing at him, everybody wants a piece for themselves no matter the cost to their saviour. The devoted dozen fall asleep as Jesus fairly begs someone to stay awake with him in his last night of freedom. Then comes Peter's betrayal, three times, and Magdalene's comment, "You've gone and cut him dead." Then there is the agonized death of Judas, the man who made Christianity possible, recognizing that he is, indeed, damned for all time.

And finally, most of all, the Crucifixion, Jesus ascending and drifting into the mist on his tiny cross – "My God, my God,

why have you forgotten me?" – framed by a giant cross, backlit until he disappears into pure light? As powerful and moving as it gets. Michelangelo can only shake his head and say, "Damn, that was *fine*."

Despite the insistence of the devout that Jesus is indeed a manifestation of the one, true God<fn>Setting aside Nicene confusions of a Trinity that is or is not in fact a single entity</fn>, the way we tell ourselves/each other stories all but guarantees that there is not a single iconic representation of Jesus that prevails universally, despite the best efforts of Renaissance artists and the various approved councils, papal conclaves, and authors like Dante and Milton.<fn>Always keep in mind that a great deal of myth that people assume is from the Bible is in fact addenda created centuries past the authoring of *Revelations.*</fn>

All of which means that when a major teevee network devotes millions of dollars to a star-studded presentation of the Christ myth – on Easter Sunday, no less – it is worth paying attention to how this story is being told. Which Jesus, or whose, is always a question worth asking. Is this the Jesus of Harriet Tubman or Robert E Lee? Is this blond and blue-eyed Jesus or Jesus with dark skin and napped hair? Is this Jesus divine or mortal?

JCS does unbelievers the service of offering a Jesus that can belong to anyone.<fn>This may in fact be the greatest objection conservative theologians have to the proceedings.</fn> Watching it, I am reminded that even the non-believing "I" can have a Jesus, just as I can have my Beowulf, my Hamlet, my Ulysses, my Jean Valjean. Interpret the myth as you will, in a way that enables and ennobles you.

> *If your slate is clean, then you can throw stones.*
> *If your slate is not, then leave her alone.*

These are stories we tell ourselves, in order to live. They

belong to everyone.