

Jack and Jesus: Kerouac and the Messy Gospel

by Brad Birt

The beat generation with their jazz-geek-cool had sidled slick and scruffy into my headspace. I would read Kerouac as fast as he wrote his books, drinking in his liquid prose. Simon and Garfunkel's *America* provided the soundtrack for the restless daydreaming inspired by On The Road. I could see myself on a tired Greyhound making some necessary sojourn – the journey that emerged was internal and Kerouac's Big Sur would be my guide.

Things came to a head pretty quickly. A broken engagement meant a titanic shift in how I had conceived the next sixty years to unfold. There were unsettled questions I had regarding a new ministry I was to begin, and ultimately the decision to forego; I also began counselling for sexual abuse I had received from a complete stranger as a missionary kid in the Philippines – it was a messy mish-mash of confusion, frustration, pain, doubt, fear and loneliness. There were some people who meant well, and on one occasion I mustered the nerve to attend a church service. Someone asked me how I was doing. I decided to take a chance and be honest (you know, that whole commitment to community no matter how things are going...)

“Actually, not so good lately...”

He just smiled and nodded, grinning obtusely to himself. He didn't hear a thing I was saying. Whilst that was an isolated incident, it seemed to sum up much of what faith was looking like to me at the time.

Discounting a miracle of biblical proportions, I hesitate to say no sermon would have reached me. It was all I could do to keep from running out of the (dis?)services I attended. No preacher, no friend, no McChurch – I'd seen it all before, heard all the lines from the well-worn and weathered book of clichés most Christians are issued with. *Here it is, go on and do your worst*; in fact, I'd preached much of the message myself!

So I read Kerouac – my familiar stranger friend who wasn't afraid of pain or uncertainty, who wrote with a kind of tragic restless arrogance, with a keen eye for humanity and the beautiful-ugly. Two lines from the whole book leapt from the page with ferocity. Big Sur is largely autobiographical. Kerouac sets himself less-than-covertly within the character of Jack Dulouz – a successful writer, bent on self-destruction.

Jack has an affair with Billie, and in a moment where his pervasive funk-mire internal rumblings rise to the surface, Billie has these words to say:

“Ahh, let me love you; just because you don't deserve it”

In a moment where I feel I am playing my last hand in a 21-year game of existential uno, I am ambushed with the scandalous love of an unfair God who refuses to give me what I deserve. God's abundance, even in the midst of a painful time of reflection and re-evaluation, confronts me again and it is the building block on which he continues to re-build and re-construct the illusion of a life I had.

At a time when I just wanted to be alone – even from God – I discovered that in my pushing people away and wanting to grieve and think and be alone, to wallow in my loneliness, the Ever-Present subtly coaxes me; an echo of a memory of God whispering in the black-print lines of an adulterous character who breathed reckless grace.

This reality of God's grace, of not having to please people or live out of some graven-image-idol, was a sweet confrontation. I identified with Jack, who whilst finding some time to himself on Big Sur, elucidates,

...an awful realisation that I have been fooling myself all my life thinking there was a next thing to do to keep the show going and actually I'm a sick clown and so is everybody else...

One can never underestimate the relief that comes with an honest confrontation of the reality of our human condition. The prose-flattened landscape of Australian Evangelicalism is, at times, a foreboding beast. It's not even so much the prose, as the quality of prose. A distilled gospel message of sin-management and four-step-guides-to-better-humanity is no place for the human soul to breathe deep the reality of pain and disappointment; to air honest doubts and struggle with the possibility of God; of trading existence in on life – not even a shiny, new life, but life with all it's real-ness.

It is as if the modern age has flicked the switch and unforgiving fluorescent lights bake the landscape. Static and heavy with cold-white-light, everything is laid bare to be dissected, formulated, arranged neatly, compiled, referenced, preached, conferenced, decided... The subtlety of metaphor and the gospel of the broken and lost has been replaced with an intellectual distillation, an invitation to buy a ticket for the salvation-train. Is it any wonder we propagate church services and bible studies, rather than apprentices of Jesus – while perhaps the greatest reason people attend any service at all is in desperation; an awareness of God's absence more so than his presence.

Any society which can turn a story of unplanned pregnancy, a tiresome journey to a chaotic town, for a birth in conditions most government Family and Children Services Departments would have you arrested for, and the threat of imminent death; into a rosy-cheeked affair complete with dreamy jazz renditions by impeccable sleepy-eyed voices; is a society that doesn't want to deal with the hardline realities, the edginess of life. The incarnation is the story of Mary and Joseph having the first face-to-face with Jesus amidst their uncertainty, doubt (the Holy Spirit did what?!) and fear—the very ingredients for an encounter with Jesus, the arrival of a new kingdom and the beginnings of a messy gospel.

Kerouac opened me up to the real gospel; with all it's poetic depth and coaxing rhythm, it's tears and unashamed laughter, and the hope of real life.

Brad Birt lives in Perth, Western Australia. He has around \$3 000 to go on a Bachelor of Theology and doesn't really know what the hey he'll do with his life. If you have any suggestions, please do not hesitate in contacting him at psouljourn@hotmail.com