

JESUS OF NAZARETH AND THE LIBERAL CHURCH

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JESUS OF NAZARETH AND THE LIBERAL CHURCH: No Other Name?

November 25, 2001

Text: John 14:1-7

Introductory Note:

Earlier in the Fall, I preached a sermon entitled “The Promise of the Liberal Church,” in which I suggested that through this year we’d come back to questions about the “Liberal Theology” that is central to Plymouth’s heritage. World events and a series of Sundays with special emphases in the life of the church have intervened, but today, and over the next three weeks, I want to return to that original concern. In particular, I want to invite you to think with me, during the first three weeks of Advent, about the role of Jesus in Liberal Christianity. To set a context for those discussions, I will speak today to the question of Christianity’s relationship to other great world faiths, asking with you what we must do with Christianity’s historic claim that it was pre-eminent among all the religions or that Jesus was the fullest, final, and definitive revelation of God to humankind. As always, I will welcome your comments as we go along.

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Here is a little historical fable:

I am imagining a time early in the human saga, a time so far back that the only record we have of it is the one written in rock – fossilized pieces of bone and fragments of primitive tools . . . so far back that there is no memory of it, save the shards and splinters of inchoate recollection that are embedded in our unconscious, filed in our DNA, and hidden in the shadowy recesses beneath our souls . . . so far back that there was no religion, only the inexpressible awe our ancestors felt when they confronted the sun and the stars, the mesmerizing power of fire, the creative blood of birth, the inky mystery of death.

Human settlements were scattered then, isolated from one another, a few disparate campfires in Africa, in Europe, in Asia, separated from one another by vast wilderness, each fire glowing in solitary splendor so that the light from one could never be seen by those gathered around another, each fire sending up a whispered hymn of smoke into the illimitable heavens. The people must have told stories around those fires – stories of how the moon came to be, and why the rains fell, and which spirits visited them in their dreams – and whole religious cultures, ways of understanding the world, accreted around those stories – the culture of each encampment quite different from the others.

Then one day, after eons, a member of one clan set out on a journey. He didn't know why he did it, really, but after weeks of walking through uninhabited territory, he came upon another settlement. The first gossamer strand had been drawn between the disparate peoples. And around the fire that night, he told his stories, and he heard the stories of this other clan. Well, how *did* the moon come to be . . . in this way or that way? What *are* the names of the spirits; are they the familiar ones he knew or the ones used by these strange people? And there was a seed in his heart, the tiniest seed, of discomfort about the difference of the stories.

He was not the last traveler, of course. Now there were hundreds, and then thousands, traders and immigrants and wanderers, the web of cultures growing ever more complex, their stories and religious ideas mixing and clashing and changing and growing. On through the generations the web grew until the whole earth literally pulsed with it, a world-wide-web so ubiquitous that there is barely a spot left where any campfire can burn in solitary splendor, barely a story left that hasn't bumped up against others and been irrevocably changed from that contact. Now the campfires around which we are settled – our cities, even our neighborhoods – are places where there is no unified story, nor even a unified language, but where all varieties are heard. Now, in many of our neighborhoods, certainly including the ones in which this church is rooted, you can easily expect to encounter, in one single day, a Hindu, a Buddhist, a Moslem, a Christian, a Jew, a humanist, a Native American and who knows how many others.

As I said, it's a fable. I'm not making any attempt here to give a scientific view of how the various religious traditions sprang up and grew and interacted, but the point is found in the end of the story and that part *is* factually true: no religion, even the most exclusive and separatist of them, can now live in complete isolation from other religions. The question is, what is the meaning of this multiplicity of faiths, this bewildering religious pluralism? Does the world face an ultimate struggle in which one religion must emerge triumphant? Or will history see a long and complete amalgamation of the great faiths, an inexorable blending which produces a religious stew in which the original ingredients are barely recognizable and in which the taste is always the same? Do you suppose that one day religions *per se* might be replaced by other structures of meaning? Or should we hope for a world in which the great faiths remain strong and distinct, but in which their engagement with each other takes on a greater depth, a new level of maturity, a new texture of dialogue? I'm sure it's fairly obvious: the last vision is the one that animates my heart. If one religion were to triumph over the others, the world, and the world's people, would be immeasurably poorer for it, as though all the notes of a harp were broken save one. If all of the distinctive faith languages amalgamate, the result will be as ugly as if one took a bouquet of mixed flowers and physically crushed them together in the misguided hope of creating something even more beautiful. To suggest that religions will simply fade away and be replaced by other systems of meaning is to fly in the face of the fact that the religious impulse appears to be universal, rising up in every single culture in every single epoch of history. No, but there is this other vision: a true world community of faiths, marked by more than mere tolerance of each other, more even than respectful and mutual admiration, but marked finally by a lively and thorough and intimate engagement in which distinct personalities remain distinct but in which all are enriched by the conversation, all are transformed by the interaction, and all are grounded in a pervasive and transcendent love. In this world, for instance, an intimate engagement of, say, Christianity and Hinduism, will render neither weaker but both stronger. Proselytism, attempted conversions, evangelical imperialisms all give way to a powerful mutual complementarily and dialogue that risks all in order to gain all.

To date, the general record of the religious communities is not all that good. No less a voice than former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, speaking at an Interreligious Peace Colloquium in 1975, expressed anger and dismay that “given the presumed strength of the religious community throughout the world, we should go from crisis to crisis, from conflagration to conflagration – that the religious community should have such apparently ineffective input into the management of our global village.”¹ We can use up our breath trying to shift the blame from religious institutions to governmental or some other ones, but we may as well accept the truth that while countless lives have been enriched and deepened by religion, even saved by it, religion, and interreligious conflict are also responsible for countless deaths and for laying waste whole cultures and nations. To begin with, religions have too willingly lent a cloak of legitimization, even supposed sanctity, to national or ethnic agendas that have little or nothing to do with the true demands of faith. Church complicity in the rise of Nazism (though, thank God, it wasn’t *all* the churches) is but one example; others, more recent and closer to home are worth discussion as well. More important, though, the desire for peace, and the commandment to live peaceably, both of which are found at the heart of all the great faiths, have again and again been too easily lost in a morass of xenophobic fear, orthodox rigidities, love of power, fundamentalisms, and unbridled spiritual arrogance.

In this regard, Christianity has some searching and challenging questions to ask itself. And mind you, by speaking today particularly about the difficulty Christianity has in coming to the conversation, I do not mean to suggest that the other faiths are exempt from an equal level of self-examination. Rather, I am listening seriously to Jesus’ own commandment that we take the log out of our own eye before trying to remove the speck from our neighbor’s eye. Logs, specks . . . never mind the relative size; what is most important is that we begin with ourselves.

For Christians, all of this has been manifest most clearly in a paradigm, present from very early in our story, that holds ours to be the one true faith. It is found reflected at several places in the New Testament, but nowhere so clearly as in the oft-quoted text where Jesus is quoted as saying:

“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father, but by me . . .” (John 14:6)

And as early as the third century, in the writings of Cyprian we find the classic formulation: “*Extra ecclesium nulla salus*,” which means “outside the church there is no salvation.” For too much of history, Christianity held Truth (in the words of one writer) “. . . tight-fistedly, as if it were an exclusive possession, and a club at that.”² Is Christianity the only true religion? Is there no other name under which one might find the riches of God: inner peace, a vision for justice, a way of being in community, and the elusive state we call salvation, which must surely be more than a free pass into a romanticized and humanly concocted heaven? At Plymouth, there are always differences of opinion on everything, but my guess is that most of us here today do not claim a Christian preeminence over other religions, nor do we hold a triumphal view of our faith that would not let us rest until all the world called itself by that one name. At the same time I hardly need to guess, but rather I am certain, that in the larger Christian family, we are in a distinct minority. “No one comes to the Father except by me” is widely accepted on face value among Christians. Nor should we make the arrogant mistake of supposing that those who see Christianity as being preeminent are anti-intellectual, recalcitrant, or naïve in their views. Karl Barth, arguably the most brilliant Western theologian of the twentieth century, never wavered in his belief that Jesus was the one true revelation of God. His neo-orthodoxy, which swept

Europe and America in the forties and fifties, and the more recent so-called “post-liberalism” which has resurrected Barth in the last few years are powerful and compelling theological movements, and while many of us do not find them ultimately persuasive, we ignore them at our peril, for they do represent a proper and needed corrective to some of liberalism’s weaknesses. Among these is liberalism’s tendency to lose sight of Christianity’s distinctiveness, something we have often done in our overcompensating rush to take account of the real gifts of the other faiths.

But on this question of other religions, the liberal view at its best, traced back a century to Ernst Troeltsch and Adolf Harnack and embodied more recently by people like Raimundo Pannikar from India and Diana Eck at Harvard, becomes a courageous and visionary attempt to retain a full, unambiguous commitment to Christianity even while engaging the other great faiths in dialogue that is marked by mutual vulnerability, radical openness, and a fearless willingness to be transformed. Not *converted*; we are not called in this dialogue to give up who we are. But, rather, *transformed*, deepened in our own faith because of our contact with another way of understanding the mysteries of God.

Barth’s argument was that God is like the sun, which can only shine on one part of the earth at a time. Not all religions, therefore, can be revelatory of God, but only the one on which God’s light shines. To his credit, Barth made no claims that Christianity was *better* than the other religions, only that God in God’s grace had *chosen* Christianity as the faith on which to shine. But is not God illimitable light, light that fills the universe, not from some particular center but by being present everywhere? Can it be in any way meaningful to speak of a God who is confined by one language, one story, one metaphor, one faith?

Over the next three weeks, I do want to speak about the particularity of Christianity, to look more closely at Jesus of Nazareth, whom we have called the Christ, and to make a case for the importance of our being grounded in this story, this truth that we have inherited. I want to explore how it is intellectually respectable and spiritually healthy to embrace that particularity, to claim the name “Christian,” and to live into its demands.

But I do so in this context: a conviction that when one faith is weakened, all are weakened, that if one of the great religions were to be lost, the rest would die a little, that by the fire of each, the others understand themselves better. Conversions from one faith to another are sometimes necessary for an individual’s spiritual development, or for some other, more pragmatic reasons. But far more important than any conversion is that transformation of which I spoke, a transformation in which the dance of the great religions with one another makes all of them more graceful, more full of joy, and more true.

I am not one who frequently quotes from Kahlil Gibran; he is heard so often, and probably no passage more often than his words on marriage. But those words came to me in a new way when I applied them not to two individuals about to be married, but to the relationship of religions to one another. Hear these words, and think about Christianity and Hinduism, or Judaism and Buddhism, or Islam and Christianity, or Hinduism and Buddhism – any of the possible pairings of our world faiths. Listen:

You were born together, and together you shall be forevermore.
You shall be together when the white wings of death scatter
your days
Aye, you shall be together even in the silent memory of God.
But let there be spaces in your togetherness,
And let the winds of the heavens dance between you.

Love one another but make not a bond of love:
Let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls.
Fill each other's cup but drink not from one cup.
Give one another of your bread but eat not from the same loaf.
Sing and dance together and be joyous, but let each one of you
be alone,
Even as the strings of a lute are alone though they quiver with
the same music.
Give your hearts, but not into each other's keeping.
For only the hand of Life can contain your hearts.
And stand together, yet not too near together:
For the pillars of the temple stand apart,
And the oak tree and the cypress grow not in each other's shadow.³

Can you envision a world in which the earth's many faiths are like lovers who find in sweet intercourse their own true selves, their own true meaning, their own true joy? May God guide us in that way.
Amen.

¹Knitter, Paul, No Other Name, New York, Orbis Books, pg. 15.

²Eck, Diana, Encountering God, Boston, Beacon Press, pg. 206

³Gibran, Kahlil, The Prophet, New York: Knopf, 1923, pg. 16.

**JESUS OF NAZARETH AND THE LIBERAL CHURCH:
*ECCE HOMO: Behold the Man***

December 2, 2001

Text: Matthew 26:36-46

In last week's sermon I invited you to imagine a world in which all of the great historic faiths, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and a host of others would flourish together retaining their distinctiveness and their uniqueness without any one of them needing to claim preeminence over the others. A time of peaceful religious pluralism, where each faith brings its particular gift to the world's table: not a table of negotiation and enmity, but a table of banqueting and love at which all of the various tastes and textures of God are shared. I was not endorsing the idea of an amalgamated religion, one bland and coalesced faith, but an atmosphere in which each faith, rooted in its own history and retaining its particular identity, is strengthened by the presence of the others around it – strengthened through dialogue, through mutual care, and through joining together to under gird the values common to all: peace, justice, selflessness, enlightenment, generosity, joy.

Most liberal Christians have become fairly comfortable with the idea that Christianity need not triumph over other faiths, need not be pre-eminent, need not even claim a higher truth than the truth embodied in other religions.

The liberal attitude, however, has often taken the form of a broad tolerance for the differences of others – *tolerance*, but without real engagement, connection, dialogue, openness. The reason for this is that to be truly engaged, to really be in dialogue, you need to come from *somewhere*, and here, among friends, lets be candid about ourselves: we who espouse Liberal Theology are sometimes a little less than clear about where we stand. It is in our nature to come at questions with an “on-the-one-hand-this, and-on-the-other-hand-that” kind of approach. Sometimes that’s a strength. Sometimes it’s a weakness. Even with some of their rigidities, the more conservative Christians may be better suited for inter-faith dialogue because they have a much clearer sense of who they are. Dialogue requires a delicate balance between flexibility and a strong sense of one’s own identity. Too much strength and views become entrenched, intractable, unmoving. Too much flexibility and dialogue devolves into a mushy bowl of platitudes and generalities. The clay on a potter’s wheel must be firm enough to hold its shape and pliable enough to let the potter’s hand make it sing. The balance is everything.

So, who are we? Plymouth is a Christian Church with a strong Universalist bent. The Universalism is our pliability, our open acknowledgment that God is bigger than any one religion and that revelation comes in a thousand languages, in a million faces, and, importantly, that revelation isn’t completed yet, that “God has yet more light and truth to break forth from the Word.” We don’t slam the book shut and say, “That’s it. That’s the truth.” We see each day of our lives as another leaf in that volume of holy writ, another chance for the story to grow, another way for light to be shared. We think that God expresses Godself in many stories and through many traditions. Therefore, we are able to approach a Buddhist and say, “Help us learn to meditate.” Or to go to a Jew and ask “What is the meaning of God’s commandments in our lives?” Or to go to a Moslem and confess, “We can learn something from your self-discipline and your daily practice of prayer.” Or to go to a Native American and plead, “Teach us how to be reconnected with Mother Earth and to see the holiness of nature.” Or to go to a Hindu and say, “Show us how many faces God has.”

And when people from all of those faiths come to us, what may they ask of us? Who are we? What do we know? What have we to teach? What have we to offer?

As I said, Plymouth is a Christian Church. As we affirm whenever we share communion, one needn’t be a self-proclaimed Christian to come to the table here. All belong. All are welcome. But our primary story is the Christian story. The images in our sanctuary are Christian images. The major festivals that we celebrate are Christian festivals. The primary language that we use is Christian language. The hymns we sing are Christian hymns. Everyone needs roots somewhere, and our roots are in the soil of the Christian tradition. So, what is it that we have to offer to that magnificent conversation among the religions? We have Jesus of Nazareth: prophet, healer, teacher, reformer, shepherd, friend. In subsequent sermons we’ll think about what it means to call Jesus the Christ, but we begin today with Jesus the man.

For over a century, scholars have been doggedly trying to find ways to get behind what the early church said about Jesus and then to discover the man himself. The New Testament is a complex collection of writings, all from the Christians of the first century, and it takes a fine eye and long training to be able to discern hints within the New Testament corpus about what Jesus was really like, what he really said, who he really was. For instance, did Jesus actually say “No one comes to the Father but by me?” Or was it the early Christians, in their passionate belief and love for Jesus, who put those words in his mouth when they wrote the gospels? Anyone who would know the historical Jesus must face a thousand questions like that. And throughout

history there has been the additional fact that when people try to portray Jesus, their own culture and assumptions shine through.

Look, for example, at the wood carving of Christ, done by a Swede, on the cover of today's bulletin. Looks pretty Swedish, doesn't he!

At any rate, in the few minutes left before we come to the Communion table, I simply want to glean from what we think we know about the man, Jesus, three attributes that have meant the most to me in my own life and in my own struggle with faith. This is no exhaustive list, no complete description of what we know. It's more of a personal statement. This is what is important for me about Jesus of Nazareth.

First, he suffered. The passage we read earlier from Matthew is a window on that suffering, a picture of a man struggling mightily with fear, temptation, and loneliness. It was one of the things that struck me when, as a college Freshman, I read Kazantzakis' *The Last Temptation of Christ*: this is a man who knows my experience. To this day, when those same demons – fear, temptation, and loneliness – when they visit, if I am able, I remember Jesus and strength comes back to me. Sometimes, of course, we are just not able to remember, and that's when the presence of others who know about Jesus is important, for they remind us. If I imagine that Jesus had some heightened awareness of and connection to God, or if he was somehow a manifestation of God, then his suffering is all the more remarkable, and all the more meaningful. Here followers of Buddha, who pointed the way out of suffering, will find a helpful counterpart in a divine figure who *took on* suffering. And as Harvard scholar Diana Eck reports:

Not only Hindus, but Muslims as well find this humbling humanity of Jesus disturbing. As my Muslim friend from Nigeria, Is-Haq Oloyede, a law professor, once put it in conversation, "God cannot be helpless! It is not befitting of God." Indeed, in the Muslim tradition, which very much reveres Jesus as a prophet, there are those who insist that he did not die on the cross, but came down from the cross and lived to old age.¹

Jesus' suffering not only offers me personal solace and strength; it is also an aspect of truth that Christians can offer in the conversation among the historic faiths.

Second, he was, as Marcus Borg reminds us, a compassionate social prophet. This connects with his own suffering, and the Latin root of the word compassionate means, of course, to suffer with. Jesus' heart was apparently open – wide open – to those who suffered. His caring was universal; he loved the rich as well as the poor, but his first impulse was to care for the poor. And his compassionate love for all led him to critique the economic, social, and religious status quo of his time. As Borg puts it,

. . . he directly and repeatedly challenged the dominant sociopolitical paradigm of his social world and advocated instead what might be called a *politics of compassion*.²

For me, Jesus has been a constant and necessary prod to my own social complacency, to my attachment to my own wealth, and to my reluctance to challenge the powers that be. In so doing, he gives me a texture of life and a vision of God that I would not have otherwise. These gifts are, I believe, salvific for me, that is, they are saving me from a somnolent comfort in which I would miss much of life's depth . . . and they are saving me to an engagement with the world which, while sometimes difficult, is life-giving.

I remember how Jesus spoke to the rich young ruler. The scripture says that Jesus loved him, and that's why he challenged him to let go of his goods and follow a different path. Not a day goes by but that I need that love, that prod, that reminder, that help – and even still, I have a lifetime of work ahead of me to respond fully.

Third, I am drawn to Jesus because his message pointed to God and not to himself. Self-proclaimed saviors are a dangerous lot, and sadly, Jesus has been painted – in scripture and elsewhere – as just such. But from what we know about the man, there is good reason to believe that he made no personal claims for himself but spent his life extolling God, teaching about God, pointing to God . . . and to God's coming realm. Any church that Jesus would be a part of is a church that would worship God, not God's messenger. Jesus, the man, might have wanted to be followed, but not to be venerated or worshipped. "Why do you call me good?" he said. "No one is good but God alone."

Next week, we'll think more about the Christ, the Messiah, and the ways in which the man, Jesus, may be identified as such . . . and the ways in which it is inappropriate to over-play that equation. For now, though, it is this suffering, prophetic, God-centered one who invites us to the table. Come, for all is ready.

¹Eck, Diana, *Encountering God*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1993, pg. 90-91.

²Borg, Marcus, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, San Francisco: HarperCollins, pg. 49.



JESUS OF NAZARETH AND THE LIBERAL CHURCH: By Whose Authority?

December 9, 2001

Text: Luke 4:16-32

He sits uneasily near his father's hospital bed, counting the breaths and wondering about what will happen when they end – what will happen to him, and what will happen to his father.

She nurses her coffee, hears the tidings of the war on the morning news, and she takes an inner inventory. Can she support what her country is doing? Can she *not* support it? How is she to account for all the death, in New York, in Washington, in Pennsylvania . . . in Afghanistan? What is at the root of the conflict?

A church finds itself in a precarious neighborhood, where disabled people are being turned away from shelters and are living under bridges. How to respond? How much risk to take with the church's resources, its good name, its credibility? To whom is the church

responsible? And how to interact with the group of neighbors who are disaffected, even if they are hurling insults, even if they hate what the church is doing?

These are situations close to our own experience and questions that most of us are bound to ask. Ethical questions. Practical questions. Questions of meaning. Questions of ultimate truth. When we are deciding – deciding what to think and how to act – is there some authority beyond the workings of our own conscience, some light beyond our own intelligence? Where does it come from? More specifically, is there a meaningful way in which one might today still look to Jesus of Nazareth as a North Star, a center of gravity, a guiding hand? People did once. The New Testament records that even as a young man in his own home town, where folk remembered him as a child, when he spoke, all were amazed at him, “for he spoke as one with authority.”

It’s true. I said last week that today we would be looking at the term Christ as applied to Jesus and ask the age-old “divinity” question, but that will have to wait for one more Sunday. Today, though, we look at the *authority* of Jesus. What authority, if any, do you understand Jesus to have for your own life today? For our church’s life?

A few words of background. In these sermons on the first three Sundays of Advent, we’re considering the role of Jesus in Liberal Theology, that school of thought that has shaped this church so profoundly and which our Strategic Plan identifies as one of our core values. Actually, we began the series on the Sunday *before* Advent with a preface that placed Christianity in the context of other world religions, claiming no pre-eminence for our own tradition and letting go of any notion that God’s will is for the entire world to become Christian . . . or Islamic, or Jewish, or how to any other single faith, for that matter. The Christian sitting by a parent’s deathbed may approach the moment entirely differently from a Hindu whose view of life beyond life is materially different, not least because of the idea of reincarnation. Nor is there any good reason why one should change and think like the other. Are we so sure that truth is monolithic? The diversity of the faiths in the world should remind us in a wondrous way that God is so dynamic, so multi-dimensional, so beautiful beyond our imagining that no single language, no single story, no single tradition can contain the Divine. But there is a *caveat*. While all of the great traditions can be enriched by interchange, conversation, dialogue with the others, they cannot be fused together, amalgamated, or tossed into some great melting pot without diminishing the glory that they embody by their separateness. We might imagine that by taking some Christian bricks and some Jewish bricks and some Hindu bricks and all the others – and combining them, joining the religions together – we could build a Babel-like tower that would reach heaven and enable us to see the totality of God, but no. It doesn’t work that way. The creative power at the heart of the universe is no fortress to be stormed, but a mystery to be wondered at . . . not a riddle to be solved, but an endless story to be told . . . not a power to be grasped, but a luminosity in which we are meant to be bathed.

Here is an image which I have offered before but which may be helpful again. Consider that that luminosity of God of which I spoke, the wisdom of God, the beauty of God, the glory of God is residing on one side of an opaque screen through which a number of tiny openings have been pricked. Human beings are on the other side. Call one opening in the screen Islam, another Judaism, another Buddhism, another Christianity. Or, if you will, you can call them Mohammed, Moses, Gautama, and Jesus. Stand back from the screen, and you see all the various points of light, a constellation of truth, an array of wisdoms. This perspective is instructive and, in its own way illuminating. But if you want to see more of the light, perhaps even see it in its fullness, you have to get close to the screen and choose an opening and look

through that *one*. Ironically, in choosing one opening, you get a wider perspective on what lies beyond. The ability of the other openings to reveal truth is in no way diminished, but the more we want to see, the more particular must be our choice. True, some people choose to move from opening to opening – Jews become Buddhists and Christians convert to Islam – but most of us find that it takes fully a lifetime to even begin to take in what we can see through the faith into which we are born.

What's more, in order to act truly effectively in the world, one needs to make up one's mind on certain important questions, including questions about the nature of God and of humanity. True, you may change your mind sometime hence, but in the moment you have to take a stand *somewhere*. As the rather homely adage has it, "you can't fire a canon from a canoe." You have to be firmly placed in one spot to do that. Or as Paul aptly put it: "If the trumpet makes an indistinct sound, who will prepare for the battle?" True, the world needs less artillery and less militaristic language, not more, but the sayings carry some wisdom: powerful action in the world comes out of conviction, not out of confusion, nor out of a perpetual state of being "undecided." Each of us needs to find some personally acceptable source of authority and a body of truth to which we are committed.

All of this is to reiterate what I said last week, namely that the gift Plymouth's liberalism and universalism should in no way obscure the importance of Plymouth's particularity as a Christian Church. In the sacred grove of the various faith traditions, that is where we are planted. However high in the tree we might climb, and no matter how far we may see, we are rooted in a particular story, the one whose animating elements are the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. As no less a liberal than my predecessor, Howard Conn, wrote:

The impact which [Jesus] made outlived him and inspired his followers to feel that his spirit was still with them as a living presence. . . . Two thousand years later we too feel that impact and regard Jesus as the supreme revealer of things spiritual. Our universalism is a Christian one . . . ¹

Howard, the quintessential devotee of Hindu mysticism and Greek philosophy, and an irresistible puncturer of orthodox balloons, still unambiguously claimed the name Christian for the church he loved and served. I wonder if, given the religious pluralism that is so much a reality in the world today, Howard might now have used other words about Jesus than "*the* supreme revealer" but in any case, he found real authority in the Galilean, and he (Howard) significantly called himself not just a Universalist, but a *Christian* Universalist.

To name oneself a Christian, though, does not require that one accept without question the beliefs that have accreted around Jesus over the years, including those early years in which the church, in their passionate desire to describe what they had experienced in the rabbi from Nazareth, in their need to forge an identity, and in the cultural context of the time, spoke with images that may not serve us today. The term "son of God," for instance, was routinely applied to many powerful individuals, including Caesar. In the day's parlance, that was what you called someone who was important. Is it any wonder that the early church gave the same name to Jesus? Now that honorific title, that same poetic image, may or may not have meaning for us today. But titles aside – at least until next week – what about Jesus' authority?

The great, central, liberal idea that goes back centuries before Christ, at least as far back as Socrates, and which came into full bloom after the Enlightenment, is that there is value in the individual and that individuals hold some degree of authority over their own lives. Put it together with the notion of free will, and the argument is that no one has ultimate authority over

me unless I give it to them. Even my government may not compel me to do something, though I may have to pay a high price for disobeying. There is, of course, the sovereignty of God, but at least in the realm of belief and human action even God does not coerce; God invites. “Today I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse,” God says. “Therefore, choose life.” But it is a choice.

Authority, though, can be granted by us to some person or entity. At various times, Christians have given authority to the Church and then, in the Protestant Reformation, to the Bible. We acted in certain ways because the Bishop commanded it, or because the Bible prescribed it. But by the fifteenth century we had learned that Bishops could be corrupt, and by the nineteenth we knew that the Bible, though certainly inspired, was more of a human document than we had supposed. So where, out of our individual conscience, do we grant authority today?

Here, as last week, I must end by speaking personally. There is really no other way in such matters, and you must and will come to your own conclusions in them. My own decision is to give authority in my life to the person, Jesus, as best I am able to know him through the scriptures, through others who have followed him, and through my own inner experience with that Spirit which is his. My success at living obediently under that authority is spotty at best, but my hope is clear. I can only make passing reference to some of the reasons why I give authority where I do.

First, I am impressed by the fact that from what we best know about Jesus, he claimed no authority for himself. He was charismatic, yes, but so were David Koresh and Jim Jones and Adolph Hitler. The difference is that Jesus used his charisma as a tool for serving and teaching, not for controlling and manipulating. Paradoxically, Jesus ascribed ultimate authority to God alone, and he also prodded people to bear their own authority for their lives. In so doing, in my belief – and it is a paradox – he earns an authority for himself that no one else can claim.

Second, Jesus himself was radically obedient. Where I fail, he succeeded, so that, in Gethsemane, for instance, he was able subsume his own will under God’s, though this came only after great struggle and with near-paralyzing fear. His example of obedience makes him an authority for me.

Third, I can read, with every historian, the effect that he had on the people around him and the people who came after them. Men and women who had experienced him became ten times the people they were before. They became inspired, selfless, creative, joyful, courageous, and they knew peace. I desire to grant authority in my life to one who has that kind of effect.

And fourth, by every account, Jesus was more intimately connected to God, more fully attuned to the Holy, than any other person of whom I know. If, indeed, there are “thin places” where the eternal can be seen through the wall of the temporal, where infinity can be viewed from finitude, where the sacred can be known to indwell the mundane, then surely, for me, Jesus is the “thinnest” of these places . . . one in whom there is no division between eternal and temporal, infinity and finitude, sacred and mundane. Because I seek that same unity in my own soul, I find my authority in the man who exemplified it.

This authority, I believe, is not as a soldier gives to a general, nor as a citizen gives to a King or President, but (to use Jesus’ own image) as a friend gives to a friend. It is not the authority of coercive power, but of persuasive connection. It is the authority of love. It is meant to affect us as leaven affects a loaf of bread, or the way a drop of potent dye can indelibly color a vast amount of water. So he gestates in us at Advent, his effect on us only to be guessed at. So, if we grant him the authority of even a small place in our souls where he might be planted, he

will flourish in us. So, if we take the first tiny step of obedience in his Way, we may be led to a realm whose astonishments rival those of the heavens themselves.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹Conn, Howard, A Faith to Match the Universe, Edina, MN: Aberfoyle Press, pg. 21.



JESUS OF NAZARETH AND THE LIBERAL CHURCH: Who Do You Say That I Am?

December 16, 2001

Text: Mark 8:27-38

To speak of Jesus, known as the Christ, and to ask who he really was, is to take the first step down a well-trod and very long path, knowing fully that those who have gone before have included many of towering intellect, breathtaking spiritual depth, and even nerve-numbing courage. To speak thus *publicly*, then, demands a heaping dose of humility and a sure trust in the grace of one's audience. I have never lacked the latter so long as I have been at Plymouth, and the former has been pressed on me more and more over these past weeks as I have studied, prayed, and struggled to say what I think and what I have experienced in the one who has been called Messiah, Lord, Son of Man, and Son of God, to name but a few of the thousands of images used through Christian history to describe Jesus.

Today, in the fourth and last sermon in this present series, I want to ask about the notion of Jesus' "divinity," which asking leads, I think, to a larger, more personal question that I'll speak of later. In the meantime, though, let me say that I have no need or desire to be iconoclastic here. Theological liberals such as I – and such as many of you – have no right to dismiss tradition with a condescending nod or to answer those of more orthodox bent with glib rejoinders. To do so is the height of arrogance. If there have been mean rigidities and evangelizing excesses, may God forgive those. But, even if the ancients and others of our forbears held to doctrines which seem less meaningful to us today, we are still bound to bow before those ardent believers as our elders in the faith and to approach with awe and respect the ones who gave the world the strength of their convictions and the witness of their lives. Yet it is also true that we do them – and God – no honor by receiving what they taught and, mistaking timidity for respect, fail to do our own work of re-forging and recasting the language and reality of faith. As I have said, though, our re-working must be done with respect for what has gone before. I may not be able to accept the Nicene Creed, for instance, as my own statement of faith, but I can say it as an *homage* to those who, encountering Jesus, did their best to put their experience into words. I may not need, in my own belief system, to hold to the virginity of Mary, but I should not cast the idea off as though it were some useless relic, but rather I must lay it down gently, reverently, in a place made honorable by the devotion of so many. And, of course, it's important to remember that if yesterday's language of faith gives way to today's, surely today's will, in some time not so distant, need to be laid aside as well. Will you pray with me?

Gracious God, love us as with stumbling steps and inadequate words we dare to approach your glorious presence and tell of your shining face. Amen.

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In the earliest years of the last millennium, a man whose name was Jesus (or Joshua) lived in Palestine, a territory under the rule of the Roman Emperor. Jesus grew up in Nazareth, a small town in Galilee, though the popular image of him as a country peasant may be vastly overdrawn. Recent excavations have revealed that the city of Sepphoris, a short walk from Nazareth, was a significant, cosmopolitan center, and we have every reason to believe that Jesus fed on the intellectual and economic and religious ferment of that place as much as he did on the simpler fare in his native town. He was a devout Jew. Sometime in his late twenties or early thirties, after a ritual baptism, he became a teacher of wisdom, a prophet calling for radical justice, and an urgent proclaimer of God's coming realm. By many accounts he was able to heal people of their infirmities, both spiritual and physical. He gathered about him a group of devoted followers, some of whom traveled with him from place to place. After three years, when he became troublesome to the ruling religious and civil authorities, they tried him and executed him on a hill outside of Jerusalem.

Days later, Jesus' tomb was discovered empty, and in the ensuing weeks, many of his followers experienced his presence in a way that broke through their old ideas about the divisions between life and death, body and spirit. By their accounts, he spoke with them, ate with them, even touched them and allowed them to touch him. During this period, he gave them a mission, charging them individually and as a group to continue his proclamation of God's realm and to call other men and women to follow in the way of justice, love, and spirit.

During Jesus' lifetime it only began to dawn on his followers that there was something unique about him, but in the time after his death, this dawning thundered over them like a new sun, and they realized that in some way, Jesus had broken history open; that is, he had lived in a way that was so radically new that everything that came after him was colored by his life. His had been no common charisma, no traditional teaching, no ordinary presence.

They found the evidence for this in their own lives. Emboldened by his unaccountable presence to them and later by the indwelling of his spirit in them, they found themselves infused with power, re-born with new purpose, and imbued with a joy that surpassed anything they had known before. The evidence of that seismic event – his life – and its effects on the first followers surround us still today. These very walls are nothing less than an indelible jagged line on the instrument of history, a line that says to anyone who looks here: once, in Jesus of Nazareth, the earth moved, and since that time, people's lives have never been the same.

In those early years after Jesus' death, his followers, transformed by their experience with him, cast about for ways to describe what had happened to them, for ways to talk about Jesus that would convey the impact he had. They borrowed images and words from their own Jewish tradition as well as from Greco-Roman thought. They called him Son of Man, an ambiguous term which at various times had connoted anything from an ordinary human being to an apocalyptic figure who ushers in a new age. They called him Son of God, a term which, as I said last week, was also commonly applied to Caesar among others. They called him Christ, which is the same as Messiah, which translates "anointed one," another phrase which described all of the Kings of Israel as well as other figures of power and authority. They called him Lord (the Greek is *kyrios*) which at times simply meant "sir," and at other times meant "rabbi," "teacher," or "master." Later on they called him "The Word" (in Greek, *logos*) which referred to the divine reason that existed before creation. In none of these instances did the believers

mean exactly what the words had meant before, and they were well aware that they were speaking in metaphor in any case, but just as a small child lacks vocabulary and must depend on a few general words to describe the whole world, so even the most eloquent, the most learned among Jesus' followers lacked vocabulary, except in the grossest sense to say what had happened to them in Jesus, or to describe who he really was.

Over the next three centuries, the early church tried to build and hone its vocabulary so as to speak more accurately about the person of Jesus and the experience of the first followers. From the first and simplest declaration, "Jesus is Lord," they built and argued and thought and experimented and voted and prayed and edited so that they might say it just right. At one point, everything hung on the difference between the word *homoousious* and the word *homoiousious* in trying to describe whether Jesus was of the *same substance* as God or of *similar substance* as God. True, even at the time, there were those who thought the arguments meaningless, and one such who attended the Council of Nicaea in 325 said to the debaters that Christ did not "teach us dialectics, art, or vain subtleties, but simple-mindedness which is preserved by faith and good works."¹ Yes, but articulation of our faith is a noble task and one which, even in simple-mindedness, demands our time and our effort. I spoke of the Nicene Creed earlier – the one that came out of the Council in 325 – and I wonder if, as an act of respect if not also of assent, you would read it with me. You will find it on page 512 of your hymnal, selection number 52.

I believe in one God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible:

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father by whom all things were made, who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man, and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried, and the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father; and he shall come again, with glory, to judge both the quick and the dead, whose kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord, and giver of life, who proceedeth from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and Son together is worshipped and glorified, who spake by the prophets. And I believe one holy Catholic and Apostolic Church; I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins, and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

It is, to my mind, a magnificently beautiful statement intended to convey the power and meaning of Jesus' life. It does so by claiming divinity for him – "God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God." It describes him as coming "down from Heaven" and asserts that he has now gone back there. *Now, I do not doubt for one minute the reality that stands behind those declarations* – that something unique happened in Jesus, that his love and wisdom transcended anything anyone had known before, that he represents not only the best in us but also a revelation of that which we cannot see otherwise – but the declarations themselves, the word and the concept of divinity, to say nothing of the images of a spatial heaven, for me at least – for many of

us, I imagine – can no longer bear the weight that they are being asked to bear. They don't tell the truth that they were meant to tell but, rather, have become a buffer between us and the original and profound experience that the early followers had of Jesus – namely, that he opened God to them in a way that was, ultimately, inexpressible. To call Jesus “divine” no longer connotes power, nor does it encourage us to follow him. In fact, it does the opposite; it marginalizes him and puts him at such a remove that it becomes impossible even to see him, let alone follow him. When Jesus is called divine, the God that he pointed to gets lost rather than revealed in Jesus' shadow; the proclaimer becomes the proclaimed, the worshipper becomes the worshipped one, results which he surely did not intend.

But what is left then? Is Jesus relegated to being one in a list of good teachers, one in a long line of social reformers, one in a large company of spiritual seers? Thus are we let off the hook, put back in control of the world, no longer encumbered by a sense that the universe is charged with uncontrollable mystery. Thus Jesus is no longer a threat to our complacencies, theological or otherwise, for then we can pick him up and lay him down as easily as we can a volume by any guru. The church becomes just another meeting place, no different from a board room, or a union hall, or a football stadium where the latest purveyor of wisdom holds forth. The ground drops out from under any consistently ethical behavior, leaving behind only well-intentioned acts of enlightened self-interest or of sentimentalized love. This is not what I intend when I suggest that we lay aside ideas of Jesus' divinity.

I mean, instead, that when we lay down some of the old language, the old ideas, we are standing where Peter stood, and where the disciples stood, when Jesus put to them the question, “Who do you say that I am?” The earlier question, “Who do *others* say that I am?” is the easy part. “Others have said that you are divine, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God. Others have said that you are ‘The Anointed One,’ the ‘Son of God,’ the ‘Logos.’” That's not hard at all. But who do *you* say that I am? The question will simply not let us look left or right, neither up nor down, but only straight into the face of it. “Who do you say that I am?” And now he stands among us, no longer disguised by the language of another time, no longer hidden behind titles that we accepted without question until they became meaningless. Now the demand for relationship with Jesus is on us, the need for articulation of our faith our own. Now Christmas is no longer an act of sentimental repetition, but something altogether new in which he comes among us, his deeds fresh, his teachings new, with the life in him undeniable. The crowning words at the end of Albert Schweitzer's historic book, The Quest of the Historical Jesus, say it best:

The names in which men expressed their recognition of Him as such, Messiah, Son of Man, Son of God, have become for us historical parables. We can find no designation which expresses what He is for us.

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: “Follow thou me!” and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His Fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.²

So, finally, the truth about Jesus is not to be found in sermons, or treatises, or creeds, but in the act of following him. Having questioned all of what we thought we knew, and having gently put aside the titles and notions with which the church has described and contained him, we are meant to see him face to face, and to go with him where he bids us go. There, in the daily struggle for justice, in ordinary works of love, in acts of healing and in moments of God-centered quiet, He reveals Himself. He tells us who He is. A new name shimmers on our tongue, a name the world has never before heard. For now the earth has shaken again. Now we are the ones who are changed. Now, standing on tradition we may yet reach beyond it and so testify to the world the living power of God's unending love.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹Latourette, Kenneth Scott, A History of Christianity, New York: Harper & Row, 1953, pg. 154.

²Schweitzer, Albert, The Quest Of the Historical Jesus, New York, The MacMillan Company, 1964, pg. 403. (Original publication date: 1906)