

What's the Big Deal About Jesus?

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Text: John 1:29-42; Isa. 49:1-7

Prayer

**O God, whom no image can encompass,
No definition encircle
And yet who meets us in the gentle touch of love,
Help us to move beyond our attempts to limit you,
To intellectualize you,
Or to restrain your power in our midst.
Keep our minds open, Lord
To possibilities
Not yet considered
And, when acceptance is difficult,
Keep us loving each other
Beyond our reason.
May the meditation of our hearts,
And the words of my mouth,
Be acceptable to you,
O God, our Redeemer and our Salvation.
Amen!**

In the summer of the year 2000, during the Presbyterian Peacemaking conference in California, the Presbyterian minister, Dirk Ficca, one of the keynote speakers at the conference, made a comment that ignited a controversy of tsunamic proportions in the whole Church. The intent of the conference was to explore ways in which Presbyterians might act as peacemakers in a world community of great religious diversity. The Rev. Ficca, who is the executive director of the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago, works with leaders from many different faith traditions and has developed a deep appreciation for their teachings and heritage. So in his address at the

conference, Ficca raised the controversial question, “**Well, if God is at work in our lives whether we’re Christian or not, what’s the big deal about Jesus?**”¹

I do not think Ficca’s question was intended to create such a huge controversy in the church. It was merely a rhetorical question meant to challenge Christians, like you and I, to consider how we can live as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ without imposing our beliefs and theological views on others. Some of Ficca’s listeners, however, interpreted his question as a direct attack on the efficacy of Christ’s redeeming power calling for an energetic defense of Christian orthodoxy. And they failed to understand what Henry Nouwen concluded so wisely [that] “**essential for mature religion is the constant willingness to shift gears, to integrate new insights and to revise our positions.**”² Sadly, Many Christians today still believe that Christianity, and in special the Protestant version of the Christian faith, is the only way that humanity can experience God’s grace and transforming love.

Last week, for instance, I received an e-mail from an unknown sender that used what the sender called “**rock-solid biblical proof**” to show that Christianity is the only true religion and faith in Jesus Christ the only way to escape eternal condemnation in hell. Here is an excerpt from that message:

¹ Ficca, Dirk. “Uncommon Ground: Living Faithfully in a World of Diversity.” Speech delivered at the 2000 Presbyterian Peacemaking Conference, July 26-29, 2000 at Chapman University, Orange, CA.

² Nouwen, Henry. Quote from Nouwen’s book “Intimacy” p. 13.

“There have been and there still are various religions. How can a person know what religion he should follow? Christianity certainly has amazing promises for true believers. Christ came in a sinless human body to perfectly fulfill all of the Law in the Old Testament. [...] Christianity is the one and only true religion that will save believers.”

Unfortunately, I am not surprised that messages claiming Christian superiority over other religions might be circulating on the Internet. Since its very inception, the Church has been grappling with the difficult question of how to speak about God’s revelation in Jesus in a world of many religions. At times, Christians have used the Good News of Jesus Christ unapologetically to promote this sentiment of Christian superiority and to exclude people of other faith traditions. At other times, some of us have chosen to ask the important question about how we can live in a global community with people who do not believe the way we do and still be witnesses to God’s love, justice and peace.

If I had to answer Ficca’s question, “**what’s the big deal about Jesus?**” I would say that Jesus is a real big deal for me as a Christian who believes that “***In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself.***”³

Historically speaking, the Christian faith has been the faith in the incarnation. For two millennia the Church has confessed consistently that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, God-with-us. The Bible, which the Westminster Larger

Catechism defines as our “**rule of faith and practice**,”⁴ teaches us how Jesus can be for us **THE WAY** into the heart of God; **THE TRUTH** by which our lives can be lived with integrity; and **THE LIFE** that compels us to live fully and to love lavishly all of God’s creation. Jesus Christ was and will always be “**the human face of God**”⁵ for the Christian community. Or as Bishop John Shelby Spong puts it, “**in the being of Jesus we see the revelation of the Ground of Being. In his life we see the revelation of the Source of Life. In his love we see the revelation of the Source of Love.**”⁶

To be Christian definitely means to believe that there is something **special** and **unique** about this man, Jesus of Nazareth. What is unacceptable is that we might use the Good News of Jesus Christ to promote any sort of prejudice or to raise any kind of barrier along racial, social, and religious lines! After all, the Gospel is not simply the story **OF** Jesus. But it is the story **ABOUT** how God, **the Fountain of Life, the Source of Love and the Ground of all being**, became incarnate in the person of Jesus to show humanity what a life full of God’s Spirit looks like.

And when we turn to the Gospels what we find is that the Gospel writers used a multiplicity of images, metaphors and symbols to illustrate what

³ 2 Corinthians 5:19

⁴ Westminster Larger Catechism – Question # 3.

⁵ Spong, John Shelby. Why Christianity Must Change or Die (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco 1999) p.131. Spong quotes John A. T. Robinson.

⁶ Spong, John Shelby. Why Christianity Must Change or Die (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco 1999) p. 131.

God was doing in Jesus. And by doing so, they showed us that there is no **final way to speak of the mystery of God in Christ**. In the gospel lesson for today,

Christ is described in many different ways. He is:

- **THE LAMB OF GOD WHO TAKES AWAY THE SIN OF THE WORLD (Jn. 1:29, 36);**
- **THE ONE UPON WHOM THE SPIRIT DESCENDED FROM HEAVEN AND IN WHOM THE SPIRIT REMAINED (Jn. 1:32-33);**
- **THE ONE WHO BAPTIZES WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT (Jn. 1:33b);**
- **THE SON OF GOD (Jn. 1:34);**
- **THE RABBI OR TEACHER (Jn. 1:38);**
- **THE MESSIAH OR THE ANOINTED ONE (Jn. 1:41).**

What we see in this passage is an attempt made by the Gospel writer to speak of a divine reality in plain human dialect. This passage is an **ecstatic proclamation** and a **confessional affirmation** of what Jesus represents for the Christian community. With his life centered in God and filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus is for us the divine invitation into a new life that transforms us and helps us to see what is already true – that God loves us unconditionally and beyond limits. If we look at Jesus Christ from this viewpoint, we begin to comprehend that the Christian life is not about believing or doing what we must believe and do to be saved. Instead the Christian life is a **way of being**, in which we begin to let go of our self-centeredness, our prejudices, our

estrangement from our neighbors and are born into a new life full of hope, compassion, love and faith.

The challenge the Church faces to embrace Christ fully, enthusiastically, and unashamedly and still respect those who experience God's grace outside of the Christian tradition has to do with our obsession to explain who Jesus is. Over the centuries, as Christians deepened their reflections on Christ, the transforming experience of his touch in their lives was no longer enough to guide them. It became necessary to explain with "**excessive precision and certitude**"⁷ how the God in whom "**we live and move and have our being**"⁸ could be incarnate in this first-century Palestinian Jew. So the question Christians began to ask was no longer what they had to do to follow Christ. The Church wanted to know who Jesus was in himself and in relation to God. From that moment on, it was not enough to love God and neighbor to be a disciple of Jesus, Christians also had to adhere to certain absolute and incontestable theological statements about the nature and person of Christ to be deemed a true believer. And as Bishop Spong warns us in his book, **Why Christianity Must Change or Die**, "*The very moment we move from ecstatic proclamation to explanation, the presuppositions, definitions, and stereotypes of the ages begin to shape our words.*"⁹ And we become captives of a worldview that is no longer in touch with the reality of our day and time. The

⁷ Borg, Marcus. The Heart of Christianity (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco 2004) p. 38.

⁸ Acts 17:28.

⁹ Spong, John Shelby. Why Christianity Must Change or Die (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco 1999) p. 75.

result of such theological explanations is a sense of righteousness that makes some Christians see a sharp boundary separating those who believe in these theological statements and those who do not.

To be quite honest with you, I wish we were not so preoccupied with theological formulations and credal statements about the nature and person of Jesus, **the Son of God**. I wish we, the Church, spent more time experiencing Christ's loving and saving touch, so the Church might continue to move past the fences of prejudice, intolerance and injustice that divide the human race. Christ was a social prophet and a passionate advocate of God's peaceable kingdom here on Earth. As a **Teacher**, he has inspired men and women all over the world "***to do justice, to love goodness and to walk modestly with [...] God.***"¹⁰ As **The Lamb of God**, Christ was killed because of his love for the poor and the oppressed and for his passion for justice that threatened the unjust political system of his time. As **The One who baptizes with the Holy Spirit**, Jesus embraced men and women indiscriminately and showed them how to live fully in the presence of God. As **the Messiah** given "***as a light to the nations,***"¹¹ Jesus has opened human hearts so people like you and I might see with the eyes of our heart "***the immeasurable riches of [God's] grace toward us.***"¹²

Tomorrow, Americans will remember the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. as a leader in the civil rights movement of the 1960's. People will think of him

¹⁰ Micah 6:8. The Jewish Bible TANAKH.

¹¹ Isaiah 49:6.

as somebody who dared to take a stand to end racial and social injustice. And he will be remembered as a martyr who died because of his commitment to making this nation more just and democratic. What most of us will not consider is that it was King's vision of the Christian life embodied by Jesus that gave him strength to live and to die for a better world for all humanity. King was not concerned with inflexible theological speculations that lead to an empty and fictional rule of faith. He knew that the salvation proclaimed by Jesus was, and still is, all-embracing. It involves personal transformation as well as social, political, economic and ideological liberation **here and now**. It was King's strong and active faith that gave him the vision of a peaceful world for blacks and whites, for men and women, for Christians and for all people regardless of their color, nationality, or religious affiliation. He knew what Jesus' message meant to his people and to this nation, so he dared to dream about a new America. But when his faith could not give him the answers he needed to make a difference in the world, he did not hesitate to look for those answers elsewhere. So it is not surprising that King should say that it was Gandhi, a Hindu, who helped him understand Jesus' love ethics. King wrote, **"Gandhi was probably the first person in history to lift the love ethic of Jesus above mere interaction between individuals to a powerful and effective social force on a large scale. Love for Gandhi was a potent instrument for social and collective transformation. It was in this Gandhian emphasis on love and nonviolence that I discovered the method for social reform that I had been seeking."**¹³ King's faith and his openness to

¹² Ephesians 2:8.

¹³ King Jr., Martin Luther from "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence"

hear the voice of God without being limited by stereotypes and theological presuppositions gave him a universal voice he has broken through the barrier of time, race, nationality, gender, and religious loyalties. His desire to live out his faith and not simply to adhere to rules about who Jesus is or isn't allowed him to make **a real big deal** of this man who lived and died so that we might have life and life abundant...

And, what about you, what's the big deal about Jesus for you?

To the king of kings, "immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen!"¹⁴

Rev. Paulo Gustavo França

¹⁴ 1 Timothy 1:17