

December 17, 2006

“Who Was Jesus, for Christ’s Sake?”

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Once upon a time, there was a vast and rocky wilderness and across this wilderness was kind of a rough highway, a vaguely defined path, where humanity was making its necessary pilgrimage through life. And at just the right place in that pilgrimage there was a spring of bubbling, pure, clear, cold water. That water slaked not only the physical thirst of humanity’s pilgrims, but it also slaked a deeper thirst, a thirst for meaning, a thirst for the deepest human yearnings of all. That spring healed people physically, spiritually, and emotionally. Life suddenly became vivid and meaningful. It was called the water of life, this spring, it was open to all. And then a few people decided, “Well, you know we need to protect the purity of this spring,” so they rolled a couple of boulders around it, kind of as a protection. Then, the boulders got more elaborate, they turned into buildings. In the buildings were monuments to people who had been healed by that spring or changed by that spring. Finally, the spring was totally enclosed. After centuries, a vast cathedral completely shut off the access to the living waters. A special caste of men had developed, (men not women) who protected people from the power of that spring and doled out the living waters as they saw fit. Wars were fought as to who would control that vast temple. The spring bubbled on, inaccessible to a thirsty humanity. Ceremonies were celebrated about what the spring had done for people in past centuries, while the people outside were dying of thirst. Now there were some people who protested. They were usually put to death, and then later they built statues to them and monuments, and lit candles. But the spring was still inaccessible and most people avoided the place of living waters they were so disgusted with the spectacle and they survived the best they could.

The Canadian biblical scholar, Tom Harpur, in his book *For Christ’s Sake*, offers this parable as a way of describing what has happened over the centuries to the pure living waters of the teachings of a human being, a Jew, an itinerant rabbi from Nazareth called Jesus. The living waters of Jesus’s teachings have been walled off and made inaccessible by the power and the greed and the anger and warfare of the institutional church.

Conservative commentators talk these days about the so-called “War on Christmas.” Now, as for myself, if someone offers me good wishes whether in the words “Happy Holidays” or “Merry Christmas,” I think it’s kind of tacky to take offense. I really do. But these folks who say that there is a war on Christmas insist that Christmas should not be about commercialization or Christmas trees, or Santa Claus and reindeers, that it’s about Jesus. Right, it is. But, I want to ask, “Which Jesus?” Is it the religion about Jesus that Christmas celebrates, the cathedral over the spring, or is it the religion that Jesus taught, is it the way that Jesus taught for the human realization of all of us that we should celebrate? The teachings of Jesus are vast, complex. We have only the gospels, both the official ones and the unofficial ones, to tell us what they were. This morning I want to speak personally and tell you what the teachings of this rabbi from the first century mean to me.

I don't call myself a Christian anymore. I think that word is too identified with the special caste of men around the spring. I don't want to be identified with Pat Robertson and Jerry Fallwell. I don't want to be identified with pedophile priests and the felonious bishops who protect them. My view of Jesus is based on the evidence of the gospel which is good news, that's what that word mean. Jesus taught good news to the people in his time. Let me set the context for his time. Actually, Christmas and Hanukkah don't have only a juxtaposition because they fall at roughly the same time of year. There is a historical movement between Christmas and Hanukkah because you see Hanukkah celebrates a war of liberation that the Jewish people fought against an outside occupier who was trying to obliterate their culture, the successor to Alexander the Great, the Syrian King. They won that war and about a century and a half later at the time of Jesus, they were occupied again by a much more powerful Roman Empire and chaffing under that yoke. All around Jesus there was talk of sedition and resistance and there developed a deeply felt religious interpretation of that yearning for freedom. It was the call for the kingdom of God and a Messiah, an anointed one, a new David who was to bring that kingdom of God about and end the rule of Rome. Later tradition has distorted our view of Jesus, but it is in this context that he gave his good news. Jesus was a pious Jew, he saw himself as reforming his religion and calling people to the truth of their existence and their potential. He would have been scandalized that people in the churches today call him God. That would have been blasphemy of the worst kind, to him, as a good Jew.

Part of his appeal to me, at least by the evidence of the gospels, is that Jesus was very human. He may have been an exemplar of humanity, but he had his faults—inappropriate anger and peevishness. He was kind of prone to self-pity, too. He was entitled, listen, they were out to get him, but he was human. He would be appalled at the current dogma that is being spouted in his name because, you see, he didn't believe in dogma. He taught with stories based on people's individual lives, the things that touched them, food, and farming, and money, and trade, the things that people knew about. He said, "The kingdom of God is not going to come later. It's right here! Wake up! You don't have to wait. It's within you." In the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas, he said, "It is all around us and we don't see it. This beautiful realm of God that everybody is waiting for in some hoped for future, right here, right now." That was the good news that Jesus taught. And he delighted in baiting the religiously sanctimonious. He got them so angry at him. In his society, in his context, there were so many rules, an obsession with purity. I think of the woman who had been bleeding for years, that he healed, he's talking about bleeding menstrually for years. The rules of that time said that no one could touch a woman who was menstruating. This woman had not been touched for years. And he touched her and healed her. People didn't rejoice that he'd healed her because he broke a rule. And he loved to break rules. He was in their face. That's why I admire him. He was kind of a party animal, too. He realized that the despised were closer to being able to hear his message because the rich kind of had a vested interest in the way things were. The people who were despised were the people who listened to him the most, the poor, the destitute, the sinners, the tax collectors. Another thing that made people mad at him is that he was a feminist for his time according to Riane Eisler, author of *The Chalice and the Blade*, because he had women disciples, women who listened to

his teachings. Women weren't supposed to listen to rabbis in those days, they had nothing to do with studying the scriptures, but he had women in his inner circle.

So what did Jesus teach? I could go on way beyond our time because I find his teachings to be inexhaustible. I find that it has a profound understanding of both the laws of the cosmos and the inner being of human beings. But I think the core of his teaching was that we should strive for a transformation from our ordinary state of fear to our potential state of joy and trust. Jesus did not say blessed are the meek. It's a mistranslation. He said, "Blessed are the innocent and the carefree, the debonair. Blessed are those who trust in God." His idea of God wasn't the idea of most of his co-religionists at the time who saw God as a stern, imperial ruler. For him God was as intimate as could be. God was Abba, father, papa, daddy, and there was this great intimacy with the divine which allowed this trust. When our eyes are open, we have the repentance that Jesus taught. Now this repentance word has become polluted. What it means literally is to turn around, to have a different perspective, to see the world not with the eyes of fear and threat, but the with eyes of joy, trust, and love, to forgive, to reconcile, to love.

Let's talk about turning the other cheek. He said, "If someone strikes you on your right cheek, turn to him your left also." People really misunderstand this teaching. Because how would you strike someone on the right cheek in a culture where everybody was mandatorily right-handed. It would a master to a servant or a slave, it would be someone with a higher status to someone with a lower status and if that person were to resist their life would be in jeopardy. So think what would happen if you were the master and you had a slave and you struck out and the slave did this. That is not meek. That is saying recognize my humanity, understand who I am. It is resisting the dehumanization of that social structure. You see how that teaching has become perverted over the years? Jesus taught radical love. I remember General Assembly Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. said that love is too strong a word and that he wished that Jesus had said "respect." Respect your neighbor. Respect your enemy. Maybe that is the best we could hope for, if we could just respect.

So, who is Jesus to me? He is not my savior in the classic sense, though to the extent that I have been able to follow his teachings, I have grown in wholeness and integrity. And isn't that salvation? The best way to describe my relationship to Jesus is to that of a guru and disciple, a teacher and student. As I ponder his life and his teachings, not the religion about him but his life and his teachings, it shows me the way day by day. It seems to me that most of the church is more interested in his death and resurrection than in his life and teachings. That cross has always been a stumbling block for me. I didn't see anyway but to take that story literally, and of course, it is impossible for a corpse to be revived. And then, I began to work in an interfaith group in Central America, to work with those Christian organizations that were resisting the dictatorships of those times and I saw an image around the necks of peasants resisting the contras, resisting the dictatorship in El Salvador, and on that neck was a crucifix. I saw this over and over and that crucifix had a peasant, not Jesus, classic Jesus, but a peasant hanging from that cross. I saw that it was sacrifice for the truth that Jesus represented there.

The greatest human beings have made a shift. It's a shift from identifying with our own individual lives and those lives defended by fear for their continuation and their comfort, our own little lives have a beginning and an end. The greatest human beings have moved beyond that to an identity with humanity as a whole, life as a whole. These are people like Jesus, and Gandhi, and King, and Oscar Romero, who see that our greater identity is with everyone and with life itself. Fear goes away and love becomes our guide and love casts out fear.

This Christmas, may that be what we celebrate. Let it be about Jesus, not what is taught about him, but who he was and about the love that casts out fear.

Amen. So be it. Blessed be.