

A Advent 02 5 December 2010 St Michael's, Studio City  
RCL Is 11.1-10, Ps 72.1-7, 18-19, Rom 15.4-13, Matt 3.1-12

### Identity

One of the criticisms of Christianity by skeptics, beginning in the nineteenth century and continuing through today, is that the message *of* Jesus became the message *about* Jesus. That is, the message of love and compassion preached by the simple carpenter from Nazareth was overshadowed by the later claim that this simple carpenter was the Messiah of Israel, expected of ages, even Son of God. Usually, Saint Paul is blamed for this (supposed) corruption of Jesus' intent. These skeptics profess admiration for the message *of* Jesus, while rejecting the supposedly later claims of special relationship to God; Don Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* is a perfect example of this attitude. And we all have run into folks like that in our lives. I must admit that in my experience their admiration of the message of Jesus hasn't made them noticeably any better than the benighted ones who labor under the (supposed) misapprehension that in Jesus God is present and is acting in a unique fashion.

This criticism of the Christian message is a good example of one reading one's own agenda into a record that will not support the claims. A careful reading of both Old and New Testaments shows a clear interest in identity: "Who are you?" is a question closely related to the question: "What do you say?" Jesus, particularly when He says something that is difficult to understand, is repeatedly asked, "Who are you?" If we are to accept your difficult sayings, we must know who you are and by what authority you teach.

Identity matters to the meaning of what is spoken. "Government of the people" means one thing when spoken by Abraham Lincoln and quite another when spoken by Josef Stalin. "Love one another as I have loved you" means one thing if spoken by Divinity and quite another if spoken by a human philosopher. For the former we might be willing to live a life of sacrifice and even death; for the latter we withhold the ultimate allegiance and obedience. I am not saying here that nonbelievers cannot be good and moral people. I am saying that *who* says something modifies the power and direction of *what* is said.

The words of Jesus take on an added urgency if we perceive God talking in Him in a way beyond how God talks in each of us. According to Christian theology, I can say with perfect truth, "I am a child of God." God created me through the agency of the energies of the universe when I was born in 1944; God accepted me into an even closer relationship when I became aware of Him and turned toward Her in an even more complex spiritual process later in my life. Through these gracious acts on God's part, I am a son of God, as you are a son or daughter of God. Christian theology says that Jesus possesses these characteristics, too, and then even more. In a fashion unique to Jesus, God has given Himself to a human being and through that human life to the entire human race.

Other religions and philosophies see in Jesus a wise teacher murdered by the politics of the world. They put Jesus in a circle of admired heros but give a stronger allegiance to another:

Mohammed, Buddha, Krishna, Moses, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Sagan, Hawkings, whatever. Christians see Jesus as an altogether different kind of reality, unique in human history, a human life uniquely infused by Divinity. Who Jesus is, is the Who of God, living among us. Or, a more accurate way of saying this is that One of the three Who's of God lives in Jesus more powerfully than in anyone else in the universe. Then, *because* of that fact of divine-human union and *through* that fact of divine-human union, each of us is united to God as well. It is a conception of the humility of God and the dignity of humankind that is elegant and breathtaking. In my humble opinion, it goes beyond all other concepts of reality in glory and wonder and beauty.

The power of God working in Jesus is not an idea created out of thin air by credulous bumpkins. Read again our lesson from the prophet Isaiah with our discussion in mind <sup>(11.1-10)</sup>. Five hundred years before Jesus, God's people expected someone special: "The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord." <sup>(11.2)</sup> Read Saint Paul's words in our lesson from Romans; Paul wrote *before* the gospels were written and already he is reflecting on the meaning of this powerful Jesus, whom he met in a vision on a road to Damascus. Paul is no late innovator; he is there early on and what he wrote, within ten to twenty years after Jesus' death, was not strange to his readers and hearers. He identifies God as "the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." <sup>(15.6)</sup> Hear John the Baptist in our reading from Matthew's gospel expect God's activity far beyond his own: "...one who is more powerful than I is coming after me." <sup>(3.11)</sup> These passages can certainly be read in a purely naturalistic sense, yet taken with other New Testament passages (especially from John's gospel and letters), they indicate something beyond the ordinary.

This is why Christians hold so steadfastly to the idea of the incarnation of God into our universe in the Baby of Bethlehem, Jesus, son of Mary, Son of God. What He says takes on added urgency and power because of Who says it, not just Jesus the man of Nazareth, but Christ the uniquely Beloved of God. This is not a credulous superstition but rather an elegant, sophisticated conception of God's love for humanity and for all creation.

We modern Christians are going to have to be clearer in our concepts and more dedicated in our religion than Christians ever before. We live in an age when other religions, other conceptions of God and creation, are not some exotic, weird, strangeness far away, but rather the attractive rule of life of our neighbor down the block and in our town. We are challenged, while respecting their religions, to hold up ours as a valid, true, amazing, elegant conception of God's love for the universe, for the human race, for you and for me. There is no other spirituality like it on earth. I thank God for all other religions, but I thank God most of all for Christianity. And I thank God that He has called me to be a Christian, follower of the Christ, called to divinely inspired love and compassion and sacrifice.

I hope you feel the same. Amen.