

You Are of Inestimable, Utter Worth

As we reflect upon the Easter experience, it is important to put some things in perspective so we can better understand the dilemma of religion in our time.

First of all, Christianity was not the religion that filled the bosom, the life, the body, the mind and the spirit of Jesus. Jesus was not a Christian. It is very important to get that straight. Nobody can document the fact that Jesus ever thought he was a Christian or ever called himself one. It is clear to me that until we get that straight, we are going to be confused about our religion. The religion that filled Jesus' life was not Christianity. That is step one.

And the religion that flowed from his life that became known as Christianity both preserved his story for history and lost his story for history. The Church has both magnified his image and diminished it. The disciples attempted to remember and celebrate his life as they had experienced it. And when they began to try and structure that life in ritual and symbol and liturgy and theology, they were trapped right away because they could not find ways of expressing what they had experienced. And thus began the development of the mythology of Jesus.

Now that mythology cannot be deprecated. I am not here to say it should never have been developed. All of the doctrines and theology and mythology represent the fact that there was a truth that men and women were attempting to preserve. And so they worked it out theologically: very God of very God, begotten not made, he must have preexisted with God before time, he must have been in the mind of God before God decided to create the world; indeed he was a part of the Godhead that God decided should come down and reveal himself to the people. And we get theories of the Trinity that Jesus never knew about. Now I am not here to make light of the theories of the Trinity. I am here to suggest that these were feeble vessels in which necessarily finite and limited minds attempted to preserve their understandings of the infinite. The fact of mythology represents the struggle of finitude to encase infinite reality. And so it's a precious situation we are talking about, but we must understand that in the attempt to preserve it, we have lost a lot. And some people have become so hung up on the Trinity and on all kinds of special properties that are imparted to Jesus that they never know anything about Jesus. His personality is obscured for us, and the church has obscured it. But somewhere in the heart of the church's intention was the desire to preserve Him for history. But they said He was a God. As a matter of fact, not A God, but they said he IS God. Jesus never said that. In fact, when they called him good, he said, "None is good but God." But we say Jesus is God. We have obscured his personality in the special claims we have laid on Jesus, the claims of divinity.

The human person has been lost in much of the miraculous trimmings that we have put around the birth and the death of Jesus. The annunciation stories of the virgin

birth and so forth deprive us of a human person. As a matter of fact, at once we are told that the incarnation was God's way of allowing Himself to be witness to the experience in the human context and the next thing we are told is that indeed Jesus did not come as other humans. It doesn't add up, does it?

And then, as if this were not enough, the mythology continues beyond his death and resurrection. It says that one day he was out on a hillside preaching and after he got through preaching, whoosh – and they call that the miracle of transfiguration. This is what you have been taught all your life and you have been told that this is crucial unto your salvation.

Isn't it interesting that we have said that God decided one day that He was going to do this thing and let a part of His Trinitarian Being come down and the majority of the churches confess to that. We would then have to ask a very simple question: with the world in the mess it was in, almost from the moment of Creation, why did God act so late? The point I am trying to get across is that the church, out of love, has helped to obscure and has often smothered the essential life of Jesus. One of the great arguments of history was whether he was one of the same essence with God; whether indeed his actual flesh was the same or different. That is how ridiculous it has become.

The fact is, there was a person born who lived and into whose life there came the experience of focused dedication to the perceived Will of the Creator, God. And what we do know is that it was startling. Somehow, the Word, the Truth that would proceed from the very mouth of God, if one could dare conceive such; the Word, the Truth that could proceed if God looked like us and spoke the Word that would proceed from His mouth, which would be the full embodiment of what God had in mind; that essence came to expression in the life of this one person. The Word became flesh, and people were startled by him. The text says he grew in wisdom and in stature with man and with God. The commitment was so realized the he began to demonstrate that strange phenomenon of the person who becomes what he talks about. This was not focused embodiment that had come from the remoteness of the intellectual life. The evidence is that this happened in a very simple life – a life in which all the devious machinations of logic and sophistry and all the rational processes of reason did not operate to shield him from the truth that he had seen.

Now as I look at Jesus, I see that what made him different was that Jesus was open – relaxed and open. And he was prepared to deal with the life that he experienced without retreating from it. He was open to dealing with life without insulation. Most of us have all kinds of ways of insulating ourselves from real life forces. Most of our social groups are insulators. They make us feel good when we shouldn't. Love affairs are insulators. They tell us lies about ourselves that make us feel good. We are used to insulating ourselves from obvious truth. We have been taught to live that way and all of our institutions come in to help us.

Jesus was defenseless before life – and open to it. And he said that if one were to be open, one would discover that life is full of messages from God. He said the prophetic

is embedded in the common stuff of daily living. So the men were out fishing all day and he came up to them and said, "God is over there." He said I know because the fish are over there, and they came up with more fish than they could handle. He said God is not passive but is making a statement. But you have to open your eyes and see where the fish are, and then fish. And this is the reason that fishermen, poor people, ignorant people, weirdoes, deviants, conniving money lenders, were all subject matter for him. But because he was so open, so defenseless, people started to say all kinds of things against him. Some people said he had in mind a classless society. I am not sure that any of that is true. What he did have in mind was that life was to be lived. And when it is lived authentically and honestly, it is liberating.

We have laid too heavy a load on Jesus. Jesus was a person limited in history – by the facts of his life. But the minute you make him God, you can allow no limitations. It is clear from looking at the text that Jesus was a rural person. At least, the highly organized, mobile urban scene was not a part of his experience. An urban-conscious person would never go in and take a whip to get everybody out of the temple. That isn't done. That is not sophisticated. But he didn't know any better. That wasn't a calculated move; that was his honest, open response to the fact that the moneychangers were using the temple as an exchange place and were taking advantage of the poor. And a young man coming from a small village said this is wrong.

He was simple. It is clear to me that Jesus did not understand large organizational life. Somebody said, well what kind of social system, economic order, did Jesus have in mind? None. You say, is Communism Christian? Who knows? Jesus wasn't a Christian so he couldn't answer that. What would Jesus do in a mess like we are in? Who knows?

But what he did know, he knew. Jesus was a kind of working mystic. He got hold of a simple idea. As a matter of fact, he was a one-point preacher. He had one theme: You are of inestimable, utter worth. That fact is registered in you through the miracle of your personality. What makes you so awfully precious is that the part of the intricate pattern that you represent, only you can represent. That's what makes you so amazingly important in the scheme of God's design. He would not make two of you.

Have you ever put a puzzle together? You get the whole thing put together and you find that a piece is missing. Jesus says that is the reason you are so important, because the someone who must be found cannot be substituted for. He said there were ninety-nine sheep in the fold, and one was lost. So what should you do, just buy another one? The gospel says it is not that you find any other one to make 100, but you find the one that is lost. Leave the 99 and go look until you find it. What is he trying to say when he talks that way? He is saying that the one wandering sheep occupies a unique position in the completion of the design that cannot be accomplished if I just buy another one.

There was a man, Jesus of Nazareth, who lived and lived so thoroughly and so openly, so unencumbered, so committed to doing what had been revealed and what was being revealed to him – the Will of the Creator for his life – that he became a wonder in history. The text says, "In him, life lay." What the text means is that that life was a light

for many. In other words, Life is in all of us, but because of his own organization of himself, the life that lay in him became a light for others. In him life lay, and life lays in you, but because of the way he seized upon it, the life in him became a beam, a light. And it was so startling that people began to try to preserve it.

Jesus was not unaware of the focusing of his own life. Out of his own knowledge of the coming together in his life of the perceived Will of God and his own doing, he said to those who were looking on and wondering what to do, he said, "I am the way." Now what that meant is: Look, I am getting it together; this is the way to do it. Life was so organized in him that it became a light and his life symbolically lights the path along which we could walk, should walk, for the Kingdom, toward the reign of Justice, toward the reign of righteous Love. And when the light that emanated from his life becomes a guide for you, then Jesus, in truth, becomes the Way.

In him life lay, and that Life is the light of men. Paul says, 'I have seen the glory of God in the face of Jesus.' I say, let us see the glory of mankind also in his face. I say, I have seen your potential glory in the face of Jesus. Let it be so.