

Telling Jesus Who He Is

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Text: Mark 8:27-38

In an earlier professional incarnation, I taught Iranian Studies at Columbia University in New York City. As a young professor, I was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship to study a small community in India called the Parsis, which literally means “the Persians.” The Parsis are followers of Zoroastrianism; their prophet, Zoroaster, or Zarathushtra, lived and taught in Iran many centuries before the coming of Islam to that country. The ancestors of the Parsis fled from Iran after the Arab conquest in the seventh century. Today there are perhaps 100,000 or so Zoroastrians in the world. Most of them live in or around Mumbai, formerly known as Bombay. Over the years, they have maintained their sense of community, but their religious views have been affected both by their Indian environment, and, in the nineteenth century, by the Christian Science teachings of Mary Baker Eddy.

During my stay in India, I was invited into a number of Parsi homes, where I was entertained, and at times where I was the entertainment. During one such visit, to a home on the outskirts of Bombay, the matriarch of the family proudly showed me a kind of religious shrine that she maintained in a nook next to the dining room. There, on a long shelf, was a gallery of portraits: Krishna, Rama and Vishnu—all Hindu deities—and the Buddha, Zoroaster, and Jesus. There were probably some others that I don’t remember or didn’t recognize. “I pray to these,” she said. “Each has his purpose. Jesus is particularly good at curing illnesses.”

Of course none of these representations was actually a *photograph*. They were products of someone's imagination, and necessarily reflected an artist's own experience and cultural background. The picture of Zoroaster, in fact, looked a lot like the pictures of Jesus that we see in our churches. Perhaps a Parsi artist was impressed by the familiar depiction of Jesus with his long flowing brown hair and beard, and felt that his prophet must have been at least as handsome as Jesus.

There is something touchingly human about our desire to visualize Jesus, to put a face on him. One of our fundamental Christian beliefs, after all, is that Jesus was the Word made flesh, that he lived among us, that he was like us, and so he must have looked like us. With the exception of a relatively brief period in Christian history, Christian artists have been inspired to try to depict Jesus, whether on canvas or in icons, or sculpture. This quest, perhaps, reflects the impulse to reach out in art for a truth that is deeper than we can express in words, a beauty richer than we can contain in doctrine. In this way, we are different from Muslims, who would consider such visual representations of the Prophet Muhammad, for example, to be a sacrilege, an affront to God.

But Christians have felt free, or inspired, to picture Jesus as a baby; or as the precocious boy who wowed the elders in the synagogue; or as the Good Shepherd; or as the patient white-robed man knocking at the proverbial door. And, of course, there are countless paintings of Jesus on the cross, as he endured its agony. Christians in different settings, in different historical circumstances, Christians from very different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, have imagined and then depicted Jesus as being one of them—in Africa, a black Jesus; in China, a Chinese Jesus; in Europe, a white blond Jesus. Wherever there are Christians, we have imagined Jesus as someone to whom we can relate in the most familiar and intimate way, upon whom we can project our own physical ideals.

But if there is something endearing about our desire to put Jesus into the picture, there is also a dangerous temptation to limit Jesus by the limits of our imagination. Like my Parsi friend who pigeonholed Jesus as a healer, while the other members of her gallery of saints and deities were similarly sorted out and categorized, we often want Jesus to be something for us, but not everything. We want him to comfort us in our pain and in our need, but we don't want him to confront us in our sin; we want him to heal us, but we don't want him to lance our wounds; we want a Jesus safely tucked away in a chapel, not a Jesus who walks the city streets and challenges the standing religious and political order.

If it's any reassurance, we are in this respect like the disciples, except they had the advantage of actually knowing Jesus as a man. Even with that day-to-day experience of Jesus, they were still mystified as to who he really was. They certainly had their speculations: they had observed Jesus performing miracles of healing; they had seen him feed thousands with just a few scraps of food; they had watched as he confronted the religious authorities with his own sense of authority, with a clarity that reduced those critics to speechlessness. But who was he, really? We can imagine the excitement they felt when he asked them what people were saying about him. "Who do people say that I am?" Perhaps now they would really find out who it was that they had left their day jobs to follow. But their answers reflected the limitations of their own imagination and the imaginations of those who came to hear Jesus speak and to perform his miracles. "Maybe you're John the Baptist? Or Elijah? Maybe one of the prophets?"

Jesus, though, is never satisfied with the safe and noncommittal answer, the kind of answer that one might give to a pollster. He asks his disciples a follow-up question, which was really the most important question for them, and which remains the most important question for us. "Who do *you* say that I am?"

Though the disciples had been quick to quote the crowds, they fell silent when Jesus asked them for their own answer, for their own commitment. Except for Peter. Peter said, “You are the Messiah.” “Don’t tell anyone,” Jesus responded. And then he began to teach them—about how he would be rejected by the religious leaders, how he would suffer and die, how he would rise again. But Peter, who had given the right answer, began to argue with Jesus about the suffering and dying part. “Get behind me, Satan,” Jesus responded. “You have no idea how God works.”

Jesus didn’t want the disciples to tell anyone that he was the Messiah because he knew that they, and Peter foremost among them, didn’t really understand what it meant that Jesus was the Messiah. Messiah is an Aramaic word that means “anointed.” It’s translated into Greek as *Christos*, or Christ. We often say Jesus’ name as if Jesus were his first name, and Christ his last name. More properly we ought to say, Jesus the Christ, the one who is anointed, chosen, set apart, by God. Whatever the disciples understood by “messiah” or “Christ,” it wasn’t someone who would be humiliated and killed, which is why Peter tried to contradict Jesus. The Messiah, in their view, was to be someone who would redeem the people, who would restore Israel: perhaps a prophet, perhaps a king. They didn’t get it, just like we don’t get it, that God chose to become weak so that we might be strong, that God suffers and dies so that we might live and experience the joy of salvation.

And then in Mark’s account Jesus tells us that this whole discussion is as much about us as it is about him. He turned to the crowd, Mark says, which means that he addresses all of us, and he said, “If any want to be my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me.” Jesus shifts the ground of discussion. It’s no longer speculation about who he is, now it’s instruction about

who we are and who we are to be. If we are able to name Jesus, to understand who he is, Jesus can name us, as he named Peter. Jesus is able to tell us who we are.

“Let them deny themselves,” Jesus says of those who would be his followers. Jesus was not speaking here of denying ourselves the joys of this world. He wasn’t calling upon us to be the prim and proper Christians who look down on people who are just having way too much fun. Nor is he advocating the kind of false modesty that often passes for piety—you know, the kind of humility of which we can be proud. The “self” that Jesus is talking about is the “self” in selfish. This appetitive self, the self that we must deny if we are to follow Jesus, is our natural inclination to put ourselves at the center of the universe, to see everything from the perspective of “what’s in it for me?” That radical self-centeredness is the very definition of sin; it’s what drives us to live as if we are alone and as if we are in charge. It’s alienation from God, our Creator, from God’s creation and from God’s creations. It’s what lies behind Jesus’ great commandment that we should love God totally, and that we should love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Deny yourself, be at one with God and with your fellow human beings.

“Let them take up their cross,” Jesus says. Remember that Mark was written at least 40 years after those climactic events in Jerusalem when Jesus was compelled to bear the cross to which he was to be nailed. For the early Christians of Mark’s generation, the cross was not the logo of the Christian Church; it wasn’t a trademark or a brand; it certainly wasn’t a piece of decorative jewelry. It was the symbol of utmost humility, a humility that can only be the end product of utter humiliation. Note that Jesus doesn’t talk about the cross as something that is imposed on his followers, as sometimes we will say of unpleasant circumstances that are beyond our control: “Well, I guess that’s the cross I’ve been given to bear.” Given by whom? By God? Do we imagine that God goes around putting unbearable burdens on people just to see how they handle them, that God is some

kind of sadist? That isn't what Jesus is talking about. Jesus doesn't talk about a cross that is imposed; he talks about a cross that is taken up, a cross that we *choose* to bear as Jesus' followers.

“Let them deny themselves, take up the cross and follow me.” Follow me. Not just believe in Jesus, but follow him. Ernest Campbell, who was pastor of the Riverside Church in New York City for many years, gave a sermon entitled, “Do You Believe in Christ, or Do You Follow Jesus?” He drew a distinction between the two, pointing out that the former is a mostly intellectual exercise while the latter requires a life commitment. “If I’m a follower of Jesus,” he asked, “why am I such a good insurance risk? Why, when I’ve done my giving, do I have so much left over for myself? If I’m a follower of Jesus, why do my closets bulge while so many are unclothed? Why, in other words, am I getting on so well in a world that marked Jesus for death?” Following Jesus, in fact, is the summation of those first two commands that he gave his followers: to deny their selves, and thereby to open themselves to life for others, and to take up the cross, not as a burden imposed, but as a joy embraced.

Who do *you* say that Jesus is? Who do *we* say that Jesus is? How do we answer the question that Jesus posed, and continues to pose to his disciples, us included? Is he a picture in a gallery of gods whom we follow at our discretion and at our convenience? Is he someone in whom we believe but whom we lack the courage to follow? Is he the easy messiah of transient worldly success, or is he the Christ who is anointed to service, the one whose emptying on a cross of shame and humiliation is our fullness, our completion, our salvation? It is, perhaps, the most important question we will ever answer. It is the question that lies literally at the heart of the gospel.

“For those who lose their life for my sake and for the gospel shall surely find it.”
Let us find our lives together.

Amen