

SPG#199, Lent 5B

March 29, 2009

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Hebrews 5:5-10

John 12:20-33

On the fifth Sunday of Lent this year, via the lectionary, we come again to the character of Jesus of Nazareth. And we are invited again to specifically contemplate who this man is. It is the nature of that contemplation that gives our lives of faith a shape and a direction. The contemplation of Jesus is a dynamic, an evolving process. It is not like voting or not voting for a political candidate. It is not like proving or disproving. Throughout the New Testament are invitations into this dynamic, this heart-mind-spiritual consideration. And in contrast to being invited to decide "yes" or "no," it is the invitation into an experience.

And yet we in our time are fond of whether he is accepted or rejected. Thumbs up or thumbs down. Either he makes sense or he does not. And yet I think that quick characterization is analogous to going to the front door, but not opening it. The New Testament is not very vocal about acceptance or rejection. It is replete with statements he made, activities he engaged in, and claims that he made. It is filled with comparisons designed to clarify who he is. In Paul's epistles he is compared to Adam, and is called "the second Adam." Elsewhere he is compared to Moses, and is obliquely referred to as a new Moses. Paul envisioned him as a supernatural spiritual being over all spiritual beings. The writer of the book of Revelation refers to him in a dream as "the Lamb of God" and the "Ancient of Days." In the story of the Transfiguration he chats with the spiritual beings Moses and Elijah.

And yet in many accounts he is experienced as a friend, someone to eat with, someone to travel with. He is experienced as a teacher, someone to listen to. In many accounts he is experienced as an enigma.

In the years immediately after his life among us, literature such as the four gospels and the letters of Paul sprang up with the express intent of inviting whoever would into this dynamic, this experience. And as the Church became more formalized and more institutionalized, the Creeds: The Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed, and the Apostles' Creed appeared. The creeds were written about him. For many, the creeds became a tool of introduction into this contemplation. For others they became a way to reaffirm their faith. But for others they appeared as vessels that contained the faith. It became easier to hold this "contained faith" at arm's length for the purpose of objective examination. The printing press made the creeds and the scripture more accessible to the masses. But it also further enabled this "contained faith." And it further enabled seeing the faith as an object, an object contained in words. And so the ancestry of our believe-don't believe, of our accept - reject was put in place.

Over the years there have been many who worked with the printed words of the scripture enough that they contacted the experience behind the words. There have been many who encountered this experience in a creed. But there have been still others who were unimpressed with a contained faith.

Bruce Chilton in his very helpful book, Rabbi Jesus says Jesus was known as a rabbi, particularly in the province of Galilee. And beyond this, because of his healings and miracles in Galilee, he was also known as a "chasidim." As a chasidim he joined the ranks of the shamans, faith healers, sorcerers, and witch doctors in ancient Judaism. Chilton makes a case for the shamanic power of Jesus. These chasidim were known to cure sickness, and relieve drought through prayer.

Chilton says, and I quote, "To understand Jesus and other chasidim, we must move behind the scientific strictures of our own mentality and enter into the imagination of a world in which God's power transformed people physically, not just ethically and spiritually." Chilton speaks of one of these chasidim who was a contemporary with Jesus. The man's name was Chamina be Dosa. He lived near Nazareth.

In a remarkable paragraph, Chilton characterizes Jesus' healing of a paralytic man with these words. "He invoked God's compassion on behalf of a fellow Israelite. He laid hands on the man's crippled legs, while his mind's eye soared to the Throne, bringing the cripple there with him. He told the man to walk, and that is exactly what he did."

In Judaism sin was experienced as constraint, a binding of one's own natural capacity.

So, frequently Jesus would say the words, "Your sins are released," or "Go and sin no more."

In Chilton's book we get a look at Jesus from a different angle. This angle has to do with the magic of Jesus. In a similar way, in today's epistle from Hebrews, the writer speaks of Jesus being a priest. He is a priest because of his calling. But he is also a priest because he experiences typical human frailties as any of us.

And Jesus, according to the writer of Hebrews, is a priest after the order of Melchizedek. Melchizedek was a mythical figure from ancient Judaism. Tradition had it that he had no parents, no kin, and that he was eternal. So, again the writer of Hebrews, affords Jesus the same magical status as the figure of Melchizedek.

There is a door through which each of us may go that has little to do with printed words. It has little to do with contained faith. It has to do with spiritual life and spiritual adventure. It has to do with letting the heart and the mind go. Jesus, I think, was a pioneer in this type of venture. It has to do with the personal. It has to do with the side of us that is a spiritual being. We speak of it all too seldom. And yet I experience that realm as a vast frontier for all of us.

How far are we willing to go behind contained faith? How far are we willing to go behind printed words? Would we dare claim the uniqueness of the spiritual life into which each of us is called? Would we dare to assertively step into the magic of the faith? In the stories and accounts of Jesus of Nazareth will be found a way into that life. In my own study and experience of the man Jesus, I am convinced that we think we know more about him than we really do. It may be because of contained faith. It may be because of our own arrogance. And the consideration of the magic of the life of faith is a part of the experience of Jesus Christ. Will we allow it? Or will we contain it?

The Bible is filled with people like you and me who had extraordinary visions and supernatural experiences. May our following of Jesus Christ lead us into the magic of the faith. May it lead us into true faith. Amen.