

We Sing of Jesus

Lent 4 2007

The woman was dying.
I knew it and she knew it.
She was a woman who had loved Jesus all her life.
Her faith wasn't sophisticated but it was strong –
strong enough that she could face death squarely and honestly.
I sang to her her favourite hymn:

*Jesus loves me, this I know;
for the Bible tells me so.
Little ones to him belong,
I am weak but he is strong.
Yes, Jesus loves me.
Yes, Jesus loves.
Yes, Jesus loves me,
the Bible tells me so.*

“Remember that,” I said to her as I prepared to go.
“I never forget it,” she said.

We sing of Jesus.

It is our song of faith, our song of joy, our song of passion and justice, our song of hope.
For Christians, Jesus is the centre of our faith,
the primary revelation of God.

Christianity is the only world faith that makes such claims about a person.

For Judaism and Islam, though Moses and Muhammad are receivers of revelation,
God is not revealed in them as persons, but in the words of the Torah and Qur'an.

Buddha as a person is not the revelation of God;
rather, the Buddha's teachings disclose the path to enlightenment and compassion.

Christians proclaim that in the person, Jesus,
God reveals God's very self to humankind.

That is why, although the Bible is our primary source for knowing about Jesus,
the Bible is less central than Jesus.

Jesus trumps the bible; when they disagree, Jesus wins.

(Marcus Borg. The Heart of Christianity)

It can be helpful to talk about two realities of Jesus:
the Jesus of history
and the Christ of faith.

Or, another way to put that is the pre-Easter and the post-Easter Jesus.

In the Bible, the two realities are intertwined.

Sometimes we hear the voice of the historical Jesus –
especially in the parables.

Sometimes we hear the voice of the early church,
proclaiming their experience of the resurrected Jesus
and their realization of the significance of Jesus.

Both voices are important but if we don't distinguish between them, we lose sight of the remarkable human being that Jesus was. Scholars of the controversial Jesus Seminar of the 1980s and 90s studied the Bible to find the things that Jesus most likely said. They concluded that things like "I am the light of the world" or "I am the Bread of Life" are proclamations about Jesus made by Christians about the saving significance of Jesus. These are proclamations of the Christ of faith. They are confessions of faith; this is also the language of commitment. We could say that Jesus said he was the light of the world without that having any meaning for us personally. But when I say that Jesus is the light in my darkness, the bread that satisfies my hunger, the vine that is the source of our life, the healer who makes us whole, the door, and the way.... when I say these things, when we confess these things, we proclaim our commitment to him. This is who Jesus is for me, for us, for Christians.

The Song of Faith describes the person, Jesus.
*We sing of Jesus,
a Jew,
born to a woman in poverty
in a time of social upheaval
and political oppression.
He knew human joy and sorrow.
So filled with the Holy Spirit was he
that in him people experienced the presence of God among them.
We sing praise to God incarnate.*
What we are saying in these few words
is that Jesus was a real person,
a man of his time
who was deeply connected to God.
The gospels tell us that he had visions, he fasted,
he spent long hours in prayer, spoke of God in intimate terms
and taught that we can experience God ourselves.
In him, *people experienced the presence of God among them.*

For many people in our congregation,
the teachings of Jesus are very important.
He taught and showed us how to live;
how to love our neighbour.
Jesus invited people to take the narrow way,
not simply follow convention or tradition.

To choose that path was to allow the death of one's identity
and be born into a new way of being.
The story of the Prodigal Son invites us into that narrow way.
That is why, for so many of us,
the story is a tough one.
I can't tell you how many discussions I have had
with people who identify with the older son and his resentments.
The story isn't fair, people say to me.
And they are right. It isn't fair. It isn't the usual way things go in our relationships.
Usually, if we are mistreated or taken advantage of,
we remember that and punish the one who betrayed or disappointed us.
In this story we have that unforgettable image
of a father waiting, hoping beyond hope,
even watching for an ungrateful, rude young man to come home.
And not so he could scold him or give him the silent treatment.
No! So that he could run to welcome him,
give him a ring and a robe
and throw a great coming home party for the delinquent.
This is a story of death and resurrection.
It is a story of choices made and some of those choices
bring unexpected, joyous new life.

Jesus was a wisdom teacher.
He was a Jewish mystic and a great healer.
He was also a social prophet who "got political"
as he challenged the oppressive forces of his time.
He initiated a movement in the brief span of his public activity.
The movement was remarkably inclusive.
It's most visible public activity was its inclusive meal practice.
often criticized by others.
Jesus ate with outcasts.
He proclaimed, in word and action,
God's passionate care for all people.
The Song of Faith puts it this way:
*He crossed barriers of race, class, culture and gender.
He preached and practised unconditional love –
love of God, love of neighbour,
love of friend, love of enemy –
and he commanded his followers to love one another
as he had loved them.*

And Jesus was killed.
He was executed by the state, by the Roman empire,
as a traitor.
He was killed because of his politics,
because he criticized the systems that made people poor,

because he was passionate for God's justice.
If he had only healed or taught or prayed, he would probably have died of old age.
But Jesus was crucified.

*Because his witness to love was threatening,
those exercising power sought to silence Jesus.
He suffered abandonment and betrayal,
state-sanctioned torture and execution.
He was crucified.*

This is what I meant when I said to the men's group
that being a Christian isn't about keeping our noses clean.
We follow a man who was passionate about God's justice,
about including people on the fringes, people who are different,
about not walking on the backs of the poor.
When Jesus calls us to love our neighbour,
those are the kind of neighbours he sees around us.

I love Jesus because I know that he loves me.
I also know that he challenges me every day
to make my table larger, to open my eyes and see my neighbours,
to share what I have and open myself to receiving from others
at the table that God sets for us.
I follow Jesus, knowing that the way isn't easy or smooth;
that it takes all the courage I have in me and then some.
I am always bumping up against my own insecurities and awkwardness.
But there are glimpses of the table Jesus sets and invites us to.
When we sit at table with farm workers from Mexico or Jamaica
and face barriers of language and race and culture
and our own awkwardness
but have a few laughs or listen to a song
Jesus is present.
When we find ways to make our church buildings accessible
to those who use wheelchairs and when we make ourselves vulnerable
in listening, even when speech is difficult to understand,
and we recognize the gifts of another,
Jesus is present.
When we acknowledge that there are people in our families
whose sexual orientation is different than our own,
when we face our own shame or discomfort or confusion
to listen and learn and accept and welcome,
Jesus is present.
When I say these things, I speak not only of Jesus who lived two thousand years ago
and what he might have done,
but I say that the risen Christ is in my life now,
in our lives.
Death was not the last word.

God said a huge “YES!” to Jesus’ life
and raised him from death.
Jesus is not, for me, only an amazing man from the past.
He is here now, living, calling, loving, challenging, welcoming.
He welcomes me to come to the party,
to sit down at the feast table along with all the other people Jesus loves.
He invites me to get over my insecurities and awkwardness,
invites me to let go of past mistakes and the hurts I have nursed,
and enjoy the people who are there with him.
Parts of me have to die
but the new life Jesus offers at the table is worth it.
Prodigal son, elder brother, joyful father and mother,
friends gathered, servants invited,
the party is happening....
and you and I are invited!

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