

Getting to Know Jesus, the Christ

July 27, 2014

More than a Sage – the Saviour

Ps 128 and 1 Corinthians 1:21-24
(500, 505, 637, 644)

What impresses you?
What really impresses you –
makes you stop in your tracks,
takes your breath away,
brings tears of amazement and joy to your eyes,
leaves your view of the world dramatically transformed forever?

For Paul, there was only one answer to this question.
It was Jesus, the Christ.

He first knew **about** this Jesus from Nazareth
as a teacher and miracle worker.

Among the Jewish people of Paul's day,
over whom he had considerable leadership responsibility,
this wandering healer and preacher
had gained quite a reputation
for offering wisdom and doing signs.

The wisdom Jesus taught, however, backed up with signs and miracles,
challenged the way Paul understood and practiced the Jewish faith.
Jesus was a disruption to the purity and order of that tradition.
He had to be stopped.

The Jewish authorities under whom Paul worked,
conspiring with the Roman authorities the day,
had succeeded in crucifying this Jesus from Nazareth.

That should have been the end of it.

But his followers came up with this weird story about resurrection.

What impressed them, what really impressed them,
was their experience that Jesus had risen from the dead.

He was alive and among them,
claiming still that in and through him
God had reconciled the world to himself
in forgiveness and love.

God had acted in Jesus, taken the final step, to establish the Commonwealth of God
(they called it a 'Kingdom' in those days)
in which deep peace and broad well-being
was available to all who accepted it,
to all who responded in gratitude to this wise and miraculous gift
of reconciliation with their Creator and Sustainer – and now their Saviour.

Because that's what salvation really is –
freely offered companionship or friendship with God,
the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of life in all its fullness,
with whom, and only with whom, we flourish in our humanity and beyond.
Through this salvation,
we are freed from the anxieties and fears that beset our isolation and loneliness.
Through this salvation,
we are brought back home into relationship
with God, with all other human beings, and with our deepest and best selves.
Through this salvation,
we are initiated into, equipped, and sent out as
the Body of Christ
to witness to and work for this commonwealth of blessing in the world.

The Christian claim that offended Paul so deeply
was that in Jesus' birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension
God did what Jews had been anticipating for centuries,
but in ways that fundamentally challenged
the ways the Jewish authorities of his day interpreted God's promises.
This wandering preacher and healer from Nazareth,
who made so much of the prophetic tradition in Judaism,
was considered by his followers to be the promised Messiah,
the Christ, long awaited by devout Jews,
who would free them anew from all their chains and sorrows
to be the blessings God called for in the covenant with Abraham and Sarah.

In the weeks ahead, we're going to dig into this idea
of being saved in Jesus, the Christ, a bit further.
But for this morning, this brief summary will have to suffice.

But what impressed Paul enough
to transform him from a persecutor into a promoter?

It was an encounter, a meeting, with the risen Christ,
with this very Jesus in his risen form,
who accepted and enfolded Paul in spite of all he had been doing
to eliminate Jesus' followers and destroy the Christian movement.

Paul experienced that acceptance, that reconciliation, as salvation.
In Jesus, he came to realize through the relationship, God did all that he had promised
down through the ages in the law and the prophets of the Jews.
In Jesus, God went back to his covenant with Abraham and Sarah
and extended his blessings to the Gentile world, to all of humankind.

What impressed Paul,
what he hoped would impress the Corinthians,
what God offers today to impress us,
is something much more profound and startling
than signs and wisdom.

It is a relationship,
a deep, loving, accepting, transforming, enlivening relationship
with the Power and Energy that creates, redeems, and sustains a hopeful future.
The best way the Bible offers to understand this Power and Energy
is to talk of a Parent, a Father and a Mother, a Family really,
who do far more than we can every imagine or hope for
in bringing to full bloom a life of deep peace and broad well-being
for all of humanity in all of creation.

Jesus didn't come to me like he came to Paul.
I suspect he may not have come to you that way either.
But then again, he might have.
Early in my ministry, I preached a sermon in which I criticized the TV evangelists.
After church that Sunday,
one of the most active and astute members of the congregation
came up to me and quietly said,
"I was saved by one of those TV evangelists."
She smiled, squeezed my hand, and walked away.
It was a profound lesson for me in letting God be God,
letting God work in God's ways, not mine.
So, however the Spirit chooses to make God's relationship with you real for you
in that encounter with Jesus, the Christ,
that has my respect and awe and gratitude.
It's simply part of the great diversity of God's grace.

In the end, we are saved from isolation, fear, and desperation.
We are saved for community, hope, and courage.
The forms those qualities of life, those gifts of the Spirit, will take vary
from culture to culture and individual to individual.
But they all serve God's desire that we be blessings in the world.
That's what we are saved for – to flourish as blessings.
May Jesus encounter us with that salvation ever more deeply day by day.