

“Saving Jesus”

Mark 8.27–30

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 20 Sep 2009

Karen Armstrong, the noted British writer, once said that “Religion is at its best when it *asks* questions.” That seems to fly in the face of most organized religion, which more often proscribes certain behaviors and dispenses (occasionally helpful) answers to life’s deepest questions.

In Mark’s gospel we have Jesus *asking* questions: *Who do people say that I am?* Why does Jesus ask what others say about him? Why on earth would he care? After the disciples run through the litany of prophets, Jesus poses the central question: *But who do you say that I am?* It isn’t that Jesus is trying to “find himself” or figure out who he is meant to be. Why does Jesus put it to them as a question? Certainly, the disciples had been wondering about this themselves.

After Peter replies, *You are the messiah*, did you notice that Jesus didn’t say, “Yep, Peter, you got that one right on the nose”? Instead, Jesus orders him to tell no one. (This is the so-called messianic secret that runs through the Gospel of Mark.) And in some ways, that causes us to ask ourselves that question: *Who do you say that Jesus is?*

The question and your response matters because it influences what we think the Christian life is about. And not all Christians would answer that question in the same way.



I'm going to read you a couple of sentences about Jesus from the enormously popular *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. (One of the Christian schools in Loveland sponsored a talk by Jerry Jenkins just last month.) And before you dismiss this as the view of a couple of extremists, consider that their books have sold more than 10 million copies, that they usually top the *New York Times* best-seller list, and that they now have children's books and video games that portray their vision of the second coming. Whether we like it or not, the "Rambo Jesus" they portray is influential. "Men and women, soldiers and horses seemed to explode where they stood," LaHaye and Jenkins write. "It was as if the very words of the Lord had superheated their blood, causing it to burst through their veins and skin." The authors add: "Even as they struggled, their own flesh dissolved, their eyes melted and their tongues disintegrated."<sup>1</sup>

*Who do you say that I am?* If your answer is *an avenging warrior*, how does that shape your vision of the Christian life? And if John 3.16 is true, then the reason for Jesus' ministry among us was because "God so loved the world," not because God wants to destroy it in a military conflagration.



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<sup>1</sup> from "Gentle Jesus to Macho Messiah," in *NY Times*, April 10, 2004

Here is another answer to the question, “Who do you say that I am?” from Luke Timothy Johnson, a Roman Catholic New Testament scholar: “The ‘real Jesus’ for Christian faith is the resurrected Jesus,” he writes, refuting the importance of the historical Jesus. “The ‘real Jesus’ is the one who is now alive and powerfully present, through the Holy Spirit, in the world, and through the lives of human being. The Gospels, therefore, provide access to the ‘real Jesus’ precisely insofar as they reflect the perception of him given by his post-resurrection existence.”<sup>2</sup> My question is, *How do we know what the post-resurrection Christ is like, without knowing about the historical Jesus?* Is the “real Jesus” the one I experience at the communion table? Yes. Is the “real Jesus” the one I experience in the Christian community here at Plymouth? Yes. Is the “real Jesus” the one I experience in prayer? Yes. Is the “real Jesus” the one who proclaimed the kingdom of God 2,000 years ago? Yes. Is the “real Jesus” the one LaHaye and Jenkins describe? I don’t think so, and I’m sure Luke Johnson would agree with me.

Here is another question: If we don’t consider the historical Jesus, how can we tell if our experiences of the risen Christ are authentic, and not just a product of our own superego? Unless our encounters of the risen Christ are *congruent* with the life and teachings of Jesus, I would question their authenticity. For me, the historical Jesus is the gold standard against which I measure

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<sup>2</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*. (SF: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), pp. 142 & 144.

the movement of the Holy Spirit and the presence of the risen Christ. And if we dismiss the historical Jesus, how does that shape your vision of the Christian life?



Greg Riley, a New Testament scholar at Claremont wrote a fascinating book called *One Jesus, Many Christs: How Jesus Inspired Not One True Christianity, but Many*. He writes that “After Jesus’ death and resurrection, his disciples went out as missionaries. Some were more successful than others; a few went nowhere at all, but stayed in Jerusalem and their home areas in Palestine. But several went great distances, to Syria and Egypt, to Asia Minor, Greece, and the west, or east to Parthia and even India, if the story about the apostle Thomas is to be believed. All of this is standard Church tradition. What is not, but what is quite visible to scholars, is that they did not all preach the same message – they preached ‘many Christs.’ Even in the same geographical area and sometimes in the same cities, different Christian teachers taught quite different gospels and had quite different views of who Jesus was and what he did.”<sup>3</sup>

The different interpretations of Jesus, his message, and the implications for the Christian life are evident in the earliest parts of the New Testament, in Galatians where Paul rebukes Peter for refusing to eat with Gentiles. Paul’s more metropolitan

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<sup>3</sup> Gregory J. Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs: How Jesus Inspired not One True Christianity but Many*. (SF: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p. 4.

Christianity existed in the Greco-Roman world, while Peter's more parochial Christianity remained only in the Jewish homeland.

Carter Heyward, an Episcopal theologian, writes, "We have shaped not one, but many, images of the same historical person. To name just a few, there is the empathic healer and the hot-tempered critic of religious hypocrisy; the enigmatic rabbi and the hometown son; the itinerant preacher and the adversary of corruption; the intimate friend and the political problem."<sup>4</sup>

So I put the question to you: Who do you say that Jesus is? Who is he for you as a figure of history, and who is he for you as a centerpiece of your faith?



A few years ago, I spent some time at Ring Lake Ranch with Marcus Borg, one of the scholars who has done the most to make the historical Jesus accessible to a lay audience. In one of his lectures, he said, "For Christians, Jesus is the decisive revelation of God. And the 'pre-Easter Jesus' is what can be seen of God in a human life." In this Jesus, we glimpse the character of God...what God is like...what God is most passionate about.

Those of you who have read *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* might remember this description: "His own self-understanding did not include thinking and speaking of himself as the Son of God whose historical intention or purpose was to

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<sup>4</sup> Carter Heyward, *Saving Jesus from Those Who Are Right*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), p. 3.

die for the sins of the world, and his message was not about believing in him. Rather, he was a spirit person, subversive sage, social prophet, and movement founder who invited his followers and hearers into a transforming relationship with the same Spirit that he himself knew, and into a community whose social vision was shaped by the core value of compassion.<sup>5</sup>

If that is your image of the Christ, what impact does that have on your vision of the Christian life?



We have different responses to Jesus and to the question of who he was and why it matters. If it didn't matter to you, I doubt you'd be here, whether you're a skeptic or a saint.

Listen to these words from Dom Crossan: "Imagine ... these responses from different observers, all of whom have heard and seen exactly the same phenomena in the life of Jesus:

*He's dumb, let's ignore him.*

*He's lost, let's leave him.*

*He's dangerous, let's fight him.*

*He's criminal, let's execute him.*

*He's divine, let's worship him.*

The last response represents Christian faith, which was there as soon as the phrase was uttered or carried out – before any death or resurrection just as well as after it. Christian belief is (1)

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<sup>5</sup> Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*. (SF: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994) p.119.

an act of faith (2) in the historical Jesus (3) as the manifestation of God.”<sup>6</sup>



By leaving us with the question, “Who do you say that I am,” Jesus leaves us with an open-ended invitation to enter the story and claim for ourselves a sense of who he was and who the Christ is today. Part of the genius of progressive Christianity is not chaining down Jesus with the shackles of orthodoxy and blindly worshipping an ossified image created by earlier generations, but rather it is allowing both the historical Jesus and the living Christ to speak to us and live through us today.

Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*. (SF: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994) pp. 199-200.