

GOD'S MESSIAH

In many ways Pentecost is the culmination, but also, and often, it is the missing piece in the Christian Gospel. I suspect a lot of people around here know and understand this. It may even be that a growing number of Christians throughout the world know and understand this. The evidence still suggests, however, that it is a small minority of the Christians alive in the world today who know and understand this.

Christianity is an open invitation to any of us who are willing: an open invitation to come into a very vibrant and personal relationship with God. That does not end anything or close down anything. That *begins* something for us that continually opens up. That begins a different kind of Life which both alarms and delights us. We see ourselves in a new light, with a different identity. Our goals and purposes begin to change. We begin to get thoughts and feelings about the part we are being asked to play in this different reality. Some of our old relationships start feeling strange and strained.

But we end up with new relationships in a different kind of community. Some call it a “church,” though that can be confusing because in our time a lot of organizations called “churches” have little or nothing to do with any of this. To make it even more confusing, there are usually idealists somewhere in the mix who try to tell us that everyone is “in” this new community and we should treat everyone the same. That, of course, means there is no church – no special bonds between Christians. If there is no “out,” there is no “in,” and conversion – dying to the old life, being born anew – is obsolete. Some of us catch on when we discover that being “loved” by one of these idealists is a very generic, impersonal, and meaningless kind of love.

In any case, the vast majority of Christendom still sees and thinks of Christianity as a Message that ends with Easter. The Resurrection is the high point and the end point: Jesus rose from the dead, and now we rejoice, take heart, and sit around waiting for the next realm so we can get on with it – that is, assuming we “make it” into Heaven. Never mind the human constructs of a loving God who eternally tortures everyone who doesn't do it right or believe it rightly.

Yet it is Pentecost that makes the whole story, the whole invitation – the whole Death and Resurrection truth – relevant to us. If Jesus rose from the dead two thousand years ago and that's it, over and out – then, at least in this realm, so what? Hurray for Him, but what has that got to do with my life in the here and now?

It is Pentecost that goes on with the story and the invitation. Pentecost says that our Resurrected Lord is not only still alive but present with us. Pentecost claims that the Holy Spirit is still calling us into a New Life; still guiding and loving and supporting us; still inviting us to “follow Him”; still asking us to take on special assignments; still asking us to love certain people in real time and in real life; still asking us to avoid some of the temptations to do some good that were our idea but not His.

The tongues of fire that rest on each one of us proclaim that the Holy Spirit is very alive – very real – and is present to teach and to guide each one of us individually. However much we may come to love each other, we are never in charge of each other's lives. Jesus is still our leader and our guide. Stay focused. Distractions are everywhere. Keep the allegiance and the obedience and the loyalty clear and clearly before you. “It is necessary for us as Christians to pray every day.”

So if that is what really matters, why do I want to talk about God's Messiah? I suppose it's because the more I see the connections – get glimmers of how it all fits together – the more excited and intrigued I get. To be sure, it is dangerous to tell you what I really believe, because you don't all put it together in the same way I do. Nor are you supposed to. What we believe is not nearly as important as many religious leaders imply. I have a finite brain. Does an infinite God expect me to have everything figured out correctly? Ridiculous. What *God* believes matters; what I believe is bound to be minuscule, exceedingly limited, and wrong in the face of true reality. How much I *trust* God is true religion. How I try to understand what's happening because of God's presence and the love-bond between us – well, that fascinates me but it doesn't really matter. We are not saved by right views or correct theology. We are saved because God loves us. The question is not: How well do we understand it all? The question is: How much do we trust God with our lives? If we try to pray but do not really trust God, what do we hear? We hear ourselves trying to sound religious.

In any case, if you are willing, I invite you to back up with me a bit. Where did Jesus come from? I don't mean biologically, and I don't care about the clichés. Somewhere around thirty years of age, Jesus came up out of the Jordan River, where John the Baptist was baptizing Him, and life on the planet earth was never the same – at least not for increasing thousands and then hundreds of thousands of people.

Nobody around Jesus knew who He truly was. Jesus Himself seemed startled and awed by the Presence and the Voice that greeted Him as He came up out of that water. The surprise was so great that it drove Jesus into the wilderness – not for a few hours, but for forty days and nights. Jesus wrestled with the Spirit and with Satan, trying to comprehend His full identity and His true mission and purpose. We constantly minimize this part of the story; it is almost impossible not to.

We even minimize it by going overboard the opposite way: Jesus was God. If you are a Catholic, a Lutheran, or in roughly seventy-five percent of the rest of Christendom, you are taught that Jesus was God. That minimizes the baptism. If Jesus was God, He did not have to wrestle with His own conversion, with His own being chosen, with His own incredible assignments. It was just part of the script; such is life; just get on with it – ho hum; yawn, yawn.

But Jesus was not just talking to Himself when He came up out of that water. He did not pray to Himself, make up His assignments, or resurrect Himself. I love and follow Him because it was all real and terrifying and so beautiful – and so hard for Him to believe too!

So what did the early Christians conclude? I mean, before the fourth century, when we started writing the creeds? By the way, in the mid-fourth century A.D., Athanasius and others concluded that they knew and understood all truth in this realm and the next. So they wrote creeds to make sure that all other Christians for all time would be clear, true, and right about everything. Are you picking up a little sarcasm, a little jaundice? Still to this day, people who tell me I am going to Hell are usually telling me this on the basis of some creed they have been told to believe in. That doesn't bother me very much; I know how to consider the source. But it bothers me a lot when they tell such things to others who do not always know how to consider the source. Creeds are one of the greatest blunders of Christianity. Never mind your own search for truth; never mind your personal experience with God or the Holy Spirit – let us tell you what to believe, and if you step outside the creed, you are damned. Would Jesus ever have talked this way or taught us such an approach?

Is Jesus God's Messiah? The word has taken on overtones, to be sure, but "Messiah" means "anointed." Translated into Greek: *Christos*. "Christ" also means "the anointed." It is not a name; it is a title. But we say it all the time as if it were a name. We say

“Jesus Christ” when we get too lazy to say it right: “Jesus is the Christ!” Jesus is God’s anointed one! And who gets anointed? In our most formal settings and occasions, we anoint the king, to declare that he is the king. Or we anoint the High Priest in a ceremony that declares him to be the High Priest. But when it comes to Jesus, this is not a human anointing. This is not a human choice. This is God’s Messiah! God is doing the anointing. Jesus is God’s choice for our rightful King – God’s choice for our true High Priest.

That sends shivers up my spine because I know that never in ten thousand years would we ever have chosen a Messiah like Jesus. Left to ourselves and asked for our opinions, we could have taken surveys forever to find out what kind of Messiah we wanted and it would never have come out to be anything at all similar to Jesus.

Most of the world still does not think Jesus is the Messiah because Jesus did not act like we thought the true Messiah should act or do or accomplish what we thought the true Messiah should do or accomplish. Why does the Messiah have to come in King David’s line? Because we want a Messiah who will bring us back and finish what David started: restore us to our rightful possession of the Promised Land. By the way, how is Israel doing with that so far? The Messiah is supposed to make us prominent and successful as the leading nation on earth, defeat our enemies, and make up for all the suffering and defeat we have endured. Obviously this would take a warrior/king like King David. It would take a leader with very different approaches, purposes, methods, and convictions than anything we see or hear from Jesus.

Only in an eerie kind of “double take” – after the Rooster’s Cry, after the Cross and the Resurrection – do some people start to wonder about God’s very different choice of Messiah. Jesus does fulfill the covenant promises, but on very different, inner layers than any we had ever imagined: Not freedom from Egypt, but freedom from Sin, Death, and the Devil (from aloneness, fear, and evil). Not a Promised Land in Israel, but a Promised Land in a forever reality that is both here and beyond the dual dimensions of this broken world.

This very strange Messiah does not seem to be focused on prominence or success in this world. His focus is our relationship with God. “*God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself....*” That is Jesus’ top purpose – the core of everything He is trying to accomplish. He is the great Reconciler. I think we often forget, but Jesus never forgets. Jesus’ true and deepest purpose is not

to reconcile us to Jesus; Jesus is here to reconcile us to God. For us these two often seem to go hand in hand so well that we don't care about any differences, but I never see Jesus making Himself the center of His Message or His mission. He is always pointing us toward God. Jesus sees Himself as God's agent. He wants us to have a close, personal, love-bond with God. To be sure, Jesus Himself has such a relationship with God. I suspect that's why it is the highest gift and blessing Jesus can imagine handing on to us.

In any case, if I have it right, it is one of the highest and most difficult principles we learn from Jesus. If our relationship with God is not right, nothing else that we do or try to accomplish will stay right. And if our relationship with God is right – that is, if it is true, real, and strong – then all other things will develop and move forward from that. Need I remind you: This is not the way our world thinks. We are always trying to fix the outside – assuming that if the outside is okay, the inside will follow. Jesus is always telling us the opposite: Go to the inside first. *“First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean.”* (Matthew 23:26) *“Seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.”* (Matthew 6:33)

We live in a culture, a time, a society that is trying harder and harder to downplay Jesus. “Jesus is not really special.” That's what I hear bandied about everywhere I go. “There is more than one path up the mountain, and we will all meet at the top.” Do we really imagine that there is only one mountain? People who say such things always seem to assume that they are such highly evolved spiritual beings that they completely understand all the spiritual paths. Yet when they speak about the Christian WAY, it causes me to wonder why it doesn't sound anything at all like what I understand or recognize to be the Christian WAY.

“Jesus is an okay good guy, but no more special than any of the other well-known spiritual leaders. The Buddha, Lao Tzu, Muhammad, Paramahansa Yogananda, Moses, the Second Isaiah, Zoroaster, and hundreds of other – past, present, and future – are all just as advanced and wise and able to lead us into ‘light and truth’ as Jesus is.” People who say such things are doubtless smarter and more aware than I am, so they are probably right. I have tried to track some of the paths they suggest for a little ways, but either I am not bright enough or I have not taken enough time to find the great wonders they say are equal to Jesus' WAY. Yet none of their spiritual leaders care about me nearly

as much – certainly not as personally. None of them have died for me, forgiven me, or healed and restored me like Jesus has done. None of them invite me to come be with them and follow them, with a purpose and an identity all my own. None of them have risen from the dead to guide or strengthen me like Jesus has done.

I certainly believe we should all stop fighting each other and killing each other. I am convinced that it would please Jesus if we would start listening to and respecting each other more than has usually been the case in the past. I really do admire some Buddhists, some Muslims, and some Jews I have known. And to be honest, I have had more than a little difficulty with some Christians I have known. The categories do not say it all. I trust and love some Muslims I have known more than I trust or love some Christians I have known.

Anyway, I brought it up. Why, on Pentecost, do I want to remember that Jesus is the Messiah?

Three reasons:

1.) I think and believe that Jesus is God's Messiah. And I do not think anybody else is.

2.) I think Jesus is Healer, Savior, Redeemer, Word made flesh – and way beyond anyone else who has ever come here. If that is wrong, we are misleading a lot of people. If it is correct and we do not bear witness to it – to Him, to His truth – a whole lot of people are likely to miss what Jesus is calling and inviting them into.

3.) The third reason is personal. My own love and loyalty to the best and greatest Leader/Friend I have ever known is important to me. I don't take the slander of any of my friends lightly. Why would I smile and nod or shrug if somebody is bad-mouthing Jesus? Well, I don't mean I should physically assault somebody for an honest opinion. I don't have to defend Jesus; He is more than able to take care of Himself. But if a person slanders Jesus in my presence, they are not going to walk away thinking I agree with them.

While we are on the subject, what do other spiritual leaders reveal to us ... about our relationship with God?
about our personal identity and worth?
about our eternal destiny?
about the purpose of life here, or hereafter?

Some of them say quite a bit, but I think it's pretty drab and pale in comparison to what we learn from God's Messiah. So on Pentecost it is really important to me to know that the Holy Spirit who has come to guide, strengthen, heal, and inspire me is still God's Messiah – even though in a higher dimension. It is still the same "Being" I have come to trust and love. The principles, the purpose, the forgiveness, and the love will stay the same – even though the dimension and the capacities are far greater. We are going on; not starting over. We do not have to rebuild the relationship or the trust from scratch. The tongues of fire come to each one of us personally, but it is still the crucified and Resurrected One: the One who has been through everything to reach us, who understands us and still loves us, and who still wants to reconcile us to God.

The Apostle Paul missed being a follower of Jesus while Jesus was still in the flesh here on earth. He was, in fact, a serious enemy of the New WAY. But as we all know, Paul gets picked up long after the Death and Resurrection of Jesus.

Paul finds himself struck, blinded, and knocked to the ground by this incredible encounter. Clearly he thought what he had been doing was faithful, and now he realizes it was exactly the reverse. Understandably he is disoriented, to put it mildly. Naturally, as he senses the great power and presence of the Being confronting him, he needs to know: What's going on? And his first question is: "Who are you?" The voice replies: "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."

This also is a Pentecost story, perhaps the most powerful of all. "Last of all," Paul writes, "as if to one untimely born, He appeared to me." It was not the last, of course. Jesus has been doing this for lots of us ever since. That is the truth of Pentecost. But it never stops being scary for any of us who get surprised, picked up, and brought into the story.

Yet I was concerned when I first heard this story. The spiritual realms are huge, and not all spiritual beings are friendly. So I was holding my breath when Paul asked his question, "Who are you?" And when the Spirit replied, "I am Jesus," I gave this huge sigh of relief. Oh whew! Thank God!! Even though it is the Holy Spirit, it is still God's Messiah.