

## **THE JESUS OF HISTORY AND THE JESUS OF FAITH**

A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan

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Today's gospel lesson<sup>i</sup> has Jesus talking to his disciples at the Last Supper, a Passover Seder,<sup>ii</sup> the night before he is executed by the authority of the Roman Empire. This is a supper we will symbolically re-enact in the sacrament of Holy Communion today. Jesus predicts his own death as he says, "In a little while the world will no longer see me." But then he promises to return after his death, as indeed he does in the Easter appearances to his disciples. Jesus says that night at supper, "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you...you will see me; because I live, you also will live." He then predicts that in his post-Easter appearances he will be seen as fully divine, as one with God the Father: "On that day you will know that I am in my Father." What's going on here is at the cusp of the Jesus of history turning into the Jesus of faith.

Biblical scholarship has long examined this dichotomy.<sup>iii</sup> We want to know who the man Jesus actually was before his death -- the Jewish carpenter, healer, mystic, wisdom teacher, rabbi, prophet, and revolutionary.<sup>iv</sup> This is the Jesus of history or the pre-Easter Jesus. The Jesus of faith or the post-Easter Jesus refers to what Jesus became after his death, according to his followers. These two dimensions of Jesus are quite different. The first refers to a finite, mortal human being of flesh and blood who died. This is not to deny the resurrection, but to affirm that the flesh-and-blood Jesus is not still alive somewhere now. The second refers to the Jesus who lives on, at least in the hearts and minds of his followers, after he's executed by the Romans. This is the Jesus who later speaks to Paul, who never met him in the flesh; Jesus encounters Paul on the road to Damascus, though, in such a way that only Paul, and not others who were with

him, can hear Jesus. The Jesus of faith also refers to one who appears to his disciples and then suddenly disappears -- who walks through walls and enters locked rooms. I would call this Jesus a spiritual presence experienced by his followers through faith after his death, to be distinguished from the physical presence experienced by his followers before his death, which historians can write about.<sup>v</sup>

The three synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke tend to be more historically oriented than the gospel of John, although their writers were all clearly people of faith in the post-Easter risen Jesus. In the three synoptic gospels, Jesus never refers to himself as the Son of God. Statements like "The Father and I are one" appear only in the gospel of John. How can these differences be reconciled? One possibility is that the historical Jesus actually spoke of himself as one with God, but Matthew, Mark and Luke either didn't know that he did or chose not to report it. But this seems unlikely. More defensible is the claim that John's language is the post-Easter testimony of John and his early Christian community of faith. The Jesus of faith is read back into the Jesus of history and words are put into the mouth of the historical Jesus that it's unlikely he ever uttered.<sup>vi</sup>

But it's also entirely understandable that once there have been post-Easter appearances by Jesus to his followers, they would look back at the historical Jesus with entirely new eyes. Who exactly was this man whom we walked with, ate with, preached with, healed with? His followers knew him during his lifetime as a Spirit-filled Jewish teacher and activist who seemed to know God. But the post-Easter Jesus now seems to be even closer to God, perhaps even one with the Father.

For the church down through the ages, though, there's been a major problem with projecting the divine qualities of the post-Easter Jesus back onto the pre-Easter Jesus. The result

is an unreal human being, a superhero we can't meaningfully relate to, rather than a remarkable flesh-and-blood human being whom we can seek to emulate and from whom we can learn a lot. Another problem is that we end up thinking that Jesus' message was primarily about himself -- about the importance of believing in him and seeing his death as saving humanity -- rather than in helping us to live more spiritual lives ourselves, to come closer to God, and to help bring the Kingdom of God -- a more humane social order -- into reality on earth.<sup>vii</sup>

The historical Jesus saw himself as having a special mission to bring the message of the coming of the kingdom of God. This wasn't just a pie-in-the-sky vision of something to happen far in the future. Jesus saw the kingdom of God already breaking into the world in his time and beginning to transform it. He spoke of it growing like a seed,<sup>viii</sup> and it related to increasing love and peace and justice in the world. It's our job to water and nourish the seed that is among us and within us and help it grow to full glory. In fact, Jesus said explicitly that the kingdom of God is within each of us<sup>ix</sup> as well as being present externally in a new social order.<sup>x</sup> Biblical scholars generally agree that the kingdom of God that Jesus preached is not about heaven but about something to come on earth. As New Testament scholar Marcus Borg explains, "It is about a transformed world, a world of justice and plenty and peace, where everyone has enough and where, in the striking phrase from the prophet Micah, 'No one shall make them afraid.'<sup>xi</sup>

None of what I've said, though, is meant to denigrate the central importance of the post-Easter Jesus, the Jesus of faith. There wouldn't be any Christianity today if his followers hadn't been utterly convinced by the experiences they had after his death of Jesus being alive again to them, spiritually if not bodily. His followers experienced the Spirit they had known in him during his historical life continuing: the power of healing, the power to change lives, the power to create new forms of community. Many of Jesus' followers have continued to feel Jesus'

compelling presence with them, down through the centuries to the present time. I remember well the words of the Stanford Provost to me when my book entitled "Jesus Was a Liberal" came out a year and a half ago: "Jesus *was* a liberal, Scotty? What *is* he now?"

There was a Jesus of history, but he continues to live now as the Jesus of faith. Our gospel lesson links the two by emphasizing the central role of love for those who wish to walk in Jesus' footsteps. "They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them." And what are Jesus' commandments? Matthew reports that when a lawyer asked the historical Jesus which of the commandments in the Jewish law was the greatest, he responded: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."<sup>xii</sup> When this story is told by Luke, the historical Jesus goes on to explain what it means to love one's neighbor by telling the story of a hated foreigner, a Samaritan, who cares for a robbed and beaten man while two Jewish religious authorities pass him by.<sup>xiii</sup> So the circle of love, if we combine these gospel stories, goes from loving Jesus by keeping his commandments to love God and to love fellow human beings, back to us in turn, such that we will be loved by God and by the risen, post-Easter Jesus.

The passage that Bob Christiansen read earlier from the First Epistle of Peter<sup>xiv</sup> also links the Jesus of history and the Jesus of faith when it says that Jesus "was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit." We are called upon to do what is right and good, even if we suffer for it, as a way to sanctify Jesus who, post-Easter, sits at the right hand of God. Or, as Sister Joan Chittister has written, "Every time we see Jesus where we did not recognize him before -- in

the faces of the poor, in the love of the unloved, in the revelatory moments of life, Jesus rises anew." Historically, "When Jesus died, hope died. The apostles grieved the death of Jesus... The entire enterprise collapsed. But in the end, out of apparent failure, came new life stronger than it had ever been before. And so, too for us. When one phase of life ends, a new one arises, if we do not spend too much time grieving the one before it, if we allow new grace to flow through us."<sup>xv</sup> So let's link the Jesus of history and the Jesus of faith, so that Jesus can live in each of us, and work through each of us, here and now.

## **BENEDICTION**

And now, may we have faith in life to do wise planting,  
that the generations to come may reap even more abundantly than we do.  
May we be bold in bringing to fruition  
the golden dreams of human love and justice.  
This we ask that the fields of promise might become the fields of reality.  
Amen.

(V. Emil Gudmundson)

## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> John 14:15-21.

<sup>ii</sup> John 13:1-2 seems to put this meal just before the Passover, but see Matthew 26:17-29, Mark 14:12-25, and Luke 22:7-20.

<sup>iii</sup> See, for example, John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), pp. 193-201.

<sup>iv</sup> See Crossan, *Jesus*; Marcus J. Borg and N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999); Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985).

<sup>v</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), pp. 44-45.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47. Note also that the Jesus Seminar claims that Jesus did not say anything attributed to him in the Gospel of John with the possible exception of one short sentence, "A prophet gets no respect on his own turf" (4:44). Otherwise, everything attributed to him is a product of the later Johannine community. See Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), pp. 10-11, 401-470.

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>viii</sup> For example, Luke 13:18-19 and Mark 4:26-28.

<sup>ix</sup> Luke 17:20-21.

<sup>x</sup> Luke 13:28-30.

<sup>xi</sup> Borg, *Jesus*, p. 252.

<sup>xii</sup> Matthew 22: 37-40.

<sup>xiii</sup> Luke 10:25-37.

<sup>xiv</sup> I Peter 3:13-22.

<sup>xv</sup> Joan Chittister, *In Search of Belief* (Liguori, Missouri: Liguori/Triumph, 2006), pp. 134, 136.