

“You Have Come to Us”

Philippians 2:1-13

Scott B. Martin - August 9, 2009

As you can see from the slide being projected now, artists have seen and depicted Jesus in countless ways through the centuries. It is also fair to say that Christians in general have also seen Jesus in countless ways through the centuries, right down the present time. This should not surprise us. Any honest reading of the four Gospels of the New Testament, not to mention the many non-biblical books, such as the Gospel of Thomas, present us with varying views of Jesus the Christ. What is essential is that we consider and meditate on what our view of Jesus the Christ is.

Dr. Bruce Metzger said the gospels present us with various “portraits” of Jesus not photographs of Jesus. In painting a portrait the subject “inspires” the artist to capture the essence of the subject using his or her own particular style and approach. Imagine Picasso, Salvatore Dali, Monet, and Remington all painting the same subject, say a vase of flowers. I dare say that the paintings would look very, very different, even though they were all painting the same subject. This would not be the case if they were all taking a photograph.

Read the Gospel of John and then read either Matthew, Mark, or Luke and I dare say even a hurried reading will reveal a stark contrast in how Jesus is presented, what Jesus says, and what Jesus does. John is far less shy in having Jesus say he is the Son of God. In the other three gospels this rarely happens. Instead Jesus talks more about God and the kingdom of God. In John Jesus never tells a

parable, but in the other three gospels they are found in abundance. The differences are too numerous to go into detail here. Try this experiment yourself. Read John straight through and then read any of the other three gospels and see if you don't notice some major differences in approach to who Jesus is.

What I like about the UCC statement of faith is that the coming of Jesus is set in the context of the "deeds of God." Jesus is connected to the salvation history God has already had with the people of Israel, told in the Jewish Scriptures. Jesus embodies that salvation history and after his resurrection extends the "salvation of God" revealed to the Jewish people to all people of the world, since that time. **"In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Lord, You have come to us and shared our common lot..."**

There is a great deal packed into this short statement. Let me take some time to unpack what it means to me. First let me start with one of the biggest conundrums of the Christian faith, namely, was Jesus of Nazareth God and if so what does that mean for his humanity? Early Christians in the centuries immediately after Jesus' resurrection hotly debated this question. Some thought he was 100% God and only looked human. Others thought he was totally human at birth and was adopted by God at his baptism or at some other time. Others thought he was a kind of demigod, half human and half God. The Nicene Creed, developed in 325 A.D. settled on describing him as "being fully human and fully divine." In other words it's a mystery, because how can something be 100% one thing and 100% something else? Needless to say words fail us when trying to express such mysteries. What they were trying to express is the

Christian experience. We experience Jesus as being a human being like us and yet we experience the divine in Jesus.

Like most Christians a number of years ago I would have simply said “Of course Jesus is divine!” Oh, and by the way “he was also human.” I would have simply left it there; but in recent years my views have changed. I still believe that the relationship between the human side of Jesus and the divine side is still a mystery; but I have to say that if it turned out that the Shroud of Turin was indeed real, that it truly had blood stains from the crucified Christ on it, that a DNA analysis would NOT reveal the DNA of God. The DNA would be that of a first century Galilean peasant. Having said that I still believe that God did come to us in Jesus Christ and more importantly that God still comes to us through Christ.

Intentionally or not, the UCC Statement of Faith does not say Jesus was God. It does say that God came to us “**IN the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Lord.**” God was at work in this man from Nazareth and through Christ God is still at work in and through him. Clearly many people of the first century felt they had been touched by God through the life, words and ministry of this Galilean Jew. He healed, performed miracles and spoke with an “authority” that no priest or rabbi they knew ever did. After Jesus death and resurrection, Paul said he experienced the risen Christ who he identified as being this same Jesus of Nazareth. This experience was so powerful it transformed his life and he became one of the greatest evangelists for Christ and the transforming work of God through Christ that the world has ever seen.

The difficulty comes in trying to reconcile the human part of Jesus with the divine part of Christ. In our Philippians passage Paul engages in this struggle. For Paul Jesus was “**born in human likeness**” and was “**found in human form.**” There is no denying this part of Jesus’ story. It is one of the most important parts of Jesus’ story. It is what makes Jesus so attractive to us. As the UCC SOF puts it God came to us in Jesus and through Jesus “**shared our common lot**”. Through Jesus God experiences what it means to be human and because of this we can relate to God through Jesus in a way we couldn’t before.

Marcus Borg describes Jesus of Nazareth as being a “spirit person” a person in whom the Spirit of God was working in a powerful way. I find this path to be the best way for me to begin to explore the relationship between the human side of Jesus and the divine Christ side of Jesus.

Notice where Paul goes next. He speaks of the importance of the God side of Christ “**humbling himself**”, “taking the form of a **servant**” and “being **obedient even to the point of death-** even death on a cross.” For Paul the divine side of Christ shines in and through his humanity through his extraordinary humility, through the examples of servanthood he gave us in his life and perhaps most importantly through his obedience to God, even though it led to his death on a cross.

Paul tells us that we too can experience an amazing transformation if we will only follow Jesus path of humility, servanthood and seek to do God’s will no matter what happens. Paul himself was living proof of this, as have all Christ’s devoted followers

through the centuries. So it is that Paul says, **“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,...”** (Phil. 2:5)

Our UCC SOF says God that gulf between humanity and God can be closed by following this path. Through this process human beings can be reconciled to God through the presence and work of Christ in our hearts, minds, and souls. Through the work of Christ, we are assured in our SOF, we can experience victory over the work of sin in our lives and over the forces of death at work in us. This is the testimony of faith of all who follow Christ.

Paul moves quickly from the cross to exultation. It is at this point that the humanity of Jesus begins to fade into the background and the divine side of Jesus comes more to fully to the forefront. It is at the point that the Man of Nazareth becomes the Christ.

Marcus Borg makes a distinction between the pre-Easter Jesus and the post-Easter Christ. The pre-Easter Jesus was a “Spirit person”, a Jewish mystic prophet, who holy aura around him. When he was killed on the cross he was dead as dead could be; but what the Easter accounts make clear, says Borg, is that the followers of Jesus **“...continued to experience him as a living reality after his death, but in a radically new way. Namely, they experienced him as being a spiritual, nonmaterial reality and, increasingly in the years and decades after his death, as having the qualities of God.”** (*Jesus at 2000*, p.13) It is this experience of the living Christ that shaped the writing of the New Testament and all subsequent Christian thought and devotion.

Jesus did not raise himself. He was stone cold dead. The Christian testimony is that God raised Jesus from the dead and

subsequently raised Jesus to heaven, to sit at the right hand of God. Paul puts it this way, **“Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name, that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”** (Phil. 2:9-11) So it has been through the centuries following the resurrection. So it is that we gather today to continue to confess that Jesus, the one we know as the Christ of God, “is Lord to the glory of God.”

This does not mean that we have settled the question of the relationship between Jesus the Man of Galilee and Jesus the Christ of God. Such mysteries are never fully settled, and no doubt that is the way it should be.

By way of conclusion let me turn to one of my favorite Christian authors, Frederick Buechner, **“What was brought to completion by such a life and such a death only he can know now wherever he is, if he is anywhere. The *Christ* of it is beyond our imagining. All we can know is the flesh and blood of it, the *Jesus* of it. In that sense what was completed was at the very least a hope to live by, a mystery to hide our faces before, a shame to haunt us, a dream of holiness to help make bearable our night.”** (Wishful Thinking, p. 45-6) Amen.