

NOT OUR MESSIAH – GOD’S MESSIAH

Sometimes I wonder how many people in our society go through the Christmas season each year and never give any thought at all to Jesus. When someone we love is coming up on a birthday, we sometimes start to think about them: How are they really? Is there something we could do to let them know how much we love them? I know Jesus gets this a lot from some people. But from our society as a whole? I don't think so. Lots of people do not even know that Jesus is still alive, or here. And they must not think He cares very much about His church, even if they belong to one.

Of course, some of them have a lot of complaints about His church. Not nearly as many as I have, and not with near as much reason. But does that mean Jesus doesn't care about His church? None of us are perfect, and we quickly admit it. So if you put a group of us together, how could anybody expect to come up with a perfect church?

I don't think Jesus is angry about this. Maybe sometimes sad, though not for Himself – for us. But He never tried to coerce anybody when He was with us physically. Why would we expect Him to do that now, when His power and presence are so much greater?

So if Jesus is patient – willing to wait for each one of us to awaken, catch on, start to care about Him as He cares for us – then don't I need to be patient too? Hopeful, yet patient? And don't we need to be patient with each other, even if most of us make it clear that we pay very little attention to what WE RECALL together each Sunday? And even if we make it clear that Jesus and His church are somewhere down around thirteenth or fourteenth on our priority list?

I know; I probably shouldn't be talking about Jesus at Christmas-time. But even if you think I am bringing up difficult things, it reminds me of wondrous and wonderful things that warm my heart and end up in places of deep gratitude and sincere rejoicing.

It seems really clear to me that Jesus is not the kind of Messiah that any human or any group of humans would ever have designed, requested, dreamed up, or even wanted. The records we have of His life bear this out. In the three years we know about Jesus' life among

us, no person was ever so quickly hated, opposed, rejected, misunderstood, reviled. Do you ever ponder the loneliness Jesus must have felt? Nobody saw what He was seeing, or understood the suffering and guilt and fear of our world the way He did. Even His best friends did not know and were not able to share what He increasingly knew to be His mission and His purpose.

Some of them loved Jesus deeply, but hardly knew why. Some of them were willing to follow Him wherever He wanted to lead them, but hardly had a glimmer of where that would take them. Some of them thought it would be into fame and glory. That was, after all, what any of the popular expectations about a coming Messiah would lead one to expect. You might die in battle, but in the end the Messiah would be victorious. Of course, on a much deeper level, that is not far from what all Christians still hope for and expect. But lots of us Christians keep forgetting to add in the longer view, or to remember the realms beyond where we find ourselves in the here and now.

Every Christmastime, it is amazing and astounding to me that most of us can go through the whole season without remembering that we killed Him. Our decorations used to know that the red was for His blood that was spilled. And the white was because of the forgiveness that He kept announcing and bringing to us. “Washed white as snow,” our old phrases said. He came to reconcile us to God. But I know scads and scads of people who like the decorations but never know they mean anything deeper than “pretty” or “merry.” “I like red, don’t you? It’s so festive and gay!” “Well, if you say so. Do we also like nails, and a crown of thorns?” No one inside Christendom has ever celebrated a mass without remembering the New Covenant in His blood. But now we have invented a “Christmass” with no mass left in it.

“Anyone who wishes to be a follower of mine must renounce self; he must take up his cross and follow me.” Is that what you like to put on your Christmas cards? *“Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”* Does that still bring us joy at Christmastime? If we heard it like Jesus meant it, no doubt it would bring us a greater and deeper joy than we have ever known before. But it is not the kind of truth we come to on our own. This is not *our* Messiah we are dealing with. That is, it is not our design; it is not our ideas of what we want; it is not our natural understanding of truth or beauty or love. *This is **God’s** Messiah.* Most people did not follow Jesus in His own day. Most people do not follow Jesus in our day either. Christmastime is the proof. Some people are even now

resenting the fact that I am mentioning such things. It tends to dampen the Christmas Spirit, they say. And does the Christmas Spirit have anything at all to do with the Holy Spirit of our Risen Lord?

We are told, and the statistics prove it, that the vast majority of Christian churches in our time are dwindling, shrinking, going out of business. Is it because we don’t celebrate Christmas well enough? Is it because our decorations are shabby? Is it because we don’t sing the carols loud enough, or don’t tell everybody that they are welcome?

We have lots of intelligent, gifted, well-educated people among us. Why are they unable to figure out how to make us more acceptable to the society around us? Don’t they know how to cooperate with the laws of natural selection? They don’t understand about the survival of the fittest? Are they all ignorant of the advantages of cultural adaptation? Actually, we have lots of church organizations and church leaders who are paying huge attention to such things. But still the numbers keep dwindling.

The problem, or at least the problem in my view, is that the church was called forth – brought into being – by a Messiah who never did fit into our ways, our frameworks, our ideas of how life should be. Jesus is not *our* Messiah. Jesus is *God’s* Messiah. So His church does not respond well to the precepts and principles that we know should work in our society and in our kind of world. Rather, we get back to Jesus, back on the vine, back to the Jesus we hear about and learn about from the Gospels – to the Jesus who speaks to us when we truly pray. Either that or we go on dwindling. “Perishing,” they used to call it.

The church does not and cannot survive or thrive on any of the truths that we like or on any of the principles or precepts we want to believe in. We must be born anew. We must repent. We must turn our will and our life over to the guidance of His Holy Spirit. “You must lose your life for my sake, in order to find it.” Oh sure, we have heard all that stuff before. We believe all those things in a generic, nonpersonal sort of way. But what’s that got to do with eggnog or twinkling lights or Christmas gatherings?

The trouble is, Jesus is not our Messiah. Jesus is God’s Messiah. So nothing about the Christian Life – nothing about the Life of the Christian church – works the way we think it should or want it to. Jesus and His WAY are still so incredibly new and different from anything we do or think naturally, it’s always a whole new road opening up before us.

Tell me, why do we revere the leaders of our tradition? That is, why do we revere a Moses or a Jeremiah? Why do we revere Jesus, Paul, Augustine, Luther, or our Pilgrim forebears? Clearly *none of them* were well adapted to the culture or the society around them. None of them fit well into the patterns that keep people safe and successful in the environments we are familiar with. Most of them were killed off because they so disturbed and upset the ordinary people like us. So why would we expect a Christian church to thrive or survive by blending in to the patterns we consider to be pleasant and appropriate and appreciated by our culture?

If you are a Christian church, one of the worst things you can do is try to “play it safe.” (You might play it faithful, but never safe.) One of the worst things you can do is try to “please everybody.” One of the worst things you can do is pretend that you “love everybody,” that “all are welcome,” or that you can “feed all the hungry” or “help all the poor.” Following Jesus is not about trying to look good on the outside. Following Jesus is about being prayerful and obedient and completely in love with God on the inside. And that kind of thing never goes over very well at all in our society or in our culture.

Maybe we should change the subject? Recently I was accused of wanting only “little yes-men around me.” I don’t know about the “little” part, but it’s true, I like YES men and women around me. Jesus teaches us that it is impossible to build on negatives. Any jerk can be negative. It takes no great skill or commitment or dedication to be against things. It is part of the dynamic behind our mandate to be forgiving when a brother or sister wrongs us and is sorry. We cannot win with retaliation, spite, anger, trying to get even. We are supposed to be the children of light. So I like it when I find people around me who are YES people. It has little to do with simplex agreements on superficial levels; I have never had a good friend who agreed with me – or I with them – about every little detail in life. But I like harmony, cooperation – people working together for a purpose and a vision that is bigger, larger, greater than any of them. Especially I like it when the people around me love and want to follow Jesus. That does require us to pay more and more attention to Him. Everybody has a right to their own opinion, but does Jesus have a right to *His* opinion?

We cannot follow Jesus by being against things. “*In Jesus it is always YES.*” (II Corinthians 1:19) That is, when we go to Jesus, if we have problems or we are moving in the wrong direction, Jesus never says simply NO – unless we are being extremely recalcitrant,

wrong-headed, and rebellious. Jesus is always directing us toward something better than we were seeing – better than we thought was possible. It is not a NO – it is a redirect.

It is absolutely true that sometimes a negative voice – a word of caution – can keep us from making a mistake. A “detour sign” can be a big favor. But that is not the heart and core of what the church needs today. The far bigger problem of the church in our time is being stingy, frightened, lusterless – determined to play things safe; refusing to move when the Spirit asks us to; straight-out refusing to trust God when it comes to the choices we are making and the way we are trying to live. Why don’t we tithe? Is it because we don’t love God or believe in his church? I used to think so. But I suspect that most people want to be generous when they believe in something. Most people would build the Christian disciplines into their lives with far greater devotion and abandon if they were not afraid of ending up on the trash heap – unable to pay their bills and unable to take care of those they love. The fear is the problem. If we truly begin to trust God and believe in the presence of the Holy Spirit – even around here, even in this remarkable church – we would “take off” in ways that would make it look like we were standing still before. Would anybody connect that to Christmas – to His COMING? Not unless they realized that Jesus is still coming to us – that indeed He is actually among us.

Jesus said that the house built on sand falls when any storm comes. We need firm foundations, and the foundations Jesus gives us are always on the rock of what we are living for – not what we are living against. Jesus is not vague about it. “*Do not resist one who is evil.*” (Matthew 5:39) If we stop to fight evil, our whole lives get drawn into a battle that builds nothing – a battle that can never be won. Paul caught it and said it: “*Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*” (Romans 12:21)

Jesus is not “our Messiah.” That is, we do not design or control or make up what Jesus says or does. We cannot decide what we like or do not like about Him. We cannot decide ahead of time what kind of life we want to live and then drag Jesus in to bless it or approve of it or to help us achieve the goals we have already set without any attempt to find out what Jesus wants of us.

It is true in every church: There are people among us who are campaigning to keep us mediocre – who want to make sure that we never do anything unusual, exciting, interesting, or even meaningful.

And especially we must never do anything risky or courageous or outlandish for Jesus. They seem to think that Jesus will be pleased and proud of us if we simply manage to stay out of trouble: if we are never generous with any of the money that others have given because they want to love and serve Him; if we never attract any attention; if we melt into the society around us so that no one is disturbed or even aware of our presence here. Is that Christianity? Or is that merely middle-class America?

Jesus is God’s Messiah – not our Messiah. Jesus’ focus is so much on God – He is so eager to obey the guidance and direction coming from God – that He is always a surprise; always alarming us; always making us feel so valuable that we cannot stand it, or challenging us to believe in things in a way that scares the bejesus out of us (to coin a phrase). Most of us believe that Jesus may be the best thing that ever happened to us. But what does the record reveal? What is our true reaction early on? “*Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.*” (That’s Peter, if you don’t read The Book.) The utter dismay of the Damascus Road or the burning bush or the burning coal of Isaiah: that is our true and honest reaction – not to the fairy tales we make up later, but to the reality of the true presence of God intersecting our lives. And yes, it even took Jesus forty days and nights to begin to recover from the impact of His own baptism – His own personal encounter with God.

As long as we have it all figured out; as long as we have it all under control; as long as we are determined to make no real changes in our behavior or in the evidence of our love and devotion – as long as any of those are true, Jesus is *our* Messiah, not God’s Messiah. And we are making it up as we go. We are in charge of the drama and the purpose and the outcome, at least insofar as we are able to be. But it leaves no room for God’s Messiah. It leaves no room for the true Christmas. “No room” is perhaps a theme we have heard of before in connection with Christmas.

Dear friends and fellow pilgrims, I am not trying to scold you. I am not even trying to scold myself. I can “wait it out” as well as any of you can, if that is what we really want to do. But we are halfway into a real *ecclesia*, a real faith family – a true fellowship of followers who want to know what Life in Christ Jesus is really like and really about. Shall we tame it down, play it safe, take all the excitement and promise out of it so it will not bother us or make any changes we cannot control?

And do we imagine that this is what would really honor Christmas – the COMING, the Incarnation, God with us? That is what most churches and their people across the land are deciding and proclaiming, even at Christmastime. So by January 1st, it will all be over for another year. And the churches will go on doing the best they can, and shrinking and dying – because they are in charge, and no true Messiah can call them forth or require the kind of allegiance or love that would truly transform them and truly save them.

Merry Christmas indeed: to the mediocre, the pabulum, the decorations on the outside, the determination to stay the way we already are on the inside.

I hear the prayers, and many of them are beautiful. We pray for the Spirit’s guidance. We tell ourselves we want to do what Jesus wants us to do. Even in our meetings, we hope and pray that we may do His will and conduct ourselves in a way that shows we are His – that we belong to Him.

But we have a budget that is at half-mast, and we have participation in Boards and Committees that keeps us crippled and limping. There is hardly any activity in the culture around us that does not outrank our loyalty to His church. We squabble with each other at least as much as we try to cooperate with each other in building up the body that lives to honor His Name.

Merry Christmas indeed. And indeed it can turn into the merriest Christmas we have ever known – if we decide to let this be the Coming of *God’s* Messiah, and not just the usual tribute we like to pay to our own made-up Messiah.