

Hebrew 1:1-4
Mark 10:13-16
October 6, 2024

The Way of Faith

The claim that Jesus is the exact representation of God's being has always been a challenge to human self-esteem. It would be easy, and perhaps a little comforting if we could say that for those who have accepted it, the Incarnation provides comfort and strength, meaning and understanding, and a sense of peace in life's chaos.

It may be more accurate, however, to say that incarnation theology is as much of a problem for believers as for anyone, and comes with its own difficulties in addition to its benefits. For it means that the kinds of things we are proud of, and often strive for, are not worth our pride and our efforts.

For even believers are tempted to think in similar terms to what might be called "the world's" mindset. Sometimes the world just makes sense. Let me see if I can explain. As a historical person, Jesus turns out to be an enigma, one of a kind. When thinking of human greatness, for instance, it is common to think in categories of human endeavor and success into which Jesus really doesn't fit.

The list of historical personages comes from one of several arenas of life: politics, military, science and technology, literature, art, music, philosophy, humanitarianism, the world of business, even theology.

One can fit all of the so-called "great" people of history into one or more of these categories; Jefferson, Einstein, Bonaparte, Dickens, Churchill, Plato, Madame Curie, Joan of Arc, Queen Victoria, Lincoln, Calvin, Luther. Strangely enough, Jesus doesn't fit. He never conquered anything, invented anything, or wrote anything. He did not run a business or a government or lead a nation through a national crisis.

At the end of his brief life he was executed as if he were a common criminal or a failed insurrectionist. And yet it is believed that his influence over world history is greater than any other person that ever lived.

The historical reason for the importance of Jesus is associated with the founding of a religion, but like other such characters, there wasn't much of a religion at the end of his life, just a small movement in one of the obscure religious traditions. It is what Christianity became over the course of the last 2,000 years that gives its founder such significance.

For those of the Christian Faith, who are impressed with the theological side of things, Jesus is important because he is - God speaking to people; "In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways . . . but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe."

That is, Jesus is the principle way God has been made known to human beings. It is more than just a little

interesting that when God became human in order to be revealed, God did not become a conquering military officer or a diplomat or a literary giant or an inventor, but a man dying a sacrifice, *that is who God is*. And the message is of forgiveness, resurrection, and love.

The question of the right human response is significant. It seems like there needs to be something to do when someone becomes aware of the meaning of the life and death of Jesus, when it is learned that there is nothing one can do. What *does* one do when there is *nothing* one can do? The answer is . . . accept, believe. Have faith. And one of the examples of this acceptance, the illustration that Jesus uses, is the example of a child.

“Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”

There should probably be a caveat here. There is no biblical support for the idea that the people of faith are justified in behaving like children, that is, in a childish way, in the negative sense; immature, selfish, not able to be responsible. Adults behaving childishly is not what Jesus means, nor is it the goal of the Christian faith. Rather, the opposite; maturity, integrity, compassion for others, is the goal.

What *are* the attributes of childlikeness that *are* referred to here, and advocated for anyone concerned about what it means to be faithful? One suggestion is

this, that children are easy to impress with life and its beautiful side.

They enjoy being taken to see new things, like the zoo, or getting a new pet or learning a new skill like fishing or dancing or playing a sport. Simple pleasures can make their eyes light up with joy. Life is exciting to them, before adulthood begins to whittle away at their joy because of the headaches and hardships that also accompany it.

Life is a grand gift, even though most of us have had our set of traumatic experiences; the ones we share, such as the nuclear arms race, or the Holocaust, Pearl Harbor, 9/11, Covid. I think of the Great Depression that affected the way millions of people lived their lives. It is in the common jargon of our times to speak of trauma, and it turns out that one way or another everyone has been traumatized

Each of us has difficult experiences that have shaped us; an injury or a rejection, a failure or a betrayal, a loss, something unique that may make us feel isolated and alone.

Resilience, the almost instinctive quality of remaining excited about the wonderful and beautiful side of life, even in the face of grave disappointments and impossible challenges. This ability is often associated with children and childhood and through the years of a person's life, it can be diminished or even, lost.

More importantly, the attribute that Jesus is advocating is trust. Another word for trust is, of course, faith. It turns out that some of our traumas occur when trust was given to a group or a person or a machine, *and* it didn't work, turned out to be misplaced; a betrayal occurred and we work our way to a philosophy of life that says, "don't trust anyone, anything." Sooner or later that childlike trust is lost, even in regards to things of God.

It may be a speculation, but I suspect, nonetheless, that every person who decides for unbelief, or some kind of agnosticism, or even atheism, has a story to tell about some hard experience that traumatized them, whether personal or experienced as a part of a group, causing them to doubt, or even to outright lose their faith.

Some are unwilling to speak honestly about what that experience may have been, and it is very easy instead to attribute their unbelief to science or history, they might refer to changes in the overall state of knowledge that seemingly justifies rejecting faith as a way of life.

But not children. Children can sometimes display a faith that gladly trusts in God, in spite of the circumstances. The admonition is, even though there may have been disappointments, nurture the ability to maintain the simple faith of a child. Without it there is no hope of salvation.

Here is a simple but hard truth. That without such a faith, life is a heavy burden; hard, joyless, like the desert, self-absorbed, pitiful. It is easy enough to understand why some are tempted to pursue this route in life, and those who are faithful should be empathic and non-judgmental, loving, generous, and kind. But there it is. The way of unbelief is in the end, or sometimes in the beginning, disastrous.

On the contrary, the way of faith leads to a life that is light and easy; Jesus even said so when he said "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

The way of faith leads to a life that makes greatness hard to define in worldly terms and doesn't fit the categories by we judge life in the world, the categories the world has created for itself; and results in hope and joy, and leads to a greater love, one that sacrifices for the well-being others, like Jesus did, rather than obsesses over its own. One that as it is, turns out to be within the realm of possibility for a child, or for adults hardened by life but who still have room for a childlike faith.

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