

Religieux Pensees

A Prologue: The Foundation of our Faith

As we reflect on our Christian faith, it is incumbent upon us to examine our a priori, i.e. our fundamental principle, the foundation of all we believe. And, since we are reflecting on the Christian Faith, our starting must be Jesus of Nazareth, the one whom we call the Christ. Jesus is the sine qua non, that without which our faith is meaningless!

The Christian faith, and therefore Christianity in all its forms, is not simply a set of beliefs; it is not simply an ethic; nor is it just an ecclesiastical organization, regardless of its community stripe. Rather, the Christian faith is a response to the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Beliefs arose when those who responded in discipleship began to reflect on the meaning and implications of their actions. In this manner, both the scriptures we call the "New Testament," i.e. the Christian Scriptures, and the organization we call the church came into being. It is our contention that these scriptures, beliefs, and organizations (of which there are many different forms) must, of necessity, be subjected to the most rigorous testing and critique in light of our starting point. This is one of the most basic principles of our Reformed Tradition, one which places into practice the operating motif of the reformers: reformata, sed semper reformanda, i.e., having been reformed, but always being reformed.

The question is simple: who is this Jesus of Nazareth? The answer is complex and difficult. Thus, how shall we respond? Jesus was totally and unambiguously human, by race a Palestinian Jew, in sex a male, and culturally of the 1st Century, C.E. We do not have to go beyond his humanity to discover the starting point of our faith.

Speaking historically, the disciples responded to the man Jesus, even though it was a response which soon developed into a religious faith. If we are to share this faith with the disciples, we are most likely to do so by first being stirred by either the qualities of the human figure of Jesus or by the human meaning of his life, teaching, death, and resurrection.

The leaders of the churches of antiquity vigorously wrestled with the question of who this Jesus was and have provided us with valuable data in the form of confessional statements about his nature and being. The intent of these statements, as they took shape at Nicea in 325 C.E., Constantinople in 381 C.E., and Chalcedon in 451 C.E., is clear. They claimed there is a total difference between the Creator and that which is created, i.e. between divinity and humanity. God, they asserted, exists without beginning or end as the sole uncreated, self-existent reality. Everything else exists because God wills its existence. In light of this assumption, the leaders of the early church were affirming that Jesus, as the Christ, as the Messiah of God, comes from, and belongs to, the divine side of this equation. Accordingly, Jesus was God incarnate and not simply a supremely good person or a simply a great prophet or religious genius. This was the manner in which the councils of the early church stated their faith concerning the uniqueness of Jesus as incarnate deity.

This has been the central belief of Christianity about its founder for many centuries. However, theology evolves; it is faith, to be sure, but it is faith seeking understanding, as St. Anselm of Canterbury put it in the 12th Century. Today, for many Christian thinkers, the classical mode of expressing this claim belongs to a thought-world no longer existing. In large measure, it is a claim wholly alien to that of the contemporary world. For many sincere believers these words no longer convey the central tenet of the Christian faith. Quite to the contrary, they have the undesirable effect of concealing it within an antiquated, outdated metaphysical structure. We must, therefore,

search for new meaning. We must search for a clearer understanding. We must, once again, adhere to the normative criterion of the reformers and employ the principle: reformata sed semper reformanda, a formula bequeathed to us by our theological forefathers.

What then may we say to this? If we look at the biblical literature, we discover that it demonstrates and presents to us a living incarnation of love; a union of mind and spirit between Jesus of Nazareth and the One he himself refers to as: "Abba, Father!" The 19th Century German theologian, Friedrich Schleiermacher, captured the power of this relationship when he stated that Jesus of Nazareth, as the Christ, was totally "God-conscious." God's spirit was so fully a part of the life of Jesus of Nazareth, it is proper to refer to him in terms of divinity, i.e. as the very "Son of God." In Jesus the fullness of God's love, grace, and compassion were revealed, a revelation and a fullness that continues to challenge each and every one of us who wishes to take up the challenge offered by Jesus in service to God and all humankind. Or, to put it in more classic terms, to take up his cross and follow him.

In more modern times, in the Presbyterian Church's Confession of 1967, this issue is couched in these terms:

"In Jesus of Nazareth, true humanity was realized once for all. Jesus, a Palestinian Jew, lived among his own people and shared their needs, temptations, joys and sorrows. He expressed the love of God in word and deed and became a brother to all kinds of sinful men [sic]. But his complete obedience led him into conflict with his people....Many rejected him and demanded his death. In giving himself freely for them, he took upon himself the judgment under which all men [sic] stand convicted. God raised him from the dead, vindicating him as Messiah and Lord. The victim of sin became the victor, and won the victory over sin and death for all men [sic]. (The Confession of 1967 9.08, emphasis added)

In these two brief descriptions, one from antiquity and one from modernity; we discover wide diversity in the expression of our faith. It is required therefore of each of us who presume to call ourselves a follower of this Jesus to examine and reflect critically, thoughtfully, and continually on these issues and to remember further to really be a follower we must allow the fundamental principle of God's love reflected in these events of the life of Jesus, to manifest themselves in our personal lives.

In this light, I have always admired the words of Ignatius of Antioch, spoken very early in the 2nd Century (ca 110), as he was on his way to Rome to be executed for his faith. He wrote to his fellow believers: "It is meet that we not only be called Christians, but also be Christians."

As so, today, as you and I meditate on our faith, both in thought and prayer, let us think about these truths so important to us and discover once again for ourselves who this Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, really is. And when we do, let him live in and through us enlightening and strengthening our hearts and the hearts of all those whom we meet.