



JESUS: SAGE OR SACRIFICE?

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LEFT
El Greco, The Resurrection,
1596-1600

Jesus taught. An even cursory reading of the Gospel texts demonstrates that a significant amount of Jesus' public ministry was given over to preaching and teaching. Jesus' teaching is also distinctive; while he clearly understood himself within the tradition of Jewish teaching, worship, and praxis, Jesus also presented himself as enlarging or fulfilling that tradition. Hence, perceptive readers of Matthew's Gospel can clearly pick up hints that Jesus is understood as a new "Moses," a new, authoritative lawgiver for God's People.

But is that all Jesus is? Since the early modern period, and for a number of complex historical reasons that need not be rehearsed here, it has become common (and easy) to see Jesus largely as a sage, a philosopher of sorts, an itinerant preacher who offered insight and wisdom about the human condition and moral behavior, a teacher of peace, tolerance, and acceptance. An early American intellectual like Thomas Jefferson could produce an edition of the Gospel, tellingly entitled *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, which is purged of anything supernatural or seemingly mysterious, anything that cannot or could not be "proven" within the canons of modern, empirical science, anything which might be a matter of the evangelists' interpretation, rather than the historically verifiable "facts" (more commonly known as The Jeffersonian Bible). What is left is largely a collection of sayings, aphorisms, and teachings about moral behavior. This is a very limited presentation of who Jesus is, and further it presumes that his most important work was imparting a particular message or teaching, essentially moral in tenor. This is a Jesus who "says" a lot, and we are left to imagine (or rather, forget or even dismiss as much less significant) what it is that Jesus "did" or (arguably, at least) "does."

This particular misreading of the Gospels, this reduction of Jesus to a wise moral counselor or spiritual therapist, is both easy and perilous. When one domesticates the great Lion of the Tribe of Judah into a tabby cat, his teaching swiftly loses its bite, either because we have made selective use of that teaching, dislodging it from the context of his life and death, or because we have informed it with whatever particular cultural ideal of which we happen at any particular moment to be enamored. It is instructive to note how often the values and priorities of any particular age or culture are “read back” into the words of Jesus; it is a perennial temptation to see in Jesus the instantiation of whatever ideals happen to be prized at any particular juncture in history, revealing much less about God and far more about our own predilections.

The beginning of St John’s Gospel makes the bold claim “the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory” (Jn. 1:14). It is bold not least because it associates *logos*, Word, with *sarx*, flesh, a link almost inconceivable, and likely quite embarrassing, to an educated Greek mind, nourished on the philosophy of Plato, who had a rather dim view of our embodiment. But it is precisely this unity of Word and flesh, of divinity and humanity, which is most distinctive of God’s revelation in Jesus, his Son. By the time of St Paul, the title Christ and the name Jesus – what he does and who he is – had already become instinctively yoked together in liturgical witness to this unity of person and work. Because of what the Tradition has come to call the “hypostatic union” (two complete natures, divine and human, subsisting in the one divine person of the Son), in Jesus we see embodied and enacted perfectly what he taught. It’s not so much that his teaching is tangential; quite the contrary, his teaching is of paramount importance. But this teaching can never be severed or dislocated from the particularities of his life – and his death. As Word-made-flesh, who Jesus is and what Jesus *does* reveals the full meaning of what he *teaches*. He enacts fully his own teaching, and so reveals to us its full meaning and beauty. Of course, this is seen most fully on the Cross, where the completely free gift of self (as *agape*, the sacrificial love he had spoken of so many times to his disciples) is manifested in something simultaneously horrific and beautiful. In fact, this is the “glory” spoken of at the beginning of the Fourth Gospel and to which Jesus alludes throughout his teaching, and it is at this very “hour” that he shows his followers what this love he had been teaching them looks like.

Jefferson’s project (and there have been legion who have promoted similar ideas and approaches since) shares – though for rather different reasons – much with the project of the early gnostic movements, a common element of which is that the details of Jesus’ earthly life and death are understood as somewhat incidental to his teaching; most of the gnostic texts that have been preserved are not narrative gospels (like the four canonical Gospels, which are very much concerned with the particulars of Jesus’ life and the circumstances of his death), but groupings of sayings or teachings (called *logia*, a

diminutive coined in the nineteenth century which captures with unintended irony the woeful reduction and dissipation of the fullness of the incarnate *Logos* proclaimed by the apostolic faith). Most gnostic texts offer little about the crucifixion, and when they do, they expend great effort to dissociate the Christ who had come to reveal a saving *gnosis* from the figure or phantasm named Jesus who suffered on the Cross (modern distinctions between the “Jesus of history” and the “Christ of faith” thus unwittingly ape one of gnosticism’s fundamental concerns). From the perspective of the Great Church, Jesus was indeed sent by God to reveal something. But this revelation was not a set of ideas, a novel doctrine, or particular “data” accessible only to a few, elite intellectuals. Rather, this revelation was very public, almost embarrassingly so: what he reveals about God is shown by who he *is* and what he *does* on the Cross, where he freely offers himself to the Father as a sacrifice “for the life of the world,” pinned to a tree between two otherwise unknown insurgents. Irenaeus in the late second century could aver that it is this Jesus who makes the unseen Father visible (*Adversus Haereses* 4.6.3) and two generations later Origen would follow up with the assertion that God is made accessible only by a correct apprehension of who Jesus is (*De principiis* 1.2.6); and this apprehension is much more than a matter of correct conceptualization. Jesus does not come to tell us “about” God. He comes to *show* us God, God-in-action, as it were, the life-giving and dynamic relationship which the Incarnate Son shares with his Father; an eternal relationship whose Love has been termed in the Tradition their Holy Spirit; a life of self-emptying love into which he invites those who follow him to share, but to do so only by losing or forgetting themselves. And this share, of course, has a significant cost. “Are you not aware,” Paul had rather sternly to remind the Romans, “that you who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” The life of Christians is not fundamentally a morality (though of course, it is indeed this too), but a personal and corporate configuration to a real, living Person: Jesus, the Crucified and Risen One. This configuration to Jesus begun in baptism is expressed fully in Eucharistic communion, where our share in his dying and rising, which Paul tells us we somehow carry about in our own bodies, is made both tangible and personal.

This is why the Eucharist is not just one more thing we Christians “do,” nor even, among the many things we do, the most important, but rather it is the central Mystery that *formats* our existence, our manner of being, our affections, our thoughts, our words, indeed *divinizes* every aspect of our humanity. It is a real participation in the Saving Mystery of the Word-made-flesh-now-made-weak-on-the-Cross (as a brash young intellectual named Augustine would come to discover in the wake of his failed attempts at Platonic ecstasy (*Confessiones* 7.18[24]-7.19[25])); it is a deeply personal share in the Paschal Mystery of the *Logos* who does not remain aloof from the concrete particulars of our earthly existence, and who daily makes himself present on the altar and accessible to believers as the *esca viatorum*, nourishment for pilgrims; it is the foretaste here and now of the Age to come,

an age inaugurated with an Annunciation that one might describe as a covert operation undertaken behind enemy lines and whose scandalous public nadir on a hill outside Jerusalem is the apparent zenith of foolishness. In fact, the first pictorial representation of this moment is not the work of an admirer, but of a satirist whose graffito depicts a man with the head of an ass hanging on a cross, an indictment of those who are so senseless as to follow the Crucified. All of the sacraments of the Church make present in one respect or another not what Jesus taught, but who he *is* and what he *did*—and continues to do—in the life of the Church. Thus St Thomas begins the Third Part of his *Summa* by noting that the sacraments of the Church continue and extend the saving work of the Incarnation (the Word-made-flesh) in time. The sacraments all consist of matter (usually a material element, water, oil, bread, wine) and form (usually particular words spoken), and thus we can experience them as reflecting—and continuing—the paradigm established in the divine economy by the Incarnation of the Word.

This pattern is also witnessed in the lives of the saints, who themselves, Pope Benedict has observed, should serve as “fonts” of theology. At the General Audience of April 13 2011, Pope Benedict concluded a lengthy series of catecheses (spanning a number of years) on the saints. He continually emphasized that the saints— from the Apostles to more contemporary men and women of faith— are a source of theological insight not simply or even primarily as moral exemplars, but more because these individuals, under the guidance of grace, themselves came to embody the Mystery of Christ, each in very different ways. It is not so much that they simply follow with a kind of intense punctiliousness or strident fidelity the words of Jesus the teacher, but rather that they themselves enact and embody anew the Mystery of Christ, revealing in the concrete particularity of their daily life their configuration to Christ which began at baptism. This is certainly more than mere moral imitation. It’s not that they just listen more attentively than others to Christ the teacher or are more self-disciplined in following the moral mandates of his Gospel, but rather that they have *become* something new, new wine-skins, as it were, fashioned anew from their friendship and sacramental communion with him, and so are capable of drinking in what Jesus teaches and thus living a particular, deeply graced kind of life. In effect, it is *his* life they come to live, through a participation in his Mystery recapitulated by sacramental grace within the gritty and often undramatic particularities of their own time and place.



ABOVE
Botticelli,
Adoration of the Magi,
1475

None of this is to suggest that the teaching of Jesus is unimportant; the rather cheeky title of this essay is not meant to imply a real choice. However, it is to suggest that Jesus' teaching is coherent and persuasive—and that we who claim to be his followers are effective witnesses—only when it is understood as part of the fabric of a life lived and handed over freely in sacrificial love; a life communicated to his followers sacramentally. Attempts to abstract from the apostolic kerygma nuggets of wisdom, no matter how well-intentioned, do a disservice to the Gospel of Jesus by presuming (often unconsciously) that Mystery of God in Christ is reducible to bullet-points or as the building blocks of more elaborate moral theories; this does not merely diminish the Gospel, it distorts it. What God has made known and revealed in Christ is not a teaching, no matter how eloquent. Rather, he has given us something even more beautiful: himself.

