

## **What Difference Does Christ Make to the World?**

When I was in law school, one of my courses was in Judaic Law, where I got to know several Jewish scholars. I once got into a discussion with a rabbi who could not believe in Jesus as the Messiah. He asked me, "What did Jesus leave the world that it did not have before?" Judaism, he told me, expects the Messiah to bring about a fundamental change in the world, to herald a world of peace and justice for all people. Clearly, he said, Jesus has not done that. The wars, the violence, the injustice continue. Therefore, he cannot be the Messiah.

Now this rabbi was prepared to admit that, taken as a whole, humanity may be a bit more civilized today than was the case two thousand years ago, but our basic human nature remains the same. Human beings are still selfish, prideful, and hostile toward those who are different.

Consider that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century more people died in wars than in all the previous centuries of human history combined. While our technology has advanced, our propensity for violence has not. Humanity has gone from clubs and swords to guns and bombs. If Jesus announced, what Christians call "the Kingdom of God," where is it?

The rabbi was echoing the comments of John the Baptist. John anticipated a Messiah characterized by strength and authority, one who would eradicate wrongdoing, eliminate evil, and hold oppressive figures accountable. The Messiah would set the world straight. Justice and righteousness would rule the day. The oppressed would be liberated, and the hungry fed. Those who resist would be swept away and cast into the fire. That's what John expected and proclaimed. That's what drew crowds to hear his message and be baptized. Then Jesus arrived on the scene. John stepped aside and essentially said, "O Jesus, go for it! Bring in the Kingdom! Wipe out the old and bring in the new!" And nothing happened.

John found himself not living in a new era but imprisoned in an old-world dungeon with many questions and doubts. Sitting in the dry darkness of Herod's dungeon, John knew he did not have long to live. He didn't want to die still wondering about the Messiah, so he sent word to Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?"

It's a sad question. It is a question that pleads for an answer. "Are you the one I thought you were? Are you the Messiah, or should I wait for someone else?"

This is not only John's question. It's our question. Only our question is compounded by two thousand years of dungeons, injustice, suffering, disease, abuse, exploitation, and death. We look around the world today and ask: Is this really the new world order of Jesus Christ?

So Jesus, are you really the one, or shall we look for another?

Jesus doesn't answer John directly, but he does point to what he has done, all of which reflects the prophet Isaiah's vision for a new humanity. Jesus says, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receives their sight, the lame walk, and lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them."

In effect, Jesus is telling John that the world is being transformed one life at a time. The kingdom of God doesn't come by government programs or global trade agreements or UN resolutions or by force of any kind. It comes when lives are transformed, hearts are changed, and God's Spirit dwells within us. It comes through acts of kindness, goodness and decency that we do for one another. It's those small acts of selfless love that bring in the kingdom of God.

Jesus invited John, and all of us, to consider the positive happenings in the world. Our natural tendency is to ask, "Why is there so much suffering in the world?" Jesus wants us to ask another question: "Why is there so much good in the world?"

Now obviously, non-Christian nations have their own values that are in some cases contrary to Christian values. But think about nations that are formed by the Christian ethic. In most countries, the death penalty has been abolished. Human rights and civil rights are embedded in the justice system. There is still poverty, but destitution and starvation have been replaced by a social safety net. Although insurance companies have their flaws, the quality of our medical care is better now than ever before in human history. And with all our military exploits since 9/11, Western nations have acted in a way that other nations have never acted. For one thing, great care is taken to avoid non-combatant casualties, and this is because "the just war theory"

promulgated by Christian theologians through the centuries has been largely accepted in the West, and including our own country. Secondly is the amount of humanitarian aid – food, blankets, and medical supplies – Western nations have committed to needy parts of the world. What nations in history have waged a war on an enemy while simultaneously feeding its people? True, we are not yet beating our swords into ploughshares. We are not yet shipping grain on B-52 bombers or nuclear aircraft carriers, but we are closer to doing so than we have ever been before. How do we account for that? How do we account for such care, compassion, and concern?

When ancient Rome defeated Carthage for the last time, she burned the city to rubble and put salt on the ground so that nothing would ever grow there again. When the United States defeated Nazi Germany, we developed the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe, including Germany, out of the devastation. Such an action of helping an enemy to rebuild would have been unthinkable in the ancient world, but not in a country like the United States where Christianity remains a pervasive force for good.

There is a story of an ancient king of Babylon who came back to life and visited one of our modern cities. His host showed him the underside of the city: brothels, gambling and drug dens, and bars, and the like.

The king was polite but bored. He said, “We had all these in Babylon three thousand years ago, and overall, we did it better. Have you nothing new to show me?”

So his guide reversed field and took the king to churches, day care centers, libraries, hospitals, public health centers, research laboratories, transient centers, institutions for the disabled, soup kitchens and shelters for the homeless.

“Ah,” said the king, “all this is new. We didn’t have these things in Babylon.”

Yes, they didn’t have those things in Babylon because they didn’t have Jesus Christ. I challenge you to go into any non-Christian nation in the world and find the level of ministry to the intellectual, social, physical, and spiritual needs of people that you will find in those countries where there is a strong Christian influence. Search the histories of the great universities, the great

hospitals, charities, and you will find, often, that they were founded by committed Christians.

It is not hyperbole to say that the whole course of human history was changed by the coming of Jesus into our world. Art, music, literature, Western culture itself with all its institutions as well as our understanding of ourselves and our world – it is impossible to conceive how differently things would have turned out if Jesus had never come into our world.

Socrates taught for 40 years, Plato for 50, Aristotle for 40, and Jesus for only 3. Yet, the influence of Christ's three-year ministry infinitely transcends the impact left by the combined 130 years of teaching from these three men, who were the greatest philosophers of all antiquity. Jesus painted no pictures, yet some of the finest paintings of Raphael, Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci received their inspiration from him. Jesus wrote no poetry, but Dante, Milton, and scores of the world's greatest poets were inspired by him. Jesus built no buildings, but St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, Notre Dame in Paris and St. Paul's Cathedral in London, are some of the most beautiful buildings in the world. Jesus composed no music, but Haydn, Handel, Beethoven, Bach and Mendelssohn reached their highest perfection of melody in the hymns, symphonies and oratorios they composed in his praise. Every sphere of human greatness has been enriched by this humble carpenter of Nazareth.

But, of course, Jesus does much more than enrich our world. His unique contribution is the salvation of the soul. Philosophy could not accomplish that. Nor art, nor literature, nor music, nor politics. Only Jesus can save us from sin. He provides peace to individuals, offers support to those experiencing weakness, and fosters renewal in those facing spiritual challenges.

Christians are going through a difficult time in Nigeria right now, with intense persecution by Islamic extremists. One of the reasons Christians in Africa are so strong in their faith is that they have experienced and withstood violence, kidnapping, mayhem and murder by their opponents. Africa has a long tradition of producing martyrs for the faith, but also some of the most committed Christians in the world.

Some of us may remember Idi Amin who ruled Uganda and initiated a reign of terror against Christians. The Anglican Archbishop of Uganda was

murdered, and many bishops and priests fled the country into exile to avoid the same fate.

One priest stayed with his people. On a day when he was not in the village, Amin's soldiers came and burnt to the ground all the homes in the village, including the church. When the priest returned, he saw the village in carnage. He found the people weeping over the ashes that were previously their thatched roofs. One of his parishioners said to him, "They even burned my Bible and hymn book."

And then, in the ruins, the priest saw a little white paper not totally burned. He picked it up and read it. The only thing that remained was, "Joy to the world, the Lord is come." He stopped for a moment and then he said, "That's enough for me."

Yes, Jesus is enough for us. As I preached last week, some of us may be going through difficult times this holiday season. We may have lost a loved one. Our health may be failing. Our children or grandchildren may worry us. Vitriol and violence in the world may cause us to fret about the future. But whatever your pain or problems, take heart. To John the Baptist's question, "Are you the one who is to come or shall we expect another?" Jesus gives us the assurance that the kingdom of God is coming into this world one life at a time. Emmanuel – God with us – allows us to sing amid the ashes, "Joy to the world, the Lord is come."

Let me conclude by returning to my discussion with the rabbi who asked, "What did Jesus leave the world that it did not have before?" We still have death and evil, and suffering and wars, and diseases and heartbreaks. How did Jesus change the world? What have we now, after Jesus, that we did not have before?

The answer is simple. We have God. God in person, God incarnate, God in the flesh. We have the eternal Son of God who was made man, and who suffered and died, and rose for our salvation, and who is still here in the Church, the sacraments, and especially in the Eucharist. You and I are invited to receive Jesus in our hearts by faith every time we partake of the bread and wine of Holy Communion.

In Jesus, God is with us always and forever. In Jesus, we face the future with faith knowing that God is with us every step of the way. In Jesus, we have

the assurance that at the end of our life is new life with God in heaven. In Jesus, we never lose hope because at the end of history God wins, love wins, life wins.

As I leave you as your interim rector, I charge you, the dear people of Advent Church, to live in the confidence that God has come to you in Jesus. Show love, compassion, kindness, mercy and generosity to the people in your community and to one another. Open your heart to him, believe in him, and trust him to lead you through the journey of this life into the presence of his radiant light. Jesus will guide you, comfort you and sustain you all the days of your life because he is our Lord, our Savior and our God.

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