

Jesus Christ: The Full Story

- *Christ the King*
- *November 21, 2010*
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The Solemnity of Our Lord Christ the King, the last Sunday of the year-long contemplation of Christ, is like the capstone course or senior synthesis of our faith in and following of Jesus Christ. It all comes together today in a summing up of who he is and who we are in him. A synthesis is needed to present Jesus Christ whole and the difference he makes in our lives. This is especially needed when studies of Americans show them to be what are called “Moralistic Therapeutic Deists”, that is, persons of a generic religiosity concerned with doing good, feeling good about themselves, and relating to a problem-solving but distant God. For “Moralistic Therapeutic Deists”, or MTDs, Christ does not make a real difference. Some of this is in all of us; we are infected by it from our culture. All of us need to be challenged by the reality of God made known in the real Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ makes a difference.

I would like, therefore, on this synthesis Sunday to present to you as succinctly as I can what I call “Jesus Christ: The Full Story”. Consider what I have already said as the preface. This story has four chapters: Who Jesus of Nazareth was; who we came to understand him to be; who he is now; and who he will be.

Chapter one: Who was Jesus of Nazareth

This Jewish peasant prophet can only be understood and could only understand himself as the one promised by God, the one in whom God powerfully worked to fulfill his promise of redemption. No man ever spoke as he did; no one ever worked so powerfully to heal as he did; no one ever demanded such repentance from people; or claimed so much about who he truly was as did Jesus of Nazareth. You can't get around him: his challenges, his truth, his compassion, his claim, his call. History divides with him; before and after: no one like him before, no one like him after.

This greatest, most compelling and concrete individual of all time, however, was completely without ego. He was totally dependent on God, his Father, fully from him, fully for him, fully turning us to his God, his Father. Look to Jesus of Nazareth and you can't stop with him, but through him are brought to God, for he is not one who stands in himself but is transparent to God. He is the way, the truth, and the life not of himself but of God.

Simply put, in being who he was, he was too much to take; he made clear and compelling too challenging a God. He had to be put away, killed, crucified by the most demeaning of deaths by the most powerful empire, the Romans. But he could not be put away. The God he depended on and made known vindicated him, raised him up in his full reality, and commissioned him to send forth followers filled with his spirit. That's chapter one of the full story.

Chapter two: Who we came to understand Jesus Christ to be

The Holy Spirit, sent by Jesus and falling upon his followers, led them into the fullness of truth about who he was, Jesus Christ, Lord. Communities which gathered in his name, telling his story in the light of God's promises in the Hebrew scriptures, and breaking bread in memory of him as he had asked them to do, came to understand who he most fully was. They did not, as it were, gradually figure this out. Rather they were given it and gradually elaborated in words, first in hymns, then in letters, eventually in creeds the truth of Jesus Christ, Son of God, word made Flesh, heart of the Trinity the one through whom all was created, fully God and fully man, Savior, Lord.

It was not however all words, this spirit-driven process of understanding who Jesus Christ was. In fact he was more understood in lives: in bold apostles, in martyrs able to die because of how he died, in men and women saints manifesting in their lives the manifold holiness of his life, in communities of worship where his spirit abounded, in a communion of lives which lived as his body and he as its head. In lives, his life and truth and full story was made known and came to be understood. This truth was discovered, kept, treasured, transmitted, ever more fully understood, in the Church as his light to nations, and to every generation and to ours. We would be arrogant or we would be ignorant to think we could in our day know or have access to Jesus Christ if it were not for the Church. That's the second chapter of the full story of Jesus Christ.

Chapter three: Who is Jesus Christ today

It would be a marvel in itself if the story were only of this inescapable Jesus of Nazareth dividing history into two and then this spirit-led full understanding of him over time right up to us. But that's not the full story, not even the best part of it. The best part is that he is alive today in his full reality: his reality touched in the towns of Galilee and more fully seen through the centuries. He is with us and we live in him. That's the best chapter of the fully story, not a Jesus of back then or a Christ of tradition and theology, but one who gives himself to us today in his risen full reality, brings us alive in himself, calls us together, makes us alive with his life, unites us with the Father in the Spirit. The present chapter should be called union.

It should also be called communion. He sends us out in his name and with power to do as he did, to minister and serve with his compassion and love the least, in whom he assures us we serve him. So it's a double communion: with him in us and with him in others. No previous age, not even the first, had closer access to him and no fuller knowing of him than we do. In fact the fullness of his story is still being written and we are acting in, even writing, that story of his. This communion is always—as he was and is—a transparency to God, to the Father, a surrender to the One who is his life and ours. This third chapter of communion calls for prayer.

Chapter four: Who Jesus Christ will be

There is a fourth and final chapter in the fully story of Jesus Christ, completing who he was, who he came to be understood to be, and who he is today. The final chapter, still unwritten but already clearly outlined by him, is who Jesus Christ will be. There shall come a day, a final day, a day which will always be day, when Christ will raise us up to live and reign with him as king on this transformed earth of ours, when he will then hand all over to the Father from whom he comes. The pledge of that future day was his own full bodily resurrection and the pledge is our communion with his spirit groaning even now in us for our resurrection and the resurrection with us of the world itself.

The fully story of Jesus Christ does not end in heaven but on earth, in what Jesus always preached, was passionate about, and initiated: the Kingdom of God on earth. How we live now, how we pray and worship in him, how we serve others in him is our sharing in how he is bringing about that Kingdom of God on earth. In the end Christ will be all in all and all will be given to the Father. This fourth, final chapter transforms the other three, giving them an assured hope of where the Christ story is going and we with him. Knowing the end and being in communion with the one going there shows what the love and compassion of God, made known in Jesus, is really and fully like. It shines a light back over the full story and gives light to our following of Jesus Christ into the future.

So there you have it! This is the capstone course of our faith in Jesus Christ on this synthesis Sunday of Our Lord Christ the King. It is both his story and it is our story if we are his. It's a story in four chapters beautifully told and made real each time we gather for Eucharist: chapter one: scriptures; chapter two: creed; chapter three: communion within Eucharist; chapter four: our being sent. That's the fully story. We celebrate in the Mass the full story every Sunday. Whether we are indeed "Moralistic Therapeutic Deists" or not, Jesus Christ makes a difference.