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October 13, 2019 Message: "What about Jesus?"

What about Jesus has raised (pardon the pun) so many questions? Why do so many people believe in him? Who was he? Did he really exist? We have no eye-witness accounts; we have stories that were written down years later expressing church viewpoints and assembled by vote of the early Christian hierarchy. Those stories present very different views of who he was and what he was about. Let me share with you just one.

According to the Gospel of Mark, Jesus went through moments of anxiety and uncertainty just as we do. For example, in the Garden of Gethsemane he wept and asked for the bitter cup to "pass from me." On the cross he cried out to God, "Why has thou forsaken me?" He had doubts; he felt frustrated in trying to communicate his mission. He asked his disciples, "Who do they say I am?" They answered that some believe him to be "John the Baptist," others that he is "Elijah," or "one of the other prophets," like Jeremiah. This didn't seem to satisfy Jesus so he pushes them further and says, "And you, who do you say I am?" Maybe he was uncertain as to his identity, maybe he wanted more of a commitment out of them. Anyway, the disciples, those closest to him didn't do too well in their responses such that he rebuked them in anger. So, it is no surprise that those of us who live at the distance of two thousand years are also uncertain as to who Jesus was and what his life and death means.

Recent books raise more questions than they answer. Bart Ehrman in his book, "How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee," indicates that at that time many people believed in stories of Gods impregnating mortals and having God like offspring. It was believed that Hercules' father was the God Jupiter, and his mother a mortal. Ehrman says that the resurrection story started after some of his followers claimed to have seen him after his death. Ehrman points out that it is not uncommon for people who have lost loved ones to report seeing them. In his earlier book, "Misquoting Jesus," Ehrman shows the inconsistencies in the Christian Bible stories about Jesus; how over the centuries copying errors and the addition of new theological perspectives crept into the stories. The Jesus Seminar, made up of modern scholars, conclude that Jesus was a Jewish sage and faith healer; they say only a small portion of the words and stories attributed to him may have actually been said by him. For example, they believe he did say the Beatitudes of blessed are the poor, the hungry, and those who weep, and that we should "turn the other cheek."

In the book, "Appointment in Jerusalem: A Search for the Historical Jesus," the author Max Dimont, portrays seven different faces, ways of understanding what Jesus was all about. Each theory explains some details of the Gospel stories that others do not.

The first face portrayed is the one that has held sway in traditional Christianity for centuries. Early church councils voted that Jesus was not a man, but a god, the "Son of God." In this story God orchestrates a drama of cosmic proportions, a battle between good and evil. God uses Jesus to his ends, that of reconciliation with his fallen creation. The Jews were expecting a Messiah, who would make things right in this world; the early Christian theologians said that Jesus was the Messiah, but what he was offering was salvation in the next world instead, if we submit to the authority of the church, believe in this theory of atonement, and leave behind this-world concerns.

The second portrait is that of a Jewish Messiah, not a Christian one. The term used for the Jewish Messiah meant the "Son of Man," which is what Jesus called himself. Many of the sayings attributed to him were but quotes from earlier Jews. For example, similar words to "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth," were attributed to King David years before in Psalm 37:11 we read: "The meek shall possess and delight themselves in abundant prosperity." One scholar, [Charles Guingnebert,] concludes, "Jesus was born a Jew, lived the life of a Jew, and died as a Jew with a Jewish prayer on his lips. He was made a Christian posthumously."

A picture of Jesus as a freedom fighting zealot is the third one we can see in the Gospel stories. He and his crew came from Galilee, which was the seat of the insurrection against Roman subjugation. The people who welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday shouted "Save us, free us, Jesus, Son of David," which was the lineage from which the Jewish Messiah, who would save them from oppression, was to come. Palms were not a sign of peace, but of victory, that were handed to the conqueror. The wording over the heads of the two men who were crucified next to Jesus read in the original Greek not "thief" but "rebel." The Romans only crucified political insurgents. It was for allowing himself to be called the "King of the Jews," which words were printed over his head on the cross, that Jesus was crucified. Was Jesus a political "Zealot" as Reza Aslan in his recent book of that title suggests?

The fourth scenario delineated by Mr. Dimont is that Jesus believing himself to be the Jewish Messiah masterminded his experience in Jerusalem. He said that things he did were done in order to fulfill the prophecies about the Messiah. In this view he may not have died on the cross, but rather had his disciples retrieve his body after it was put in the tomb. Scholars who believe this theory point out that Jesus was only on the cross for six hours; it usually took several days to die from crucifixion. It is written that his side was pierced with a spear to make sure he was dead before he was taken down and that blood and water poured forth from his side. These unbelievers point out that blood does not pour out from a corpse as the heart is not beating and pushing it forth.

A fifth way of understanding Jesus and his message came to light with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, ancient writings from the Jewish sect, the Essenes. Like them Jesus proclaimed that the end of the world was at hand and that we should leave mother and father, and family, and the ways of the flesh to cleanse ourselves for the apocalyptic second coming and ending of the world. Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, who was clearly an Essene. According to Mr. Dimont a ritual very similar to the Last Supper was practiced by the Essenes years before Jesus gathered his disciples that fateful Friday.

The sixth view is that of Pauline Christianity. Like the first view it asserts that if you believe by faith that Christ arose from the dead you will be saved from your depravity and live for an eternity of joy in an afterlife. "Death, where is your sting?" Saint Paul proclaimed. Paul spiritualized Jesus and emphasized not his life and teachings, but his death and resurrection. He developed the concept of salvation through belief in the resurrection, and through the cross, on which we must die to our self-centeredness in order to be born again to eternal life.

The seventh perspective one might take on the life and death of Jesus was made apparent with the discovery of the Gnostic gospels. For example, a recently discovered

fragment indicates that Jesus had a wife. These writing of early Christians in Egypt were branded as heretical and if you read them you would see why. They portray a mystical notion of Jesus as spirit not body, yet celebrated union with him through ecstatic experiences that some said were orgies.

All of these views have some plausibility, or one could take some combination of them as the truth. Albert Schweitzer, in his great book, "The Quest for the Historical Jesus," concludes that we will never be able to find the real person, the historical Jesus, and that everyone who looks for him ends up projecting their own views.

Was he the "Son of God," or the "Son of Man," was he the Messiah bringing salvation in an after-life, or liberation in this one, a revolutionary, or a visionary? Was he judgmental, or forgiving, a political zealot bringing a sword, or a religious leader bringing peace? Was he a teacher, a pastor, a prophet, a guru, a victim, a model, a fool, or a friend?

Kahil Gibran in his book "Jesus the Son of Man" tells a mythic story in which, "Once in every hundred years Jesus of Nazareth meets Jesus the Christian in a garden among the hills of Lebanon. And they talk long; and each time Jesus of Nazareth goes away saying to Jesus the Christian, "My friend, I am afraid we shall never, never agree."

I am surprised they even recognize each other. As religions become institutionalized, trying to make their teachings more accessible and people manageable, they seem to change the religion of the prophets on whose foundations they claim to be based. Paul interpreted what he believed happened in the life and death of Jesus and developed a theology about it, and his theology clearly has great value to it, but I do not think Jesus would recognize what the church has done in the name of his religion. We cannot follow his example, the theology of Saint Paul says, so Christianity offers the relief of belief instead.

I think that all the various beliefs and views about Jesus have developed because they, he, speaks to something deep in human nature, our need for love and justice. I think Jesus and the theology the Christian church developed about him speaks to so many people because it invites us to believe in the transformative power of love; it gives people hope; it proclaims that the miracle of life even surpasses the reality of death; it says that someone in power somewhere in this vast universe cares about us, and that injustice and pain will not last forever, that inner and world peace are possible. Jesus offers hope, a faith to transcend our fear. That is a powerful, liberating message, a faith in the efficacy of love.

What do you believe about Jesus? I do not believe in his resurrection, nor in the theology of atonement that developed about him, that we will never be able to be good or free, unless we turn control of our lives over to God as defined by the Christian church.

I believe that he existed, that he was a real human being; that he was a great moral teacher, who asked people to "feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick," to create a more just society and peaceful world.

I believe that, like Jesus, we all have some of that goodness in us that some call God, or the divine, and that we can develop that goodness. Jesus developed his potential for goodness, so can we. Jesus is a model for me. His courage and commitment to love and truth inspire me. He is a model of selfless giving, of the

transformative power of love. He asks us to “love our neighbors as ourselves.” I think that is still a good model.

As Jesus asked his disciples then, I imagine he would ask us now, not, do you believe in me, not who do you say I am, but, who are you? Are you realizing your potential for good? What would help you move beyond the fear and anxiety caused by selfishness to serve those who mourn, the oppressed, and needy? And, I imagine, he would ask us, "How can I help you?" He was that kind of guy.

The question we should be asking is not “What about Jesus?” but “What about us”? What are we doing to serve others? What about us is Jesus like? How can we be more loving like Jesus? We may not choose to give our lives to create a better world as some do, but certainly we can all do more, if only we could get beyond our fear. Jesus invites us to have faith in God or in goodness; to believe that developing our goodness is worth it, that it will win out in the end. Using the trinity of love, hope, and courage, we can learn to share, to be kinder; we can courageously give more of ourselves to help create a more just and peaceful world. Jesus is a reminder of that. May he rest in peace and may we, following his example, create more of it. Amen.