

B proper 16  
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RCL Ephesians 6.19

## The Mystery of the Gospel

I love a good mystery. I've been a fan of Agatha Christie and Nero Wolf for years. I buy dvds of mystery stories. My bedtime reading is usually a good murder mystery. And then there are the mysteries of daily life, like, why does the washing machine turn all the underwear inside out, why does the washing machine eat solitary socks, where do clothes hangers hide when you need one, how does the refrigerator hide food until green rot turns it into a disgusting mess, where do dust bunnies come from?

So you can see why a phrase from today's *Ephesians* reading caught my attention: the mystery of the gospel. What is the mystery of the gospel? Words are fun and words are instructive, so that's a good place to begin our meditation. "Mystery" has lots of meanings but the most generic is something that puzzles. "Gospel" is a survival into modern English of the Old English word meaning good news. So our phrase means something like the challenging puzzle of the good news.

What is the good news? In Christian theology, the good news is Jesus Christ, His person and His message.

His message was relatively simple, though challenging. The best of His Jewish tradition said that there is a God who knows and cares, much as a human person does. This God loves His creation, especially the weak and vulnerable, and has called human beings into work for goodness and beauty, what we call holiness. That's the good part that Jesus kept. The part that Jesus rejected was the restrictions and rules that hedged the glory of that message about so tightly that only the wealthy and the powerful had the resources to obey them all. That's why He took a loose relationship to the Law of Moses as interpreted by contemporary Jewish teachers. It simply didn't serve the God of love and mercy that Jesus knew so intimately. So here is part of the mystery of the good news: how to respond to God's call to goodness and beauty (holiness) for all, employing the guidance of past wisdom without getting trapped into useless rules and regulations. It's the mystery of the balance between freedom and discipline, and Christians spend a fair amount of time trying to find the right balance for themselves, both personally and as a community. Controversy within the church in any age is always about this balance. Turmoil within a particular individual is always about this balance. Part of the problem is that, within the broad call to holiness (goodness and beauty), there is a range of responses. What is good for one person is not good for another. How do we keep standards and respect the God-given uniqueness of the individual? It's a mystery that engages us throughout our lives.

The other half of the mystery of the good news is the person of Jesus. What and who is He? Jesus Himself, at least from the evidence of the books about Him, seems not to have been too worried about this. He just lived in the power of the moment and in the power of His relationship to God. He seems to have been aware that His time for God's work was limited and that the work involved great sacrifice for Himself. Who He was and what authority He exercised were more issues for others. We see evidence of their struggle in the New Testament, and that

struggle has certainly continued down through Christian thought and theology since. It is the question every individual faces who encounters Jesus: who are you and should I pay attention?

The answer that His people, the Church, has formulated and is still formulating goes something like this. The what: Jesus is a human being, which makes Him comprehensible and approachable; He is one of us, brother to each and every person; He has lived a life of sorrow and joy, love and indifference, life and death. But in Jesus there was something more, and it is this “something more” that is the question; it is the question brought by the resurrection. Some saw Him as teacher and prophet, and no more. Some saw something more that was at the least like unto the Son of God that the Roman Caesar claimed. Others, more thoughtful and more based in Jewish thought, saw Him as the expression of God’s wisdom from the Jewish Scriptures, God’s personal wisdom that we see in the books of *Proverbs* and *Ecclesiastes*. Others, more thoughtful still and perhaps more mystical, took off from there and saw His identity in the God of the Jewish scriptures, the Creator who made all that is, the Lover who will not leave Her people alone, the Compassionate who is utterly committed to the welfare of His creature. With this God, resurrection made sense. These are the ones who finally saw that the Who of Jesus was intimately bound to the What of Jesus: Jesus was a unique manifestation of God living out a real human life. That, of course, raised as many questions as it answered, and we don’t have time to go into that part of the mystery. But one of the things it did do was to unite us human beings intimately to our God, because Jesus is both divine and human. He is the bridge, enabling communication between God and man, human life commingled with divine life.

So here are aspects of the mystery of the gospel: the good news of God, God’s love, and God’s Messiah. But wait. There is more. The mystery is not finished. For you and I are part of the mystery of the gospel. We are good news for the world we live in. We are part of the unique expression of God into Her creation. Every human being is part of God’s mystery, for each of us is an expression of the beauty and goodness of God. That alone would be breath-taking. But there is more. God gives Himself into each person in a fashion beyond mere creation. It is what the Church calls grace, and it is the life of God Himself. Now isn’t that a puzzlement and isn’t that good news? How do we live with that? Well, we are in the midst of the answer; we are in the midst of life, life with all its mystery, life with all its good news.

We Christians have a special responsibility within the family of men and women, for we are the ones who know in a specific, focused sense what the mystery of the good news is about. We are the ones who glory in God’s creation. We are the ones who know that God goes beyond creation in making us a part of Himself. We are the ones who have this amazing treasure to give away to the world who does not know how valuable it is, how much God wants us for Himself. We are the ones who know that feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, healing the sick, rooting out political corruption, teaching the ignorant and confused, comforting the dying – all are part of the mystery of the gospel, the puzzlement of the good news of God-with-us and we-with-God.

Good mystery stories in books and dvds and everyday life keep us on our toes, keep us alert, keep us guessing. For the mystery of the gospel is ours for the living, and it will not be solved until the last breath of the last creature in the last moment of the universe.