

B Proper 08
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RCL

The Chief Cornerstone

The Christian understanding of God is founded on the person and personality of Jesus Christ. Christians see many sources of the revelation of God into our world, chief among these being the creation itself (Romans 1.20), and the Bible. But Jesus is the primary, the extraordinary, the unique revelation of the nature and person of God. He is one of a kind, a supernal uniqueness.

So when we ask those questions that are really important in life – Who am I? What am I here for? What should I do? Is there a God? What is God like? What does God want of me? – when we ask ourselves these searching questions, we have sources to go to: yes, the magnificence and beauty of the universe; yes, the story we see in the Old Testament of God's choosing of creation as something that He loves in particular; yes, the witness of the New Testament story of Jesus; yes, the love of our grandmothers; yes, the beauty of a rose. All these and more reveal our God to us.

But the primary Word of God to us is God Himself (John 1.1-18), God living a human life in Jesus of Nazareth. So Christians look for encounter with Jesus to help them answer these foundational questions. So where do we find Jesus? Let me count the ways:

One, of course, is in scripture, scripture seen not primarily as the word of God but as the story of a person. My mother is terrified of thunder and lightening, a fear that as a little boy I didn't understand. Only when she told me the story of her family's house being struck by lightening and burning to the ground in a terrible storm when she was eight years old did I begin to understand. Just as stories tell us things about our family and ancestors, so the stories of the Old Testament tell us of the preparation of a people – the Jews and through them the entire human race – for a world-changing act on the part of God. Stories in the New Testament tell us of the earthly life of Jesus and His followers, of the changes in their lives that living with Him brought about. The point of these stories is that we, too, will be changed if we let the encounters with their Central Figure really soak into our lives, our conscious and our unconscious.

Another form of revelation of Jesus is in the lives of people around us. We see in some people sterling examples of the foundational compassion and love exhibited by Jesus. Some of these people are in our families, but our neighborhoods and cities and indeed the whole world are filled with people who show us the extraordinary power of commitment, love, sacrifice, and obedience to a godly will. If we interpret properly, even those people who lack these characteristics show us what living without responding to God means: arrogance, selfishness, despair. We should note here that Jesus can be revealed every bit as much in the lives of nonchristians as in the lives of Christians. I believe that the power of Jesus is so subtle and so pervasive that the whole universe and every creature is marked by His characteristics.

Another form of the revelation of Jesus is our self. Most of us find it difficult to close out the distractions of daily life and plumb the depths of our own person, the self that is the foundation of our existence. Introverts do this more readily than extroverts, but everyone finds resistance to going down into the depths of who we are. But when we do, we find that we are not alone. There is another presence with us. The psychologist Carl Jung, who was not a Christian, described this presence in his psychological writings. He recognized it as a divine manifestation and wrestled with what this divine presence could mean. Christians identify this experience as the Holy Spirit, the personal Spirit of God that makes the experience of Jesus present throughout the universe, canceling out the limitations of space and time.

Another form of the revelation of Jesus is what we term the mystical, far more common than usually thought. Mystics encounter God directly. We have the writings of some mystics who struggle to convey to us what they have perceived. But mystical experiences are given to almost everyone, though we often fail to recognize them for what they are. They are characterized by a sense of something present beyond ourselves, beyond the normal meaning of here-and-now, leading into an unknown, greater reality than we are used to. These moments can come at different points in our lives and in different ways. Some people have mystical divine encounters in music, in sexual intercourse, in the wisdom of older age, in the closeness of long-lasting love and friendship, in wonder before the mystery of life, in the births of our children, our puppies, our kittens, our roses, the joy in discovering the workings of a universe that is as beautiful as it is mysterious, the wisdom and comfort of Scripture, sometimes just a moment of quiet and reassurance. The list is as long and as varied as the human race itself. What is common to all these is the feeling that a larger reality is here, a reality that is loving, compassionate, reassuring, strengthening. Christians see this as the presence of God's Spirit that enabled and strengthened Jesus, and enables and strengthens us. It is a revelation of Jesus in the living out of our lives.

What form that revelation takes in your life and mine, in our selves, in the mystical moments unique to each person, we don't have time here to explore. That is what friendships, love, study groups, prayer groups, and other forms of giving ourselves to others is about.

Let me just focus for a moment on what are the things we learn from the story of Jesus in Old and New Testament. We learn that God is involved with Her creation and especially, at least from our human point of view, with the human race. We learn that God makes demands for obedient, sacrificial, loving response from us. We learn that there are consequences to our response to divine initiative, creative and comforting when we are positive, confusion and dissatisfaction when we are negative. We learn that the negative can always be turned to the positive, that God is always looking for transforming the lesser into the greater, repentance in biblical terms. We learn that the transcendence of God is focused into the Person of Jesus Christ. We learn that this Person of Jesus is available to everyone through the timeless, limitless activity of God's Spirit. We learn that our lives matter – to ourselves, to one another, to God. Everything we are and do is part of the eternity that we will live with God after the transformation of our death.

This is why Christians hold so tightly to the Person of Jesus Christ. He is the cornerstone in our life's foundation. Jesus is our guide, our direction, our way, our strength, our encouragement, our comfort, our joy. Jesus encompasses all of creation, every creature, every human being. No one is left out. Jesus is the reason for the season, as the jingle says, this season of God's presence and working in the world. The prayer we prayed a few minutes ago said this: "Almighty God, you have built your Church upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone..." May we each believe what we pray. Amen.