

Who Christ is to you shapes what you are

Sermon by Andy Wurm, Seventeenth Sunday of Pentecost, 16th September 2018

When I turn on my computer at home, the first thing that appears on my screen is a picture of Jesus. It's not *The Last Supper*, or Jesus on the cross, rather it's Jesus wearing a crown and holding a machine gun, saying 'don't make me come down there!'. That image of Jesus gives me a laugh because it caricatures a range of bad beliefs about Jesus – firstly the notion that Jesus is up above us, looking down in judgement and ready to punish us if we do the wrong thing and then suggesting that Jesus uses violence to deal with our flaws. Behind that lies the assumption that God used him in that way and now having conquered all, he has the right to carry on like that. Why do I let such a bad image of Jesus greet me every time I turn on my computer? It's to remind me of my own tendency to do something similar in the way I picture myself and others.

In Christianity we talk about believing in Jesus. We believe in Jesus, because, as John's Gospel tells us, he is the Way, the Truth and the Life. But what does that mean? If we were ancient Greeks, it would mean that Jesus is truly God, for example. It's taking all that is said about Jesus as being correct information: for example, he does heal us, he is our savior, he did rise from death. But we are not ancient Greeks, so referring to Jesus as truth doesn't mean that. Instead, it means that we come into truth by following him, by living his Way, by allowing his life to shape us. For this reason, our ideas about Jesus matter not so much because of what they say about him, but for how they shape our lives.

This is played out in today's gospel story. Jesus asks his disciples who he is to them. Peter says to him, Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus gives him the thumbs up, until Peter rejects suffering having any part in that. If believing in Jesus means allowing Jesus to shape the way you live, then Peter isn't just saying he doesn't want Jesus to suffer, he's also saying that he's not so keen on the idea either. Actually, what Peter would prefer, is that Jesus be more like the machine-gun-toting image on my computer, however, by the end of the gospel, Peter surrenders to belief – not in the form of accepting that Jesus really rose from death, but in the form of allowing himself to be loved and giving himself to love others.

Who do you say Jesus is? What if someone asked you who Jesus is, what would you say? It's a fundamental question, because the real gift to the world of Christianity is not Christianity, but Jesus. Jesus is what we have to offer the world, not in the sense of us having something that no-one else has, but in the sense of becoming people who are shaped by him and in the sense of inviting others to let the same thing happen to them.

Notice in the gospel story the references to Jesus as *the Son of Man*. A contemporary translation for that is *the Human One*. *The Human One* is the archetypal human. He is the truly human one, who shows us how to be human and invites us to create a more humane world. If that's all he was, then believing in Jesus would just mean following in his Way, or being human in the way he shows us. Does that mean that he's really just someone to admire and emulate? What's not to like about his great commandment: to love one another? Is believing in Jesus then, just a matter of loving one another?

It is, but only as long as we don't take it to be something we try hard to do. The danger in that comes from the fact that we aren't always great at knowing what the loving thing is. In today's gospel story, Peter thinks the loving thing to do is to steer Jesus away from the direction he's going. Even those who killed Jesus thought it was the loving thing to do – not for him of course, but for their people.

When Jesus calls us to love one another, he's not commanding us to put effort into being nice to each other. He's inviting us to let our lives be shaped in a way that makes that the norm. He's talking about reshaping our desire. The Good Samaritan is an example. He doesn't think about the consequences of touching a ritually-unclean person and he doesn't weigh up the potential cost of leaving his credit card with the inn-keeper to pay for whatever the man needs. He is driven solely by the desire to care for him.

The trouble is, that is not our 'natural' desire, or rather it's not the desire we are enculturated in, the desire we have had grown in us by our society. The crucified Jesus is our image of what the desire we are given by our society ultimately leads to. It is hard for us to love a rejected person lying in the gutter, when so much about us leads to putting people in the gutter, and even putting ourselves there.

Jesus, *the Human One*, leads us into letting go of old desires and allowing new desires to drive us. It is as God in human form that he does that, and we need that, because what really enables us to love one another, is knowing that we are loved. Believing in Jesus then, also means letting ourselves be loved, not just by people close to us, but especially by God, because God's love is perfect, unending and cannot be challenged.

So who is Jesus then? Jesus is the One who embodies God's love for us and shows what that is. And what that is, is delight. Yes, God delights in you and me, in the same way we delight in others. Years ago, in the parish I was serving, there was a Russian bloke named Peter, who had once been reigning state chess champion. One of my fellow priests took his daughter to take him on in a game of chess. As his daughter made the first move, my fellow priest described Peter as virtually *salivating with joy*. He got so much delight from her giving her best. I felt something similar upon reading about the chess champion who visited my children's school and played twenty kids at once, beating them all. What delight there is when someone shines. But God's delight for us is there all the time.

Jesus once said that it's harder for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. Similarly, it's harder for a person who has their own conditions for love to experience God's love, than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. We cannot know God's delighting in us, while we are driven by conditional notions of love and acceptability. When our notions of what is acceptable humanity are so shaped by our society (and possibly bad religion), how can we accept and be shaped by the non-judgmental delight of God? The only way is for our conditional notions of love to be dismantled first and that dismantling will be experienced as a kind of dying. Or it can even be described as *denying yourself, and taking up your cross*. It's *losing your life, in order to save it*. Losing the life that is run by what society (and bad religion) says is acceptable humanity, in order to let God-blessed humanity come forth. Believing in Jesus then, also means discerning the ways you judge and condemn others (and so also yourself), and having accepted that about yourself, beginning to let that go by opening yourself to unconditional love, as seen in Jesus. Believing in Jesus then, is also about being dismantled (which is a *dying in order to live*). This movement from being run by judgmentalism to being run by acceptance and delight is being saved from sin.

Who Jesus is then, is really to do with who we are, and who we are is to do with what we are run by: judgement or delight? To believe in Jesus is for your chief desire to be delight: delight for others and delight in yourself. Everything else comes out of that.