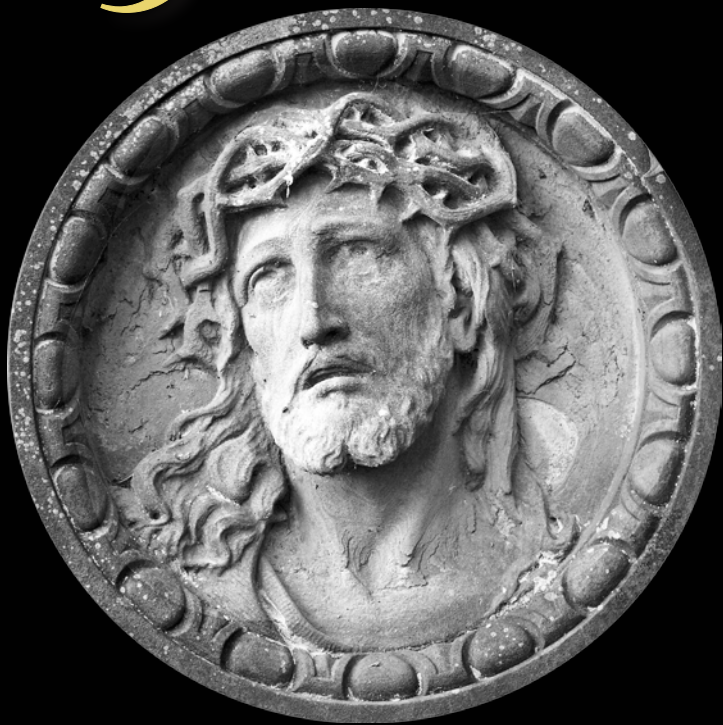


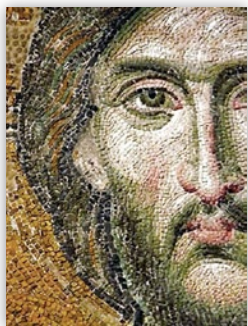
UNDERSTANDING JESUS



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WHO IS JESUS?

We call ourselves Christians. We are proud to be identified by our belief in Jesus as the Christ. Our faith is unique: we believe that in no other person is God's self-revelation more clearly expressed than in and through Jesus. Being a Christian demands knowing who Jesus



is. Each of us must answer the question Jesus asked the disciples: “Who do you say that I am?” (Mk 8:29). What is our answer?

Peter claims that Jesus is the Christ—the anointed one whom God will send for to bring humanity back into right relationship with God and with others. However, Jesus reminds the disciples that the real meaning of his role as Christ will be known only through his suffering. And so it was. After Jesus' death and resurrection, his disciples finally understood and proclaimed to the world the Christian message: Jesus of Nazareth is truly the Christ who suffered, died and rose from the dead. This is our salvation. And this is the essence of our Christian faith in Jesus.

THE MYSTERY OF JESUS

Jesus of Nazareth is the most notable person who ever lived. We Christians believe that he was not only a real historical person who lived, suffered and died in Roman Palestine two thousand years ago but also that he shared in God's divine being in a unique way. This belief that Jesus is God incarnate, true God and true human being, is the unique and essential foundation of our Christian faith.

But although we can affirm through faith that Jesus was both divine and human, it is not possible to explain how this union of the divine and human occurs. This inability to explain our belief about God's incarnation in Jesus with adequate concepts or words is what theologians call a genuine mystery.

More importantly, this belief has consequences for how we think of ourselves and our world. Because Jesus became truly human, we can rejoice in our being human. Through our faith in Jesus, we now have the possibility of entering into a relationship with God that will not end with death but with eternal life. When we associate ourselves with Jesus through our baptism, we become sons and daughters of God.



THE OLD TESTAMENT STORY:

PREPARING FOR JESUS' COMING

Christ's incarnation did not occur at the beginning of creation. Instead, it came after a long time in which God prepared humanity for his coming to establish God's kingdom community on earth.

The Old Testament in our Bible tells how God prepared the world for Christ's coming. From the beginning, God intended all creation to be in right relationships. But the first humans Adam and Eve introduced into creation the disordered relationships we call *sin*. The rest of the Old Testament tells how God worked to restore creation to God's original dream by calling a covenant community that would live in right relationships (justice) with God and one another and be a blessing for all nations (Gen 12:3).

First through Noah and his family (Gen 6–11) and then through Abraham and the covenant people of Israel (Gen 12 to the end of the Old Testament), God gathered the covenant community, sent them leaders, offered them guidelines for living in right relationships and expected exclusive loyalty from them. When the people failed, God sent them prophets to call them back to God's ways.

But despite all these efforts, God's dream for a covenant community went unfulfilled. So God sent Jesus as the *messiah* (anointed one) to create a new covenant people who would succeed where Israel had failed.

THE GOSPEL STORY: JESUS' COMES TO SAVE

After centuries of preparation, at God's appointed time (around 4 BC in our modern calendars), the drama of Christ's incarnation began to unfold in the tiny, out of the way village of Nazareth in the northern part of the Holy Land called Galilee.

The accounts of Jesus' birth are found in chapters 1–2 of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Although they relate the story in different ways, Matthew concentrating on Joseph and his dilemma about accepting Jesus as his son and Luke concentrating on Mary and her willing participation in God's plan for salvation, both Gospel writers stress that Jesus was not just another child born to human parents but the unique son of God born through the agency of God's active power, the Holy Spirit.

Both Gospel writers also stress that Jesus' infancy story is really a miniature version of the rest of the Gospel: Jesus is sent into our world, and each person must then decide to respond either positively with acceptance or negatively with hostility. So Joseph and Mary, their relatives Elizabeth and Zechariah, the shepherds and the magi recognize



Jesus as God's son sent for salvation. But threatened by this new-born king, King Herod and the Judean Jewish leaders respond with hatred and try to murder him. Similarly, each of us must also decide how we will respond to Christ's presence in our lives today.

JESUS TEACHES

After about 30 years of living in obscurity in Nazareth, Jesus left his home and family to begin his life's work: proclaiming and teaching about a new kind of community that he called God's kingdom. This kingdom is both a place (a realm or community that people can enter) and an experience of God's lordship (an active rule over us and our lives) that replaces the domination of our world by the evil disordering powers of Satan.



Jesus' teaching was directed to helping people discover God's presence in their lives and then respond to God's presence by committing themselves to God's new communi-

ty. In order to get people to notice God's hidden presence and respond to it, Jesus told his audiences stories called *parables*. These parables invited the audience to hear about everyday situations in which people discover things that are hidden, must then decide what to do

and in the process have their lives changed. When we connect the parable stories with our lives, we also learn what it is like to find God present as part of our life and how by responding we can then be changed.

JESUS PRAYS

“And in the morning, a great while before day, Jesus rose and went out to a lonely place, and there he prayed” (Mk 1:35). In Jesus’ time, it was not common to pray alone but only in community. Jesus invites us to a new way of reinforcing God’s personal relationship with each of us. Besides our community prayer, Jesus showed that special personal time must be set aside for listening and speaking with God. When his disciples asked how we should pray, Jesus told them to pray to God as our loving Father.

The prayer that Jesus taught his disciples (Mt 6:9-13; Lk 11:1-4), and which Christians call the *Lord’s Prayer* or the *Our Father*



from its opening words, is also characterized by the reciprocal relationship and mutual obligations of fathers to their dependents as first-century persons like Jesus well-understood. The first set of petitions express our obligations as God’s dependents—what we owe God: total loyalty, honor and respect for God’s holiness, hear-

ing and doing (obeying) what the Father wants or commands—and the second set relate to God’s obligations to us as our benefactor or patron—what we want from God in the relationship: our material needs for sustenance (bread), forgiveness for our failures that break down the relationship and forgiveness for the failures of others, and strength to resist temptations that separate us from God and others.

JESUS FEEDS

Without food, we cannot survive and we die. So feeding was the responsibility of the father or head of the household.



In the exodus, when God liberated the Hebrews from Egypt to become God’s covenant community, they expected that God their new “father” would feed them. God fulfilled this expectation and

first gave them manna and quail for their food in the wilderness (Ex 16), then gave them a land where they could grow crops to support themselves.

This gift of food was only a preview of what God would do with Jesus. Jesus, who shows his divinity by doing the things that only God can do (forgiving sins, controlling storms) also shares God’s ability to

give food. Jesus makes bread available to the hungry crowds—a sign of how eager and willing God is to provide what we need for survival.

But Jesus, at the Last Supper, went one step further. He not only gave bread; he also promised that he would actually become the bread in the eucharistic ritual. With this holy bread, his own body and blood, he feeds us so that we can begin to share now in communion with God's own life. His gift of himself as our daily food is the gift of ongoing communion and life with God.

JESUS FORGIVES

Sin is the biblical way of describing the breakdown of the right order established by God for all creation. In its most general sense, sin describes whatever breaks down right relationships in a community. Since we humans are the ones who sin against God, God must be the one who initiates forgiveness when we want to restore our broken down relationships.

When Jesus begins his ministry, he does many signs showing that God's kingdom—God's rule over our world—is really happening. One important sign is that he tells



people their sins are forgiven. Rightly, the Jews question how this can be since “Who but God alone can forgive sins?” (Lk 5:21). The conclusion is that because Jesus can do what only God can do, then he must share in God’s divine power. It is a short step to the conclusion that Jesus is divine.

Jesus’ whole work regarding the establishment of God’s kingdom can be summarized as the forgiveness of sins, that is, changing our disordered relationships into rightly ordered ones. In this way we can say that through his ministry, death and resurrection, “God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us” (2 Cor 5:19).

JESUS LOVES

Sin is the power that breaks down relationships, but love is the power that bonds persons together. For this reason, God is identified as love because God is a trinity of persons bound together in an eternal community of love. As God’s son, Jesus’ human love is the incarnation of his divine love for the Father and the Holy Spirit. God desires that we imitate God’s way of loving by being persons who fulfill Jesus’ guidelines for life in God’s kingdom community bound together by acts of self-giving and self-sacrificing love.

Jesus not only invites us into the community of

love, but also offers us the clearest example of what self-giving love requires. The bond of love exists when persons commit themselves to one another and to the community that their bond of relationship creates. Jesus' faithful commitments to God, to others and to his mission never falter even in the face of opposition, outright hostility and threats, and even death. Jesus' way of loving reminds us most clearly that God's love excludes no one and God's kingdom is open for all to enter.

JESUS SUFFERS & DIES

The greatest test of love is the willingness to give oneself for others. So parents consider no sacrifice too great when their children are involved. Close friends will do anything to help one another. Jesus' love for us insured that he would do whatever it took to bring us into God's kingdom.

Since Jesus was genuinely human, like us he would have to die. But his political murder was the result of the Judean religious leaders' hostility. Threatened because Jesus was opening a new way to God and



a new community that would not depend on the Jerusalem temple, the religious leaders decided to have

Jesus killed. Since for the Jews God's messiah would be both a religious and a political leader, they skillfully exploited the political part so that the Roman Procurator Pontius Pilate would identify Jesus as a political threat and crucify him.

Only later did the disciples understand the real meaning of Jesus' death. They recognized that it was not the apparent triumph of evil over Jesus that it seemed but instead was the promised victory of God over the creation-disordering powers in God's plan for salvation. Jesus' death was the final stage in his mission to bring about God's kingdom. He was willing to remain faithful to God and to give his life to see his mission fulfilled by trusting in God's power to make "the kingdom come."

JESUS IS RAISED FROM THE DEAD

The resurrection is the central event of the Christian faith, the source of our hope and the driving force of our Christian mission. This new life for Jesus, described as resurrection, was not just a restoration of his former human life—a resuscitation from the dead that would mean he would have to die again (like the resuscitation of Jesus' friend Lazarus in Jn 11:1-44). Jesus' new life was eternal life, permanent and undying existence with God forever. Something so extraordinary could happen only if God, the origin and giver of all life, did it.

When God gave new life to Jesus, death took on a new meaning. Because God gave Jesus new life, this established a new and continuing relationship that would never end. The relationship of Father to Son continued not because Jesus wanted it to continue, but because God did. Now God's secret plan was fully revealed: death ends only our earthly life, not our relationship with God because God wants to extend this relationship beyond this earthly life into eternal life (Rom 6:22-23).

What God did for Jesus after his death, God will do for us at the end of our lives. The condition, of course, is that we establish and maintain a relationship to God that follows Jesus' example. Then, like Jesus, our covenant relationship will not end with our death, but continue through and beyond death into eternal life (Jn 3:16).



JESUS ASCENDS INTO HEAVEN

In the Gospels, only Luke describes the ascension of Jesus into heaven, and he does it twice—once at the end of his Gospel and again at the beginning of Acts—as if to stress the end of the special visible appearances of the risen Christ in preparation for the descent and mission of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus' ascension has several consequences for the Church. First, it assures us that God's commitment to Jesus did not cease when Jesus died. Second, his enthronement at the right hand of God invites Christians to worship Christ as they do God. Third, it reminds us that Christ eternally intercedes for God's holy people.



Because Jesus was one of us, he understands our human situation and advocates for us with God.

Like the disciples, we are not called to stand gazing into heaven to detect his return (Acts 1:10-11), which will surely come, but to go back to our cities and homes to show forth the power of the Spirit that has been given to us by the ascended Jesus. By our attitudes, our words and our deeds, we display to the world around us the importance of Jesus' ascension.

JESUS LIVES IN US

All the early Christians believed that Jesus was risen to new life and appeared to his followers. But even more they believed that the risen Christ did not just vanish to heaven but continued to dwell in them and with them and allowed himself to be discovered under forms that we can recognize.

The New Testament authors stressed Christ's abiding presence. Matthew described Jesus as "Emmanuel, God with us" (1:23) and reminded us that Christ is present whenever we gather in his name (18:20) and will be with us always (28:20). Luke illustrated the hidden presence of the risen Christ as a mysterious stranger who explained scripture and shared bread (24:13-36). John described the abiding presence of Christ through the Holy Spirit or Advocate (Paraclete) (14:26) who continues in us as the presence of the absent Jesus. Paul described the Christian community as those incorporated into the Body of Christ (Rom 12:5; 1 Cor10:17, 12:12-27) here on earth who continue his kingdom ministry and mission.

WE NOW LIVE AS JESUS DID

Jesus not only revealed who God is and what God is doing in our world to bring about the kingdom community but also gave us his followers an example of how to live God's kingdom ways. His whole life was dedicated to the service of God's hidden presence in our world. As a prophet, he called people's attention to this presence in the ordinary events of our lives where we might not expect God to be found. As a priest, he invited people to celebrate this presence with inclusive meals that prefigured the end-time feast with God in heaven. As a king, Jesus showed people how to reorder

their lives according to the kingdom values of justice, love and peace and thus begin the kingdom community here on earth.

The risen Christ delegated these tasks to the Christian community. We now continue his mission and ministry by our prophetic witness to God's hidden presence, by our priestly participation in our eucharistic and sacramental celebrations, and our kingly reordering of our lives so that evil does not continue its hold over us and our world. Our Christian vocation is to work with God to transform our world from a place marred, disordered and dominated by Satan and the powers of evil into a world characterized by God's rule. This requires reordering all distorted relationships, eradicating evil and transforming all creation once again into the obedient service of God.



Understanding Jesus was written by Steve Mueller.

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