

5. Touched by the Living Christ

⁵¹"You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! ⁵²Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— ⁵³you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it."

⁵⁴When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. ⁵⁵But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶"Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

⁵⁷At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, ⁵⁸dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.¹ – Stephen

"I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible. "And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried, and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end."²

--The Nicene Creed, 385 AD.



He came to heal. They came to kill. Not at first, of course. After all, they were religious leaders, trained to interpret sacred books. It was their job to point out the Messiah, the Healer. If there was any killing to be done, it would be sacrificial animals as the law of Moses dictated. They were not trained to take human lives, especially when it was one of their own. Now, the Romans, they were barbarians; they were the enemy, the oppressor. Even there though, one must be careful. To give life was better than to take it. It took many late night discussions, many interpretations of what that Nazarene was doing to work up the courage to carry through with plans to kill Jesus. And even then, they needed false witnesses, counterfeit charges, to get the job done. The killers were desperate. They risked their soul on a gamble.

¹ Acts 7.

² Nicene Creed Text from the Revised Translation of the English Order of the Mass.

The followers of the Lord fared little better. He had warned them they could expect no better. As He approached His last days in Jerusalem He said that some would kill them, thinking that doing so they would be doing God a service. These were the religious persecutors. The Romans were another matter. Led by Tiberius and after him the psychopath Caligula, many of the Lord's followers were brutalized beyond belief...with some exceptions. There is a modern day mass killer whom we know and still fear, Hitler; the devil's disciple and to date the world's worst terrorist. No wonder the crowds gasped when they heard Jesus say, "*Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely* on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*"³ Forgive Tiberius? Forgive Caligula? Forgive Hitler?

Follow Me

"On the next day Jesus...found Philip and said to him, "Follow me."⁴

²¹ *From then on, Jesus began telling his disciples what would happen to him. He said, "I must go to Jerusalem. There the nation's leaders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the Law of Moses will make me suffer terribly. I will be killed, but three days later I will rise to life."* ²² *Peter took Jesus aside and told him to stop talking like that. He said, "God would never let this happen to you, Lord!"* ²³ *Jesus turned to Peter and said, "Satan, get away from me! You're in my way because you think like everyone else and not like God."* ²⁴ *Then Jesus said to his disciples: If any of you want to be my followers, you must forget about yourself. You must take up your cross and follow me.* ²⁵ *If you want to save your life, you will destroy it. But if you give up your life for me, you will find it.*⁵

The Lord Jesus nears Jerusalem and, in doing so, comes all the closer to His destiny: enduring suffering for every man, woman, and child in order that they may enjoy the benefits of eternal life. Thus, He speaks of suffering, which He must meet head-on in the City of Peace. But as the disciples are to learn, their unique relationship to Jesus not only allows them to enjoy the benefits of His cross, they must also suffer with Him the pain of their cross.

The two words from Jesus that burn into our consciences are "Follow Me." "Follow," He says. Jesus goes ahead and we walk behind. He is the Shepherd and we are His sheep. He is

³ Matthew 5:11-12, New Revised Standard Version.

⁴ John 1:43, NET Bible.

⁵ Matthew 16:21-25, CEV.

our protection. He is our Lord. He is our contentment. In all of this we rejoice that in everything that pertains to us He is the head and we are the body. This is the way we want it to be. We want to abandon ourselves to Him.

Caussade’s Prayer: Giving ourselves completely to God is what Caussade means by “abandonment to God.” What do we want? Caussade asks. He answers in part in the following prayer. Read it carefully and then look at it word by word. See what the Spirit will show you.

“You, Lord, are all I want or need. Use this little creature as you wish. All is yours, all is from you and all is for you. I have no longer anything to look after or to do. Not a single moment is controlled by me, for everything is yours. I have not to try to add anything to my stature or take anything away; nor have I to inquire into or reflect upon anything. It is for you to deal with everything. Holiness, perfection, salvation, spiritual direction, penance — these are all your business. Mine is to be content with you and not adopt any line of action or involve myself in any attachment, but to leave all to your good pleasure.”⁶

Think on this prayer; think carefully. Does it represent what you desire in your heart? Is this the way you want to relate to the Lord Jesus? Are you content to leave your future to the Lord, to do what He asks without requiring from Him any explanation?

Spiritual teacher Thomas Merton puts it this way: “the first sign of a soul that loves Christ is obedience without delay.”⁷

Why should we leave all to Jesus? Aren’t we His partners? Aren’t we His hands and feet? I have heard that throughout the years. I recall clearly denominational leaders trying to pump up pastors in my district in Texas by appealing to our part in “bringing in the kingdom.” Sure, Jesus is the head; He is the Master...but... Because our church has bowed before the American altar of progress in many places, we have bought into the error of works-righteousness. Heaven, when it is spoken of at all, has become a reward for our good works. We have an entitlement to the place, to its benefits. Jesus could not have done it without us, could He? Sure we want to go to the kingdom and see our relatives, our friends. We deserve that much at least. We rarely ever consider the possibility that they might not be there, or worse yet, that we might not be there. But suppose only Jesus is there, at least at first.

6 Caussade, Abandonment to Divine Providence, p. 66. Emphasis mine.

7 Merton, The Monastic Journey, p. 75. Emphasis mine.

Suppose we gain admittance to heaven because we have genuinely trusted Him to get us there. And, to take this a step farther, Jesus has decided to spend a little private time with each of His people when they first arrive. After all, time as we know it will not be a factor in our future...or “our eternal present.” Okay, we have the Redeemer first hand, face to face, as Paul says to the Corinthians. Now what? What might this mean? What would we talk about? What would you like to say to Him, ask Him? Do you think the things that concern you now will concern you then?

I used to joke that I hoped heaven would be a huge library filled with books on every subject. I would sit down at a mahogany desk, a large one, with beautiful carving and superb lamps and have at it. Not your idea of a good time? I can’t imagine that. But I don’t think I will get my desk and books, not at first anyway. What would be greater than to look Jesus in the face and hear Him say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” Whatever heaven is, it revolves around Him. I am convinced that we will have access to Him. Perhaps we can join a choir and sing His praises. Perhaps, like the lady in Luke 7, we will be able to bow before Him and kiss His feet. Sound better? I think so.

Why does the Lord of life get such adoration? Maybe this would be a good place to reread part of the Nicene Creed that begins this meditation. In the late fourth century AD many fathers of the church sat down to put in creedal form what they believed the Bible to teach about our Lord. It remains to this day one of the great creeds of the church. So what do we believe about Jesus? There is more to the creed than what follows and you may want to refresh your memory before going on. The Lord is

“... one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him all things were made.”

Every word is especially chosen and to take one word out diminishes the creed. The creed tends to follow the Gospel of John, the Book of Revelation, and Colossians. The heart of this section is to affirm that Jesus is the true and only Son of God, not born like a common man, but of the same substance⁸ with the Father, Creator of all that is. Jesus is no ordinary person but

⁸ The use of the word “substance” has been debated rather heavily. It means at least that Jesus is one with the

clearly the Savior, the Messiah. Now, reread Caussade's prayer to Jesus and see what you think.

Reliability of the Lord: The whole of Christian faith is based on the trustworthiness of the teachings of our living Lord Jesus. Of course, the reliability of what He says and does is itself based on His relationship with the Father and the Spirit. The creedal statement we have been working with says to the reader, Jesus Christ is trustworthy and true. You may depend on Him 100% of the time. Furthermore, He is a faithful guide to the kingdom of God. This is the main sticky point in our relationship with other faiths. None of the major religions except Christianity teaches that its redeemer is both human and divine. Because He is, He is a reliable guide. Caussade has a helpful way of grasping what this means to the Christian.

“Imagine we are in a strange district at night and are crossing fields unmarked by any path, but we have a guide. He asks no advice nor tells us of his plans. So what can we do except trust Him? It is no use trying to see where we are, look at maps, or question passers-by. That would not be tolerated by a guide who wants us to rely on him. He will get satisfaction from overcoming our fears and doubts and will insist that we have complete trust in him.”⁹

Does Caussade paint a modern picture for us? Is life lived in an unmarked dark place? And Jesus, is He holding back information that might otherwise help us be at ease in such a place? Are reading books, listening to lectures, talking with those who have had a near-death experience of any help to us? Does the Lord require complete faith in Him in order to move from this life to the next? It seems in spite of our hopes that we are afraid of death, that we, even Christians, cringe at the thought of dying. As a matter of fact, not many members of the church look to Jesus for triumph over the grave.

Stephen's Vision: Stephen has the dubious distinction of being the first recorded Christian martyr. His story takes up the seventh chapter of the Book of Acts. Called on to give an account of his new faith by the religious authorities, he gives an excellent account of God's saving revelation to the Jewish people, including Moses, the renowned Hebrew prophet and leader. He seemed to be doing well for himself until moved by the Spirit he launched into a tirade against the leaders of the people for not holding fast to the law and consequently murdering Jesus.

Father and therefore whatever the Father is, the Son is.

⁹ Abandonment, p. 83.

John Wesley's Prayer: John Wesley, the 18th century English revivalist, wrote a liturgy for those people who more than anything want to love the Trinity with all their hearts. It picks up many of the themes in Caussade's prayer above. Over the years I have read many such prayers of commitment from many Christian traditions and they all sound remarkably the same. It doesn't seem to matter whether we be Methodist or Quaker, Presbyterian or Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox or Assemblies of God. We all have prayers of seeking God's face that seem to borrow from one another. This is why that under the skin we are all the same and our basic unity is as real as Jesus is. If only we could see that we would be much happier and would see each other as brothers and sisters, not as competitors.

I have prayed Wesley's prayer many times. Designed for use in public worship, it can be used helpful in private prayer. It is a serious prayer service and was usually held on New Year's Day. It was a good beginning to the New Year.

Leader: "Let us, therefore, go to Christ, and pray:

***People:* Let me be your servant, under your command.
I will no longer be my own.
I will give up myself to your will in all things.**

Be satisfied that Christ shall give you your place and work.

**Lord, make me what you will.
I put myself fully into your hands:
put me to doing, put me to suffering,
let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you,
let me be full, let me be empty,
let me have all things, let me have nothing.
I freely and with a willing heart
give it all to your pleasure and disposal.**

Christ will be the Savior of none but his servants.
He is the source of all salvation to those who obey.
Christ will have no servants except by consent;
to all that he requires.
Christ will be all in all, or he will be nothing.

Confirm this by a holy covenant.

**O mighty God, the Lord Omnipotent, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
You have now become my Covenant Friend.
And I, through your infinite grace, have become your covenant servant.
So be it.
And let the covenant I have made on earth be ratified in heaven.
Amen.”¹⁰**

Trusting the Living Jesus: This meditation is about putting our hand into the Lord’s hand and following Him all the way to the kingdom. It is an affirmation that we stand with the church universal in affirming the uniqueness of this blessed man, His Godhood and Lordship. It is to say, in keeping with our baptism, that we want to become His, to do what He wishes all the time. We Christians believe in God, but more than that we believe in Jesus, the Son of God. We stand with Stephen and say to all that He is the living Way to the kingdom, the only living Way to God’s eternal life.

We have five more lessons to help fill out Caussade’s understanding of the Christ-filled life. We will look at Caussade’s view of abandonment to God every moment of every day. We will attempt to grasp his belief that “the whole of history is nothing but the story of God’s activity.”¹¹ And what joy that will bring with it.

We end today with one more of Caussade’s prayers, a prayer that will help us learn what it means to “follow Him.” The “book of life” that the Spirit will teach us is the book of “our” lives, a book now largely unknown to us, a book emphasizing what it means to be touched by the living Christ.

“So teach me, Holy Spirit, to read in this book of life! I long to become your disciple and, like a little child, to believe in what I cannot see. It is enough for me that my master speaks. He talks and explains, arranges the letter of the book and makes it comprehensible. That is all I need. I am convinced that everything is just as He says, although I cannot see why. But I know (Jesus) is truth itself and he says nothing but the truth. He puts letters together to make a word, assembles more to make another. There are perhaps only three or six. But they are exactly right. Any different number would make nonsense After all, he alone can put them into words. Everything is significant and everything makes perfect sense...Although I believe now, when the day of glory dawns

¹⁰ The United Methodist Book of Worship, “Wesley’s Covenant Service,” p. 291f. There is more to the covenant prayer service than what is given here.

¹¹ Abandonment, p. 44.

the secrets of so many mysteries will be shown to me that I shall realize how imperfect my knowledge was during my earthly life. What now seems to me so confused, so incoherent, so foolish and so fanciful will then delight and entrance me by its order, its beauty, its wisdom and the incomprehensible wonders I shall explore for all eternity.”¹²

--Jerry L. Mercer
--December 4, 2009

¹² Abandonment, pp. 45-46. Emphasis mine.