

The World's Testimony Concerning Christ.

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Mark 16: 13-15 — "Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?" "Whom say ye that I am?"

A peculiarity of the Christian religion is that its value to the world depends upon the world's attitude towards it. In this it is unlike most other world blessings. The value of food or medicine, for instance, may not be appreciatively affected by our likes and our dislikes. These may nourish us, or cure us, even though in some cases distasteful. The world itself may bless us whether we accept it genially or not. The sun will shine in the sky and in his daily round bring us unnumbered blessings though we should hate the sunbeams, and like Job curse the day of our birth.

This is not so with a personal religion, for its value to us will depend upon our attitude towards it. In a sense the same may be said of our relationship to God; he will be to us what we are to him. In other words, the condition of our own heart will decide God's seeming attitude towards ourselves. Was it not said of him "With the merciful thou wilt show thyself merciful; with the upright man thou wilt show thyself upright; with the pure thou wilt show thyself pure, with the froward thou wilt show thyself froward."

The world creates its own atmosphere, good—bad, and so every man his own destiny, his own judgment, his own God. The sun may blaze his glory in the sky, but that glory to the world will depend upon the world's reflection of the sunbeams, for every pebble and blade and leaf must shine back the sunlight or the world would ever be in physical darkness despite this king of day. So man decides his God, yet even makes his God, for God will be to him even as he is.

Standing on Hymalaya peaks one may shout to the valleys below, but those below only hear the echo of the shout. Humanity never hears but the echo of God's voice, and the echo is but the rebound of humanity's heart. Christian, what does your heart say to you of God, for that God is to you. Does your heart say to you he is the Saviour of the world? Then to you he is the Saviour of the world.

To these human, faintly, faculties, worth is seldom intrinsic. There is harmony in nature only when there is harmony in us. To one, the world is beautiful, but it will be found that this is because there is beauty in himself. One has a rich appreciation of music, and this for the simple reason that music finds an echo in his own soul. Another delights in art, but the art is in himself. Another feels the beauty of a poem, and feels it only when there is some harmony in his own heart. Marconi's instruments are tuned to one another, and only vessels that carry instruments in harmony with the despatching tower can hear and respond to the master's voice. Just so the human heart, it must be attuned to the heart of God; or no message can come from the divine one to cheer and bless and save these lives of ours. Hence, as I have said, the value of religion to us will depend upon ourselves—our heart condition, and Jesus ever asks his question of the world.

Though the question of our text has engaged the attention of theologians for centuries the Christian world has never reached unanimity in its answer. Various have been the world's conception of Jesus. In the early centuries a body of Christians called the Ebonites taught that Jesus was simply a Jew of distinguished legal piety.

The Docetar on the other hand claimed that our Lord's body was only an illusion—a kind of accommodation to man's limited faculties, and that he possessed no real body.

Then, the fourth century produced a Lybian who, with a large following, claimed that Jesus must not be counted as coequal with God, though he was exceedingly wise and kind. This teaching was opposed by Apollinaris, Bishop of Lardicee, who argued that the divine nature in Christ took the place of the human mind, and that the body of our Lord was a glorified form of humanity. That he had no human thoughts or feelings, and that a very God dwelt in and illuminated a human body as the sunshine lights the fleecy cloud.

Thus the world has argued pro and con—Jesus a man; Jesus a God; Jesus a God-man. His humanity real; his humanity illusory; a human being from whom humanity is eliminated; no human being at all, but God clothed in the seeming habiliments of man—of human flesh and blood.

We are somewhat disturbed, perplexed, mystified, and eventually cry with Tennyson—

"Strong Son of God; immortal love
Whom we that have not seen thy face,
By faith and faith alone embrace,
Believing where we cannot prove."

However, the modern world does not seem quite willing to understand Jesus by "faith and faith alone." We are living in a most material age, and demand that faith be strongly buttressed by well authenticated fact. The tendency seems to be to eliminate the mysterious from

our dogmas. Rationalism has wedded materialism, and together this pair of science tools lays claim to the world. The higher criticism encourages plebian criticism, and men would analyze the communion bread and finding no spiritual entity there, declare the emblem an empty form. Modern scholarship places its formula on sacred evidences, and stamping out emotionalism, seeks to square the heart's songs by religious logarithms. The Bible is declared to be the product of evolution, and the good old book, also, they say has in the travail of centuries gathered much moss. They would brush away the moss as we clear the base of aged tomb stones, in order to find out what is written there. The sacred book is no longer regarded as *a priori*, the source of light,—the fountain of truth, for now the world must read into its Bible, not out of it. "Love God with all thy soul, and thy neighbor as thyself," means, they would say, what you make it to mean. God has given the formula, you must clothe it with flesh and blood. Thus the whole Bible is a book of bones, and man must build his own creed.

And yet possibly this is not the attitude of the critics alone. It may be that some very uncritical people, and some people who claim to be very orthodox, read their Bible in this very way. For instance, when once I asked a man if he belonged to Christ, his answer was, "No sir, that is not my concern but Christ's." "But," I said, "those who will to belong to Christ." He turned away saying, "If that is your doctrine I don't accept it." Then I quoted John 3: 16. "Ah," said he, "I don't look at it in that way."

In another case a man argued his right to give as he felt inclined towards church and pastor, and when he was told that his duty was to give as God had given to him, though he was a man exceedingly pertinacious in claiming the necessity of obeying some Scriptural requirements, such as baptism, etc., he could answer to this law of God regarding benevolence, "that is not the way I look at it."

My brethren let us see to it that we fall not into the way of the critics. A man gets a hobby—he gets it no matter how nor where. It may be a prejudice; it may be the inclination of his own heart. But having it, the natural tendency is to read it into his Bible. "I'm a Baptist from my father's loins," says one, while another claims to be a pedobaptist from the same early genesis. Having been born with the theory, then he proceeds to read it into his Bible.

Another wanted to watch at night for the Saviour's second coming, or he did not want to watch as the case may be. He found the world good or bad, better or worse, according to his way of looking at things, and perhaps the reflection of his own heart, and hence he, by predilection, is a post-millennialist or a Pre, and proceeds to read the same into his Bible.

An energetic Armenian cries, "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling," but a lazy Calvinist furnishes the text for him, and then each has a satisfactory proof that he himself is all right.

Thus man is inclined to make his own Bible, or rather to make his Bible a deduction of his own intellectual and moral preferences. God has given us the warp, they would say, but we must find the woof, and the pattern is in the woof.

This representation is probably true of all classes of critics high and low. Some one will argue that all science develops with the progress of the race, and books want to be revised or supplemented with each new discovery. A work on physics, medicine or even astronomy written fifty years ago would need much supplementing today. The book of God is placed in the same category. Genesis is somewhat of an old book, and must be understood in the light of modern science, so they say. Oh yes, and Paul's letters must be understood in the light of twentieth century thought. Some of these remarkable productions may need pruning or developing as the world goes on.

And last of all we come to the story of our Lord, which story, it is claimed, must be read in the light of modern knowledge. Matthew, Mark and Luke were, from necessity, influenced and biased by the drastic conception of their age and preceding ages, and that conception made God an anthropomorphic being. He talked with Adam, walked with Enoch, called Samuel, appeared to Elijah, and with his own hand buried Moses. In this very human conception, he was not unlike the gods of heathen Greece and Rome. Their deities were as glorified men. Jove was mightier than Caesar only in degree. It was natural, then, that the disciples should defy their master, and especially so after he had died. But in our day we have no such thought of God, and would regard such thought as almost sacrilegious. God don't talk and walk with men today, and heaven is very far away, so thinks some modern critics. A little boy is kneeling beside his brother's bed—a poor little sick and hungry brother; and he prays, "Oh God, give my brother some bread and butter." But modern thought shakes its wise head and says, "Little lad, God is too big to care for such small things as these; go pray to the baker."

A common soldier marching in the front ranks of his army breathes a prayer, "Lord shield my life for my mother's sake," but modern thought again grows wise and says, "nonsense common soldier, God is making the destinies of nations now, and cannot consider either you or your mother in this case."

Ah, how sadly we mistake God, and how far we remove Jesus from this common world. A thousand times better were it, could we, like Samuel, listen for his voice, or like Jacob wrestle with his angel, or like Sarah, talk alone with God. This old world is suffering for a personal and loving deity—a divine personality that walks and talks with men; a Saviour who is indeed a warm and sympathizing friend. We robe ourselves in modern thought, and rob ourselves of God. Let us get back,

Christian, to the old idea that God the Father is very near in the person of his Son. "Lo I am with you always," rings down the centuries; then make him life's companion. Land him as high as you will for he is God, but remember he was also man—son of God and son of man. His nature expands both ways. Like England and Scotland's king, he unites two thrones; he is king of heaven but he would also be king of the human heart. For aught I know the upper throne may be very far away.

"I know not where his islands lift
Their fronded palms in air;
I only know I cannot drift
Beyond his love and care."

But this I know, he is here, the Saviour of the world, and the friend of man.

Second. Jesus turned from the question of the world's conception of himself, to the disciple's personal conception. "Whom say ye that I am." This is also a peculiarity of the Christian religion; it appeals to the individual. We cannot hide ourselves in the round numbers. God setteth the solitary in religion. Christian's gate was a wicket gate. As personal as the grave, in it we must go alone. The other day I saw a mother crying about her two boys who were living an impure life, and my heart's sympathy said, "dear sister, take them with you to the kingdom," but ah, I knew that his plan required each one for himself to cry, "God be merciful to me a sinner."

This is not Christian America, for no country can be Christian. There is no such thing as Christianity in the aggregate. The Bible is a book of personal demands. Then what think you of Christ?

There seems to have always been three classes who have formed an opinion of the Christ.

First. Those who because of the sins of their own heart have attributed every word and deed of Jesus to some unholy motive. There are people who reveal their own character in their estimation of other men's lives. Purity is in a certain sense the world's looking-glass, for man will unconsciously measure himself, and may see himself by the opinion he forms of other men. For instance, bring together Jesus and Caiaphas the high priest. Now what should we expect to be the verdict of this man whose life was known to be impure. Listen—"He hath spoken blasphemy; behold now we have heard his blasphemy." If you scowl at a mirror surface you will see a scowl. What you shout to the mountains you will hear in the echo of your voice.

Or again, ask the Scribes and Pharisees, what think ye of Christ. "Thy Master is gluttonous and a wine bibber."

Or ask the Jewish mob what of Christ—"He hath a devil and is mad."

Or ask the mob in Pilate's hall—"He is guilty of death; crucify him! crucify him!"

Ah, do you know that a devil in us loves to look out and find a devil in some one else, and calumny is the inevitable lot of the pure child of God. Darkness hath no fellowship with light. The night-bird complains at the rising sun, and the croaking of a reptile cannot harmonize with your summer songster. They crucified Jesus—they could do nothing else and be true to their nature.

Second. Those from whom conscience wrings an honest testimony. Nature sometimes speaks for herself. Truth will out. There is a spark of the divine in every human soul, and some serious moment will reveal the divine. You may find the birds' nest when the leaves are fallen. In great trying moments and in death men will reveal themselves.

Now ask Judas, as the blood-money rings his funeral knell, What think ye now of Christ? "I have betrayed innocent blood." Or ask Pilate when fear and conscience makes him tremble. What think ye of Christ? "I find no fault in him." Or the Roman soldiers, when stricken down at the tomb of this Son of Man. "Truly this was the Son of God." Aye did not the very demons confirm this honest testimony of conscious stricken man. "What have we to do with thee thou Son of God."

Wisdom is justified of her children, and righteousness will declare itself even on the lips of a sinner, an atheist, or a devil. Nature turns again to God. Never an infidel died but the majesty of divine truth, and the reality of his God stamped itself upon his forsaken soul, and surmounted him with its awful halo of eternal truth as his life faded away. Maribran cried, "Take away these funeral tappings from me and let me have music and flowers when I die." Voltaire—"You talk to me of literary glory! Ah, a pretty glory you have won me." Paine—"I think I can say what they made Jesus Christ to say, 'My God! my God! why hast thou forsaken me?'" No, God has not made man a fool, and when the soul is rid of its hypocrisy and sings its truest note, it sings of truth and justice and Jesus Christ.

Third. Those whose testimony is inspired by a divine spirit. There are those who speak because God has written the knowledge of Christ upon their hearts. They give a loving testimony to their faith in a personal Saviour. First among these stands the Jordan prophet. Listen to his testimony of the Christ—"Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world."

Another of this class was his namesake, the evangelist—"He is the bright and morning star." Also Peter—"Thou art the Christ, the son of the living God." And Thomas—"My Lord and my God." And Paul, the last of the Apostles—"King of Kings and Lord of Lords."

And if further testimony of this class were desired we could listen to angelic choirs—"Unto you is born this day a Saviour who is Christ the Lord." Or the very voice of God himself—"This is my beloved Son, hear ye him."

And now people of God, what do you think of this Christ? And sinners what is he to you? Some thought comes to you of other great world characters—of Carey, or of Moffat, who sang, "Waft, waft ye winds his story." Of Havelock or Grant inspiring "Onward Christian Soldiers." Of Luther or Wycliff teaching us how "Through floods and flames if Jesus leads to follow where he goes." But what of Christ? Listen, my soul, while we sing:

"No mortal can with him compare
Among the sons of men.
Fairer is He than all the fair
Who fill the heavenly train."