

# “WHAT SAY WE OF HIM?”

“JESUS!”

(Prologue)

*Be It Hereby Enacted: that every three years all people shall forget whatever they have learned about Jesus, and begin the study all over again \* \* \**

These are words of one of my favorite seminary professors, Robert McAfee Brown, and ever so often I’ve tried to do this, but not with much success. After all these many years of reading and talking about Jesus, it’s hard to forget what you’ve learned and said. What I gleaned from all those many lectures, books and sermons, as well as from the New Testament, just can’t be easily deleted from my memory. Even Dr. Brown knew it was impossible, though I think what he was really suggesting is that we Christians need to rethink, to critique anew, who Jesus is.

Now, there is a lot we don’t know about him, and never will, like the exact date of his birth, what he looked like, his childhood days (called “the hidden years”), other teachings not recorded in the Gospels, or even the precise year of his death. While we wish we had a good biography, which the Gospels are not, being instead a limited collection of stories about Jesus, along with some of his teachings, many details just aren’t available. Uh, an autobiography would be even better! But do we need to know everything about him in order to be a disciple? No! In fact, I’m comfortable with what we do know, which makes me a believer in him (about which, and why, I will say more later). Also, I’m Ok with a bit of mystery about him. While not said in this context, Einstein’s words about the great mysteries of life are apropos: “He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder, and stand wrapped in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed.” Oh, there is an awe about Jesus that’s truly eye-opening! (O God, open my eyes anew! And not just for me alone!) That may be when we really see Jesus for the first time, seeing what St. Paul “saw”: “Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name . . .” (Phil. 2:9). As to how that first happened, we need to start at the beginning. And before we do that, let’s sing one of his birth songs, “Away in a Manger.”

# “BORN!”

## (Part I)

Jesus was Jewish born. His is a Greek name translated from Hebrew, meaning Joshua. What a heroic name! It literally means “God saves.” A lot of boys in that day were so-named. But for Jesus it will take on a new meaning in how he lived and died. In Jesus’ genealogy, listed in Matthew (1:1), he is kin to David and Abraham. In Luke’s gospel we read that when Jesus was about to be born Joseph went to Bethlehem “because he was descended from the house and family of David” (2:4). This aligned Jesus with royalty, which was very important to those who later told Jesus’ story, calling him “the King of kings.”

Nevertheless, when it comes to Jesus’ birth, we must not forget his humanity. I doubt if Mary and Joseph did, especially during his growing up years. I like the way Robert Karsten pondered this in a wonderful article, titled “The Baby Jesus.” Here are some of his ponderings:

I wonder if he caught colds and had colic,  
if he squirmed a lot and kicked the bedcovers  
off at night. I wonder if he smeared food all over  
his face and drooled on his chin. I wonder if he was  
like other babies.

Do you suppose he went through the “terrible twos”?  
Can it be that he used to cling to Mary’s leg,  
cry in a mad panic when she left him to go to the well,  
and would say “No” to everything?  
Did he resist sleep and feel sorry for himself when denied a  
whim?  
Was he a little monster sometimes,  
and could he charm his father by a look on his face,  
when all the while he was trying to get something?

Karsten answered, “I hope so, I really do.”

The importance of Jesus being fully human is that’s how God chooses to interact divinely with us all, including Jesus. It’s a Divine/human encounter! If Jesus was other than human, only a heaven personage who just appeared to be human (and there were those in the first centuries of our

Faith, called the Gnostics, who viewed Jesus this way), I doubt we would be able to relate to him as we do. You see, God's indwelling in Jesus inspired John to write, "The Word became flesh and lived among us . . ." (Jn. 1:14). As a result, Kenneth Scott Latourette, the renowned church historian, said, "No life ever lived on this planet has been so influential . . ." Did Joseph and Mary really understand what God was doing in and through their child? Perhaps. Or maybe not. But we do! And this allows us in faith to talk as do the theologians (and in particular Karl Barth) about the "humanity of God." Or, as Joseph heard the angel say about Jesus, and it goes for us too, "God is with us" (Matt. 1:23). Later, we read that Mary "treasured all these things in her heart" (Lk. 2:51). As we ponder all this, let's sing together his birth-place carol, verses 1 and 2 of "O Little Town of Bethlehem."

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## "CHRIST!" (Part II)

When I taught Confirmation, which now seems like ages ago, there was one thing in particular I insisted they understand: Christ isn't Jesus' last name! Invariably I would hear the response: "But why then do we call him Jesus Christ?" Thus would begin the lesson. If some of my confirmands of yesteryear are here, I know you'll remember this, for it was one of my pet issues. How could you forget my continual drum beat: Christ isn't Jesus' last name!!! And I'll not embarrass the rest of you by asking if you thought this was Jesus' surname. If you did, stay with me.

The word "Christ" is a Greek translation of the Hebrew word "Messiah." Both signify a special title, albeit a calling to represent God on earth. The expectation among the Jewish peoples was that there would come a time when God would reveal the divine Will in a very special way for all humanity, as well as save them from their enslavement to Rome. Their prayer was: "Save us, O Lord, from our enemies. Let your Messiah come quickly! Deliver us, we pray!" For some of our Jewish friends, this expectation is ongoing, for they are still prayerfully looking for the Messiah. As for us Christians this Realty has already come in the one named Jesus, whom we call "Christ."

This word speaks of the Incarnation. Of course, God has always come to us humans in countless ways, like through prophets and those who love

what God loves. I like the way Doug Fox (a member of our congregation who has now received his heavenly reward) put it, of a “Christing God.” In other words, God is at all times reaching out to us in many ways. But the best and most ultimate way this has happened is through Jesus. It’s what caused Simon Peter to say, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16). Remember, Peter was Jewish, so naturally he would use the word “Messiah.” We say “Christ.” The essence of this Paul best summed up, saying, “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell . . .” (Col. 1:19). YES! And it started on that night long ago that was both silent and holy, which inspired one of our most loved Christmas carols, “Silent Night, Holy Night.” Let’s sing it, just verse 3, first with full voice, and then softly as a prayer of thanks to God for Jesus Christ.

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## “LORD!” (Part III)

Twenty some years ago I went to Israel, and on that trip I visited Capernaum. This is where Jesus often stayed, at the home of Peter and Andrew. What I wanted to see was their house that was being archeologically dug up. The archaeologists were at work on it the day I was there, though the site was off-limits. Later, in BAR (Biblical Archaeology Review) I read of their findings. In the fourth century this house was enlarged to be a house church, and then in the middle of the fifth century another church was built over the house church, an octagonal building. Unfortunately, since my first visit in ’83 and my second one in 2000 a modern (and an unattractive one to my way of thinking) church building has been erected over the site, which saddens me. But back to the early house church, the archaeologists found a bit of graffiti on the wall left by some Christian pilgrim: “Lord Jesus Christ help thy servant . . .”

This word “Lord” was one of the most often used in the early church in reference to Jesus Christ. Or, as repeatedly used in the New Testament, “Lord Jesus.” I also saw it in a catacomb in Rome, which was etched in the wall in Greek (Ἰησοῦν ἐστὶν Κυρίον): Jesus is Lord. Paul said this in his letter to the Christians in Rome, “. . . if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart . . . you will be saved” (Rom. 10:9). But what do we mean by “Lord”? In the Hebrew scriptures this word is used for God, the Creator and Ruler of the universe. So why with Jesus? No, Jesus

wasn't taking God's place; rather, he was God's special one, duly appointed to be our Lord. When used with Jesus it's an oath of allegiance. Jesus is the Lord of our lives. Or, put another way, it's our way of saying he's the one who rules our hearts, all for the glory of God. That's what Peter affirmed, for in his sermon on Pentecost he said, "Let the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36; RSV).

Is Jesus Christ our Lord? Meaning: Is he the controlling influence in our lives in all we think and do? The ethic of love which he taught and lived, is it the ethic that shapes how we relate to each other? Have we really committed our lives to him, giving him our total loyalty? I can't answer for you, but he knows I'm trying, even though at times I fail to be faithful enough. Fortunately, with God's grace I can renew my allegiance to him, and through him be atoned to my Creator God. And the same for you, too! Because of this, let's sing "O Come, All You Faithful," singing just the fourth verse of this carol as our renewed oath to our Lord.

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## “WORD!” (Epilogue)

(Just a few more words.) “What Say We Of Him?” is the title of this elongated sermon. You know, it's mind boggling how many words have been printed in all the books about Jesus, much less the total count in all the sermons preached since Peter's first sermon. But all these words mean really only one thing, which is what we read in John's Gospel, as previous noted, “. . . the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.” As his disciples, this is the Word which empowers our lives and deepens our faith—and which fills us with grace and truth. This is our joy, the joy which the angels heralded, and which inspired the carol “Joy to the World.” Let's sing with joy!

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AMEN

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