

THE CENTRAL FIGURE

How does one ever describe – ever capture the Risen Christ – the central figure of Holy Week? He is near – and yet far. He is here – but he is not. He is eternal, pursuing us – yet elusive, evading us.

The periphery figures of Holy Week – the rascals and the inner circle of disciples – these we could lay hold of – see clearly – identify with –

Sensuous Herod with his superstitions

Caiaphus the ecclesiastical organization man

Judas the pragmatist who wanted faith to pay and pay well

These men are our – our fellow rascals and, and, we feel for them.

The inner circle of disciples too –

The disciples with their arrogant anger

Their parochial, their narrow, views

Their unwillingness to accept the suffering saint role of the Messiah or themselves

We can come close to them too – for all the minor heresies of the friends of Jesus – are our very own. But the central figure – on the canvass --? At Easter we see him as in a garden clothed in light which the New Testament calls splendor.

The Christ himself? But how near can we ever come to Him – the splendid Christ. Maybe we feel more at home back in the dark corners with the rascals in sepia – with the Herods and the Caiaphus and the Judas -- ? Or at least we are surely prone to ease back in the shadows with the ordinary friends of our Lord –with the Peters and the James and the Johns – and their minor heresies – their angers, their narrow minds, their unwillingness to suffer? Yea, we know our place. We're in our class with these boys.

But can we come out -- out into the light and face the central figure as he is? Can we behold the Christ? Or does the “splendor” – “the glory” of him blind us.

Oh, there are certain things we can see in him – for his humanity is plain to behold – especially we can see the way his humanity contrasts with the humanity of those around him – well, I say to you, near enough to sense his strict moral demands of a Father God. For example, his sense of the contrast of the strict moral demands of a Father God – contrast sharply with all sensate Herods and their rank superstitions. Near enough to see He plainly requires character of

his followers, not an abracadabra mumbo jumbo, but that “ye love one another.” Those will enter his Kingdom are not those who blather, do the talking, but those that keep his commands.” This Christ is more like a top sergeant than a soft silent priest.

Also, how close can we come to the resurrected Christ? Near enough. Near enough. The Christ’s profound concern for any individual in need, whether that individual be a publican, a half-breed Samaritan, a harlot, a Centurion, an adulteress or nervous Pharisee – is in contrast with all Caiaphus’ who are near enough to see that he never put institutional religion, puts ritual and form above faith and right living. The Christ served people, not programs. He loved sinners, not on the Gospel canvas -- quite enough of him to know we need him – resurrected among us.

Need him desperately – our in humanity needs his humanity – before we destroy humanity altogether. Elusive though he may be – and far, far away in ancient history – the sight of him is plain enough – and the life of him is near enough.

So that with the twelve – on Easter Day – we too feel that they met together here – even though the doors be shut – Jesus stands in the midst of and even with the inner group of his own disciples. You know well enough where they tried hate – and failed. He tried love and won. When they saw only the needs of a narrow group – their group – those who were like them. He saw the needs of the whole world – those who were not like him but needed his life. Where they sought security – the eternal myth – he faced unafraid the suffering at the core of reality and found eternity.

So you see by these contrasts – with his avowed enemies as well as his avowed friends – we – we do see him – at least through the patina, the mists of the ages – we do see an outline of his humanity – and God the sight is – how good it seems to us – this figure of the Christ – kind strength, majestic meekness – standing in the center – standing lonely – how good the sight of him. We come close to the risen Christ in the Gospels – close enough to know.

For how much we need him – need him here – need him now – his moral fibre – we soft – we silly – we sensuous, we sillily superstitious Americans need his concern – we who don’t, or won’t or can’t care – we program-mad ecclesiastics need his religion of giving – we who want so much to get, get, get.

And who can hope in science -- ? "The road to hell is so obviously paved with good inventions." One final, idiot war is all we need. Strange, isn't it, never again will a great war be lost or won -- you don't win or lose a catastrophe. You just have one. And that's what we'll have -- if we ever have a nuclear war. Science and its technology have made us more efficient people (what deadly efficiency), but they can not make us better people, or generous people, or happy people -- or even insure our staying living people.

So, we must help ourselves? No we can't. We lack the vitality. So we need help. We can not even help ourselves. We are bunch of bad eggs, we are. And (as some great theologian once said no matter how you arrange bad eggs, they never make a decent omelet.) So no matter how you arrange us -- no matter how Washington or Madison Avenue -- rearrange us -- economically, or socially, or politically, or racially, or psychologically -- no matter how you legislate, manipulate, shuffle a deck -- we'll never make a better society.

Well, if that's true -- you say -- "God help us!" Well, it's true alright and you're correct -- God must help us --

As one prominent Skeptic says, "...it is doubtful if our society can last much longer without religion." That's a truism -- but it's true -- what religion is needed this scholar doesn't know and doesn't care -- but some religion he sees is necessary -- to touch the deep wells of human thought and feeling and action -- some religion to give mankind new meaning, new mercy -- for modern man "feels "homeless, helpless, and in despair and he is far from harmless.

Some of us here -- in our own personal lives -- have reached a very low point -- we have felt homeless and helpless and we are far from harmless. We cause much needless pain. And the Church? The Church has not seemed to help us -- her worship splendid perhaps but her people cold. So they could not reach us -- could not give us hope or help or healing, but then it was for some of us a new day -- something happened -- as alternative to despair -- the Easter of the soul -- one's own soul -- then it was -- "we beheld his glory -- glory as of the 'only begotten' of the father, full of grace and truth" -- and the living Christ came alive in us in our own contemporary life -- and he resurrected hop in us -- love in us -- peace in us -- and we began to live, live again -- live our religion -- the Christian religion -- changed we were then, committed -- forgiven, forgiving, kind, good -- living with meaning -- be cause we had encountered Christ -- not just in a creed -- but in a companionship -- "strengthened with might through His spirit in the

How much even we friends of his need him – need his love – we are angry, even bitter, need his inclusive love – we who shut men out need his servant life – we with the mother complex. Oh, we can see enough of his resurrection presence, all right, the sight of the offering. Actually he gave his life for justice – not status quo. The Living God’s Fatherly life – being pure in heart, being merciful, being gentle, being good – this above all talk, all liturgy, above all creed.

And how near can we come to the risen Christ? Near enough, Near enough to realize why religion never pays you anything. And we can see him in contrast with the Judas’ too, says the life of the Christ, it just costs you everything – your life. So “take up your cross and follow me.”

Oh yes, there are many things we can see – splendid things in the humanity – in the central figure of Holy Week – especially as he contrasts with the rascals around his cross -- us and says, “Peace be with you!” and we too are “overjoyed.”

Even, the skeptical Thomas’s – when we see what can be seen of the Christ – can not but cry, “My Lord and my God!”

Ah – here is the *mysterium tremendum* (latin: awe-inspiring mystery) of the central figure – that when we see what very little we can see of him – even though it be through a glass darkly – we do call him – we can not but call him – “My Lord and my God” – maybe the full light of Him we could not bear now – it might be too much for mortals – but some day face to face –

Now just through a glass darkly can we look upon the Son of Righteousness – but that is enough. I see there is:

Hope in Him –
Help in Him –
Healing in Him –
We need him.

And – we – and our society for we are so in need of hope and help and healing – all our efforts to help ourselves fall short somewhere. It isn’t that we do not need our Social Security and our government regulations, hooray for our monthly check and retirement funds and our General Motors dividends – they protect our bodies, feed our stomachs, sure; but do not reach our souls – they keep us alive, fed, clothed, housed, entertained but do not make us kind or good.

inner man” – able to face all things – even the worst – do all things – even the most difficult. Saying, feeling, knowing, “I can do all things in him who strengthens me.”

The personal encounter with the resurrected Christ and the vitality – the power that is made available to us from Him. This is the Easter Experience –old and new, now and always.

_____ Amen!