

LENT: CHRIST THE MEDIATOR

March 1-7, 1964

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March 1 (Third Sunday in Lent)

Read John 1:1-16.

"No one has ever seen God," says John. This is the statement of a sophisticated man. A simple savage might "see" God in the stone pillar, in the erupting volcano, in the ancient tree. But as man's education advances, his God recedes, until eventually he realizes that he cannot make contact with his Creator through his bodily senses. There is cause here for wistfulness, but not for despair. This is part of the process of growing up spiritually.

How can we know the God we need? Knowledge falls into two categories, immediate and mediate. Immediate knowledge of God by way of the senses may be impossible, but immediate knowledge through the life of spirit *is* possible. Yet this immediate spiritual knowledge needs something more substantial to feed on if it is to develop—some mediated revelation of God. Similarly a pen friendship grows by additional pieces of information, a photograph, even a visit—though even a personal confrontation never implies perfect knowledge. Upon the basis of mediated knowledge, however, the immediate spiritual links between friends develop.

John stresses the fact that at one moment in history God revealed Himself supremely by becoming man—the Logos, the Word, the eternal Spirit of wisdom clothed in human flesh. In the incarnate Word we can see God, hear Him, feel His love.

*Prayer: Lord, I am blind; be Thou my sight:
Lord, I am weak; be Thou my might:
An helper of the helpless be,
And let me find my all in Thee. [Amen.]*
—Charles Wesley

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As a young boy, Jesus knew and seemed to think that His parents should know that "the things of his Father" must form the mainspring of His life. When He offered Himself for baptism by John, this filial consciousness was brought to a focus. He retired to the wilderness for forty days of fasting and meditation (that we commemorate in Lent) in order that the significance of His sonship might be made clear.

Here we plumb not only the mind of the early church but that of our Lord also, as He had opened it to one or more of His disciples. As we meditate upon this incident, we realize that Jesus is not concerned about His sonship as a glorious end in itself, but only about the part that it plays in God's purposes. Each mental query—or temptation of the devil, to use the dramatic form of narrative—is countered with a word of God. Jesus is impervious to everything except God's word, until at last even the devil has to turn to Scripture for his arguments.

Another point about the mental attitude of Jesus seems to be implicit if not explicit: He is concerned about His divine sonship *in relation to men* as well as to God. How should the Son of God mediate God to men? With bread, with pomp, with marvels? These were not simply proofs of divinity but possible programs for a divine mediator. And it became clear that Jesus must present not a program but God Himself as the only and the full answer to man's need.

And so Luke shows Jesus returning from the wilderness to His hometown of Nazareth, going to God's house, taking up God's book, and proclaiming God's word of liberation for men.

*Prayer: Teach me, O Lord, to fight like Thee;
With weapons from Thine armoury
The foe I then shall quell,
Skilful to use Thy two-edged sword,
Victorious through Thy written word
O'er all the powers of hell. [Amen.]*

—Charles Wesley

As a mediator, Christ reveals God to man and man to himself. We get along with ourselves fairly comfortably until in the blazing light of His presence we see ourselves as God sees us; then we are ashamed. This happened to Zacchaeus. He only "wanted to see who Jesus was"—to have a look at Him, not to meet Him. He was simply curious. The annals of Christian history are full of those who came to scoff and stayed to pray, and Zacchaeus is one of the first.

But Jesus did not only expose to the despised little tax collector his own shortcomings as he had never seen them before. In addition, Jesus showed this man of evil reputation that he was both child of God and son of Abraham. For Christ mediates between man and himself not only by contrast but by identification. The title which Jesus most favored was "Son of man." Although this was somewhat ambiguous, and later generations took it to mean "ideal man," its primary meaning was quite certainly "man in general," "human." We might almost translate it by the title of the old English morality play *Everyman*. As Paul says, Christ "emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men." It was Paul also who showed that Christ's identification went to the point of sharing the curse of sin, even though He Himself had committed no personal sin.

Thus Christ proved and proves Himself a mediator between man and himself in two ways, negative and positive. On the one hand He shows "the exceeding sinfulness of sin," our sin, and on the other He steps down and shares sin with us. This twofold revelation is redemptive, combined as it is with the forgiving love of God flowing through Christ. Zacchaeus became a new man in Christ. So have others. So may we.

Prayer: O Lord, what is man, that Thou art mindful of him, and the son of man, that Thou visitest him? Thou art the true light that enlightens every man by coming into the world. Shine Thou in my heart, that in Thy light I may see light, and may love Thee because Thou first lovedst me. Amen.

Job complains to God, "There is no umpire between us, who might lay his hand upon us both." Or it might be that it was an exclamation: "Would that there were an arbitrator, an impartial third party, who would put his arms around the shoulders of both of us, and bring us together!"

Job's dream became a reality in Christ, who came as a mediator to reconcile man and God. The New Testament makes it clear, however, that it is not God who needs reconciling to man. He is eternally prepared to accept man as he is: sinful, ineffective even in his sincere attempts at righteousness, ashamed that he can do no better. No, it is man who needs reconciling to God. Man has caused the breach, not God. God repairs it, however, because man is impotent to do so. Man is guilty of rebellion against the terms of living laid down by the Creator of life; yet God forgives this misuse of free will and constantly tries to win men back to His way of life, the only truly satisfying life for them because it is the one for which men are made.

Christ was the mediator of God's reconciliation, the mediator sponsored but not controlled by the injured party in order that the hurt might be healed. In Him a sinless God identified Himself with sinful man, sharing and absorbing the curse invoked by the law. Paul's phraseology here should be noted. He does not say that God made Christ a sinner, but "made him to be sin"—without the guilt yet assuming the burden of it. And so in reverse man is "made to be righteousness," without the merit but awarded the status. So God and man are reconciled in Christ; the righteousness of God and the sin of man are channeled through Him.

Prayer: *Lord, we with joy confess*
 The myst'ry of Thy grace:
 God and man because Thou art,
 God and man shall still agree;
 God and man no more shall part,
 One in all Thy saints, and me. [Amen.]

—Charles Wesley

Once man has been reconciled to God, God is prepared to make a new covenant with him, and (as our author says in verse 15) of this also Christ is the mediator. The new relationship between God and man is what the Christian addition to the Hebrew scriptures is all about. To the "Old Testament" was added a "New Testament." We might almost equally well say "To the old covenant was added a new covenant," though there is a difference: the new covenant was a replacement, not an addition.

Biblical archaeology has shown that the covenant God made with Moses on behalf of the Israelites was quite different from that between Jacob and Laban. The latter was an agreement between equals, the former a royal or suzerainty covenant, a privilege offered rather than a bargain struck. The new covenant follows this same pattern: it offers the continued fatherly love and protection of God in response to the filial love and obedience which it expects. As a pledge of the Father's love, Christ offered Himself as a sacrifice to seal the covenant.

The Hebrews had no word for testament, a written instrument about the disposition on one's property after death; but in the King James Version verse fifteen emphasizes an important point in speaking of Christ as "the mediator of the new testament." The Greek word "diathēkē" is in fact normally translated "testament," and for the early Christians this word emphasized a similar factor in their new relationship with God. Once more it was God who took the initiative, who bequeathed a full life in Christ to His heirs. And a new covenant could take effect (a point which Paul elaborates) only after a death, just as the old covenant needed blood for its ratification.

Because Christ is our mediator, we are heirs of God, we enter a new covenant relationship. As God has given Himself to us in Christ, so we gladly respond by giving ourselves to Him.

Prayer: "And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it. And the covenant I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen."—The Book of Worship

Paul and other exponents of the new covenant mediated by Christ linked it with blood, with sacrifice, with death. Perhaps this came partly from a vague racial memory of human sacrifice to appease the threatening gods. Certainly they linked it with the Hebrew sacrificial system whereby the priests were believed to remove the barriers erected between man and God by man's breach of the ritual law. Jesus Himself insisted that the way to new life lay through death: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." And so in instituting the Lord's Supper Jesus said, "This is my blood of the new covenant which is poured out for many." It is possible that the title "Son of man" appealed to Jesus because He was not to be a Messiah-King but a Suffering Servant.

All this lies behind the parable of the vineyard: the "beloved son" is clearly the mediator sent by God, rejected and killed by men, yet undefeated. Other men benefit by succeeding to the privilege of being God's husbandmen, and the Son Himself is mysteriously vindicated. Here the metaphor changes to the rejected stone which becomes the head of the corner. This metaphor reveals the confidence of Christ that the death of the mediator implied not the failure but the success of His mission.

Here at last is a human sacrifice to end all sacrifices, the sacrifice of a representative man on behalf of men. Yet in fact it was the eternal God Himself submitting to a shameful death at the hands of those who had wronged Him. It was all a mystery, but by the death of the God-Man as divine mediator atonement had been made between man and God.

*Prayer: Victim Divine, Thy grace we claim,
While thus Thy precious death we show:
Once offered up, a spotless Lamb,
In Thy great temple here below,
Thou didst for all mankind atone,
And standest now before the throne. [Amen.]*

—Charles Wesley

The new life brought by Christ as mediator involves a new picture of God, a new picture of man, reconciliation, and a new covenant sealed with a sacrificial atonement. It is something that must encompass our whole personality—every thought and activity—until we are “new persons in Christ.” This is the “eternal life” about which John writes frequently. He places the stress on perfection in quality, or sanctification, rather than on its everlastingness, though this quality of living does endure beyond death and is indeed a foretaste of heaven upon earth.

When we respond to the revelation of what God is and what man can become as we see it in Christ, it is like being born again into a new spirit if not into a new body. And if the new spirit can be summed up in one human word, it is “love.” This is what prompted God to send Christ as mediator; this is the hallmark of Christian discipleship: love to God and love to man. To love is to be sanctified. Sanctification is the process of growth begun in regeneration.

This prayer was restricted neither to Christ’s lifetime nor to His first disciples. It was intended to take effect after He had gone into the presence of the Father, and it was “also for those who are to believe in me through their [the disciples’] word.” The early church clearly believed that even in heaven Christ continued as the mediator through whom the love of God was applied to the souls of men that they might indeed live the life of the sanctified. Perhaps this is best expressed in Hebrews 7: 25: “He is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.”

*Prayer: Thy will, O Lord, whate'er I do,
 My principle of action be:
 Thy will I would through life pursue
 Impelled, restrained, and ruled by Thee,
 And only think, and speak, and move,
 As taught, and guided by Thy love. [Amen.]*

—Charles Wesley