

9am Christian Learning Series Sunday, March 14, 2021

The World Before and After Jesus: Desire of the Everlasting Hills

by Thomas Cahill – Chapter 5

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“Drunk in the Morning Light: People of the Way”

“Christianity, too, is a form of Judaism.” – Rabbi Shayne J.D. Cohen

“People of the Way” is the name given to the earliest Christians, the Christians who witnessed to a crucified and risen Jesus as Jews (and some gentiles) in the first century. Our faith was first understood by the outside world as a branch (or sect) of Judaism. They were called “People of the Way” and we hear an echo of this fact in Jesus’s promise to be “the way, the truth, and the life.” (John 14:6) A modern example of faith being named by outsiders would be the Methodist Church, which was begun by two Anglican priests, John and Charles Wesley, whose distinct understanding of the Anglican faith had a “method.” Their followers became “Method-ists” in the 18th century.

Cahill asks us to recognize God acting in History.

After Jesus’ crucifixion, and the mysteries of his resurrection, many disciples (we don’t know how many) witnessed Jesus’ presence- some in groups, some as individuals. About the mind-bending resurrection of Christ, Cahill writes: “It seems wisest to say that the disciples believed that they had encountered the risen Jesus, that he was looking much better than when they had seen him last (to the extent that some of them didn’t even recognize him at first), and that, despite the ease with which he appeared and disappeared, he was tangible.” (p. 221)

Cahill reminds us of the Judeo-Christian belief that God acts in time when he writes: “Time is precious, and just as the ‘day’ of the prophets of Israel had to come to an end, the ‘day’ of Jesus is ‘nearly done’ to be succeeded by the Age of the Spirit that is about to break upon the disciples... From now on, the Age of the Spirit is also the Age of the

Church (which will have failings like the Grand Inquisitors of the future but begins with the strengths and vulnerabilities of a fledgling church of perhaps 100 men and women)." (P. 219)

The stories of the very early church are messy, charismatic, and beyond scientific or logical analysis:

Pentecost, as told in Acts (p. 221-223), describes the Spirit descending on the disciples like a painless fire 10 days after Jesus' ascension; the man crippled from birth whom Peter and John restore with miraculous healing: "I have neither silver nor gold, but what I have, I give you" (Acts 3:6) suggests Jesus' followers have some of Jesus' power; the stoning of the first martyr, Stephen, depicts those who kill him laying their coats at the feet of a young man named "Saul" who will become "the surprising mainspring of Christian expansion" – Paul. (P. 226)

The Early Church gained structure and copied the liturgy of the Jews.

Both Paul and Luke (in Acts), acknowledge the growing church and speak of "positions of defined responsibility such as apostles, prophets, and teachers (*1st Corinthians*), and Bishops and deacons (*Letter to the Philippians*)." (p. 221)

Luke "confirms the church as remaining faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of bread, and to the prayers, which he sees as four constructive elements of the new Assembly." (p. 228) In the 80's, Luke insists people resist the "Judaizers or the proto-Gnostics" and remain true to the wisdom of the original witnesses. In worship, the common prayers of the Jews in the Temple or synagogue were the ones the "people of the way" attended as often as possible, many of them daily. The centerpiece of worship was the reading from the sacred scrolls (which God-fearers came to hear as a prophecy predicting Christ as well as truths in their own right). "Breaking of the bread" was the common meal, the Eucharist, celebrated in private homes among believers. The sharing of this meal incorporated them into the cosmic Christ and tied them into a brotherhood and sisterhood with one another. (P. 227) "In the 90's when Christians are finally expelled from the synagogues, the Jewish

prayer service will be appropriated and become the prelude to the Eucharist, creating the liturgy we know today." (p. 229)

The early Church was a work-in-progress.

Cahill notes that the early church was a church of its age: "They were still a people of their age – holding property in common was a voluntary option, the community did not challenge the patriarchal code of the dominant culture, the use of slaves, or the need for wives and children to obey their husbands/fathers." (p. 232). Nevertheless, messages of equality and love were powerfully present, and the community members called one another "brother" and "sister" and recognized a unique "kinship" with one another. Cahill speculates that the fledging church could not afford to offend the dominate culture. He says, "Christians were already fighting a cultural war against Jews accused them of the capital crime of blasphemy, against Greeks, who found the Jewish notion of bodily resurrection hilarious, and against Romans who were eager to round up "troublemakers", especially ones that prayed to a 'God" that they had executed." (p. 232)

Where is Jesus now?

When Jesus "returned to the Father" to become the Cosmic Christ, he was not replaced by the Spirit, never to contact them again. Jesus continues to be present to his community in mystical, practical, and compelling ways. He is found in the Eucharist, in the eyes of the needy, poor, or ill who need care; he comes to us in dreams, in moments of prayer, in a sudden sense of him we experience personally but often find hard to talk about. "As Gerard Manly Hopkins wrote:

... for Christ plays in ten thousand places,

Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his

To the Father through the features of men's faces." (p. 251)

Next Week: The Beloved Disciple's Jesus: pages 255-281.