

8. X was in Y reconciling W to X

What does it mean for “God to be in Christ reconciling the world to Himself.” (2nd Corinthians 5: 19) This saying of Paul’s has been much preached upon, but clarity about the meaning of this formula has been much confused.

Let us assume that we have begun to solve for X in the first seven discourses of this collection. What Paul means by “God” or “X” is an experience of Eternal Mystery, the incomprehensible Source of all things, the eternal power and divinity that have been plainly discernible through things which X has made and which are commonly seen and known. In the formula above, Paul is saying that this Eternal Mystery was in Christ reconciling the world to X, the Eternal Mystery. Paul does not say that the Eternal Mystery became Jesus, a historical figure. It is superstition to say that incarnation means that the Eternal became Jesus. The incarnation means something else. Jesus was God only in the sense that the Eternal became Present in this flesh and blood person in a way that was healing to humanity. If we do not understand what it means for one of us to be the place where the Eternal becomes Present in a way that is healing to humanity, then we do not understand how this was true for Jesus.

When Jesus dies upon the cross, this is not the dying of the Eternal Mystery. This is not that death of what the Apostles Creed is referring to with the term “Almighty God.” “Almighty God” means the Eternal Mystery which does not die. The cross is the outpouring of the life of Jesus in obedience to the Almighty aspect of the three-faced experience we call “The Trinity.” Jesus, as he is pictured in the story of the Garden of Gethsemene, is quite clear about this. “Not my will, but thy will be done.”

So what does it mean for X (the Almighty) to be in Y (Christ) reconciling W (the fallen world) to X (the Almighty)? What does Paul mean by Y, by “Christ” in this text? It is clear that Paul associates the man Jesus with the title Christ, but “Christ” has a wider meaning when Paul says that the community of those who accept Jesus as the Christ are “in Christ.” Further, to be in Christ means that we share in the crucifixion and in the resurrection. How is that so? What is crucified and what is resurrected?

We can begin by saying that our crucifixion means that our expectations for a Messiah who would save us from the terrors of Almighty God was very rudely killed. Jesus was and still is a disappointment in terms being a Messiah who would rescue us from the tyranny of the Roman Empire, or from the British Empire, or from the U.S. Empire, or from racist society, or from civilization’s momentum toward ecological doom. In terms of such expectations, Jesus was and is a failed Messiah. His death (as well as his life and teachings) killed our expectations of the arrival of someone (or some event) that would rescue us from the grim and grimy tasks of resolving our own earthly affairs. Furthermore, those among us who have given up our expectation for a false messiah are going to be swimming upstream, for the fallen world is taken up with false expectations of many sorts. Here are some: When I get a new job, then I will be really living. When I find a proper mate, then I will be really living. When my children finally leave home, then I will have life at last. When my health returns to normal then ----. When some pill or doctor or faith healer cures my most troubling pain then ----. There is no such Messiah on the way. For Jesus to be your Messiah means you have renounced all such messianic expectations. With a Jesus sort of Messiah, with a “Jesus Christ,” there is just NOW with its possibilities and responsibilities. There is just us who, like Jesus, face the challenging demands of the Almighty God to expend our lives for something worth expending it for, and to do so before our life simply expends itself. Jesus in his teachings again and again explained that clinging on to whatever we think our life needs to be, has been, or is hoped for, will mean the loss our true Life. We who are “in Christ” move from clinging to flinging. We who are “in Christ” are flung and are flinging ourselves into experiencing a resurrection of the Life that was in Christ

Jesus. And this Life takes place, not tomorrow nor yesterday, but Now.

So being "in Christ" means flinging our life into the Now of our own times. This means flinging ourselves into the ecological crisis or whatever else calls us in our moment of living on this Earth. For Jesus it meant questioning the moralistic use of the the Mosaic Law. Jesus called people to simply fling themselves into a forgiveness that was universally present. It did not matter how messy our past. Now the kingdom of God was being offered to us as our true home – the entry into which means flinging ourselves into an ever-forgiving new start that is present in each and every living Now in which we are being posited by the Ever-Present, Eternal, Almighty, Mysteriousness. Such flinging of our lives "in Christ" is the core meaning of experiencing the resurrection.

Perhaps the clearest resurrection narrative in the Gospels is the 24th chapter of Luke. Here is my take on this remarkable text: In this story, Cleopas and an unnamed disciple, perhaps a woman, are leaving the scene of Jesus' crucifixion in a state of despair. According to the story, they have already heard tales about an empty tomb and Jesus being alive, but this has made no impression on them. Clearly, these two despairing disciples were not even interested in a resurrection that may or may not have happened to Jesus. Only when the resurrection was something that happened to them personally did "it" become an event worth remembering.

So here they are walking down the road in despair, "their faces drawn in misery," and some mysterious figure they do not recognize begins to walk with them. In an almost jocular and nonchalant fashion this mystery figure gets them talking about what is bugging them. They express their grief in these poignant words, "But we were hoping that he (Jesus) was the one who was to come and set Israel free."

So then this mysterious figure, whom we, the readers, are told is Jesus himself, does a theological interpretation for them on the subject of suffering. The main point of this sermon was the claim that it was befitting for the Christ "the expected one" to suffer. It is almost like Jesus is asking these two, "Have you ever heard of a true prophet who did not suffer rejection?"

After this lecture on suffering, Luke, or whoever was the author of this story, inserts these words in his tale: "They were by now approaching the village to which they were going." Surely, this sentence is alluding to the "Spirit" destination Luke is about to describe. Let us contemplate these power-packed words:

He (the mystery figure) gave the impression that he meant to go on further, but they stopped him with the words, "Do stay with us. It is nearly evening and soon the day will be over." So he went indoors to stay with them. THEN IT HAPPENED! While he was sitting at table with them he took the loaf, gave thanks, broke it and passed it to them. Their eyes opened wide and they knew him! But he vanished from their sight. Then they said to each other, "Weren't our hearts glowing (burning) while he was with us on the road and when he made the scriptures so plain to us?" And they got to their feet without delay and turned back to Jerusalem.

They had just walked **SEVEN MILES** away from Jerusalem, from the scene of the crucifixion. But after **IT HAPPENED**, they walked back, without delay, at night fall, **SEVEN MILES** to the very place where their entire lives had come unraveled. We are left to assume that these two disciples joined the community of those who spent the rest of their lives celebrating rather than despairing over the fact that a true Messiah gets rejected by the fallen world.

Here is the longer passage in 2 Corinthian 5:19-20 where Paul spells out his vision about all this:

What I mean is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, no longer holding men's misdeeds against them, and that he has entrusted us with the message

of reconciliation. We are therefore as Christ's ambassadors. It is as if God were appealing to you through us: in Christ's name we implore you, be reconciled to God!

Paul is saying that we who have been reconciled are now called to be the reconcilers. This means taking God's side (Reality's side) in the ongoing conflict with humanity's complaints against Reality. Taking God's side is seen as compassion for the complainers. It means seeing that the true Life of the complainers depends upon the complainers being reconciled to God. Reality is not going to change to please the complainers. The complainers have to do the changing. (1) Step one of this change is not stopping our complaining, but simply admitting that we are complaining. We are basically and deeply complainers. We can pray prayers of complaining if we like. Many Psalm writers certainly did. But the completion of step one means seeing that our complaining against the Enigmatic Power shining through nature and history is an estrangement from our own reality, the reality of others, as well as from the Final, Overall, Mystery, Depth, and Greatness of Being. For reconciliation to occur, this understanding of our "fallenness" or "corruption" needs to be confessed. (2) Step two in our reconciliation to X (to Reality) is realizing that Reality welcomes us home to Reality in spite of our lifetime of complaining against Reality and acting out our complaints in various forms of malice toward others and ourselves. (3) Step three in our reconciliation is surrendering our complaining and instead flinging our lives into a Life of reconciliation with Reality – making Reality our God. Only after this reconciliation (this shift from Reality our enemy to Reality our friend) can we begin to understand the love of Reality for us. Reality loves us by insisting upon our realism and welcoming us home to a fresh start in realism as opposed to carrying on in a lifetime of futile fight with Reality and thus living in the despair, hopelessness, malice, and slavery to obsessions that the fight with Reality includes.

When Reality is in us reconciling the fallen world to Reality, we are going to encounter the same wrath from most of humanity that Jesus encountered. In the Gospel of John, John's fictitious Jesus explains to his disciples that the disciple is not above his master. If humankind rejected and persecuted the master, they will do the same to the disciple. This arrangement of things is Reality's (God's) forgiveness toward the fallen world of complainers against Reality. As followers of Jesus we get to be Reality's forgiveness through our weakness of being vulnerable to the wrath of humanity, a humanity that hates Reality and prefers malice and murder and even their own despair to being reconciled with Reality. Some portion of humanity will, nevertheless, respond to the reconcilers. They will repent and join the "Kingdom of God." They will become reconciled and reconcilers. They will take their place in the Reign of Reality, picking up their own measure of suffering (i.e. their own cross) which will be worked out by "Reality" as their lot in being part of the reconciling body of Christ. They will pray with Jesus, "Not my will, but Thy will be done."

Martin Luther King, Jr. provides us an example and some understanding of what it means to reconcile humans to the Almighty, to Reality, to God. We may have had difficulty sorting out what it means for Jesus to have died for our sins. But clearly Martin Luther King, Jr. died for our sins, for our racial estrangement. Whether we citizens of the United States were conscious or unconscious bigots who oppressed a portion of our citizenry, or whether we were among those who allowed ourselves to be outwardly and/or inwardly oppressed, King died for our sins. If we were willing to be, we were "born of his Spirit and washed in his blood." King knew that he was risking his life. He knew he might be killed. He did not know when or how or whether, but he was aware that he might not enter the promised land. Nevertheless, he was willing to lay down his life that others

might enter that land. The exact same dynamic applies to Jesus. We, humanity, (not Jews, not Romans, but humanity) killed the best of what humanity could be. The characteristic sin of that time was not African American racism, but a type of ingrown arrogance with regard to law and moralism. Jesus challenged his times to the core and delivered many to new life. The part of his times that was not willing to accept his challenge, shed his blood. That blood was shed for us. The Almighty Reality was in Christ reconciling fallen humanity to the Almighty Reality. The Almighty was in Martin King reconciling fallen humanity to the Almighty. The Almighty was in the Moslem, Malcolm X, reconciling fallen humanity to the Almighty. The Almighty was in the Hindu, Gandhi, reconciling fallen humanity to the Almighty. We need to add to this list women like Harriet Tubman, Susan B. Anthony, and many others who flung their lives into the estrangement of their times. The Almighty Reality can be in any one of us reconciling fallen humanity to Almighty Reality. We are exploring here a universal dynamic of history, not a mere Christian dogma.

Blessed Assurance Martin is mine, Jesus is mine!
Oh what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,
Born of his Spirit, washed in his blood.

This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Martin, my Jesus, my Susan, my _____
all the day long.
This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Healers all the day long.