

Is Jesus The Only Way To God?

Text: St. John 14:9 *"He that hath seen me hath seen the Father"*

Is Jesus the only way to God? Let me begin by saying that He is not; that He never claimed to be, and that the scriptures make no such claim for Him.

If Jesus were the only way to God, He could never have come. His coming would have been an event unrelated to every act of divine revelation that had happened before it; without hint, antecedent, preparation or tradition. Indeed, if He were the only way to God, then His coming would have denied the validity of any self-disclosure of God before His coming.

We know that these physical bodies of ours exist only because of all that has gone to the making of them: the stuff of the earth, the sun, the moon, the stars. We are made of stardust, called into life and being by the love of ancient ancestors and the grandparents and parents we know. We are rooted physically in all that this universe is. And this is as true of our mental, moral and spiritual identity as it is of our physical existence. We entered a world waiting to receive us, which has helped to make us what we are. There was a world for us to enter; not only a world of material stuff, but a world of events, ideas, values, languages, experience, personality, character. We became characters in a story already being told, were given a part in a play already being performed. As Thomas Traherne so beautifully expresses it, "You never enjoy the world aright till you remember how lately you were made, and how wonderful it was when you came into it."

This was true also of our Lord. The scriptures tell us that He came "in the fullness of time." This means that there had been preparation for His coming. Not everything He taught about God originated with Him. Indeed, as George MacDonald tells us, our Lord never thought of being original. One day His mother, who had lost her twelve-year-old son, found Him in the Temple, surrounded by the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. They taught Him about God, and how He had disclosed Himself in the events and characters of Israel's history.

Our Lord did not have to rediscover what Israel already knew. Many before Him had affirmed that God is One, that He is Creator, that He is Love. Jesus did not have to discover that the God of His conscience had created the world. The Prophets of Israel had already declared that. It was part of Israel's faith. Into their awareness of God, and this understanding of the Divine nature, our Lord entered at His birth. His mother taught Him these things at her knee. They were affirmed in the prayers He learned, and in His good talk with Joseph as they made things out of wood. Much later, when He asked His disciples who people thought He was, they replied that some thought He was Moses, and some said He was Elijah or one of the Prophets. Moses, Elijah and the Prophets were among the great ones of Israel who shaped His understanding of God. When worshipping in the Synagogue, as He habitually did, He read the scriptures and declared His own work a fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. Of course Jesus is not the only way to God. If He were, it would deny the heritage of faith into which He entered.

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We can go further. If Jesus is the only way to God, think how impoverished our Christian worship would be. This Service of Worship, of which this sermon is but a part, would be stripped of much of its truth and beauty. We heard a Call to Worship from the lips of a sweet singer of Israel. One of the anthems we listened to came from the Book of Psalms, and the hymn we just sang praised the God of Abraham. Our First Lesson was read from the Hebrew scriptures. ~ These acts of worship presume that Abraham and the Psalmist and the Y Prophets knew something of God long before Jesus was born. It would Y be impossible for us to make use of them if Jesus is the only way to God.

This serves to bring home to us our enormous indebtedness to the faith of Israel. And this indebtedness is not a recognition of Israel as another faith, but an acknowledgement that it is the root of our own. The faith of Israel is in me, and it is in you, it is inseparable from our knowledge of Christ. The words of Israel's experience of bondage, deliverance, pilgrimage and salvation have given us the metaphors =which express our experience of God. Rachel and Abraham, Rahab and Ruth are all in Jesus, and they are all in us. Our Savior was a Son of David, our Lord was a Jew, and for that reason all of Israel is gathered into our faith. To call Jesus "the Christ," or to name Him "Messiah" has no meaning apart from the faith of Israel. Our acknowledgement of it is not the recognition of another faith belonging to somebody else, but an affirmation of the faith to which we are inextricably bound and from which we are inseparable. We ought to acknowledge the truth of this and praise God for it. Dr. Fosdick told the story of a woman who was indignant when she heard him say that Jesus was a Jew. She set him right by instructing him that "Jesus may have been a Jew, but God is a Baptist."

One way to discover this is to plunge into the Epistle to the Galatians and try to answer the questions that are raised there concerning Jesus of Nazareth, who He is and what He accomplished. The range of our answers will carry us all through Israel's history and thought, and God's revelation of Himself to His people.

If our faith is deeply rooted in Judaism, then anti-semitism in any form is not only wicked, but foolish. It is the severing of our own roots, the denial of the faith which makes Christianity possible. For the Christian, anti-semitism is not murder, it is suicide; it is the denial of our own experience and identity. The faith of Israel is the rock from which we are hewn. Israel's covenant is our own.

We must recognize, not only the preparation in Israel for our Lord's ~t coming, but the preparation in other faiths. Not in the same way, mind you. Israel's faith was unique and uniquely anticipated His coming. He was born a Jew. It was to Judaism that He came. The faith into which He was born was the faith of Moses, and David, and Samuel and the Prophets. Yet Christians believe in the Holy Spirit, "the Lord and Giver of life, by whom all things were made." The t; Spirit is the universal Spirit, who moves like wind over the earth and in the hearts, minds and spirits of men and women everywhere, even when they do not recognize Him. Christians believe that "everything that came to be was alive with His life," and that it is His light that "enlightens every man that cometh into the world." If God is the fountain of all

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goodness and the source of all truth and love, then God is present wherever these are to be found, and they are not limited to one faith.

Notice how scriptural this understanding of the work of the Spirit is. In the Book of Acts, Peter addresses Cornelius, who was not a Christian, not a Jew, but a religious man who worshiped God, gave generously and prayed regularly. (Which puts him ahead of some of us, to begin with.) Peter tells him, "I now see how true it is that God has no favorites, but that in every nation the man who is God-fearing and does what is right is acceptable to Him." Peter had not always believed this, but came to believe it when God showed him in a vision that he must not despise as profane or unclean what God finds acceptable. Beginning with what Cornelius already knew, Peter went on to tell the story of Jesus and preached the good news of the forgiveness of sins. Alas! some of us have yet to learn the lesson Peter learned in the early days of the faith.

We may speak, then, of the work of the Spirit in other religions. It is as though Christ were present, though hidden, in them. I read recently of the headmistress of a high school in Osaka who was converted to Christianity by the Christ-likeness of a Buddhist monk. There is a marvelous universalism in that. Professor E. L. Allen, one of my old teachers, who was a missionary to China for many years, tells us that when he entered a Chinese village which had never heard the gospel of Christ, he had a deep awareness that God was already there in the power of the Spirit, and that the faith they already knew had prepared them for the message of Christ. I have told you before the story of the old Hindu woman who heard the story of Jesus for the first time and said with shining eyes to the missionary who preached it, "I have always loved Him, and now you have told me His name." Of course Jesus is not the only way to God. To claim that He is would deny any knowledge of God in other faiths; it would sever our own roots in Israel; it would render Him inexplicable and His coming impossible.

But we must go further. You see, everything I have said so far is congenial to our time, a time when intolerance is one of the few sins we won't tolerate. To the modern view, tolerance is good in itself. It doesn't much matter what you tolerate so long as you tolerate it. We live in an eclectic age, and pride ourselves on our broadmindedness. We are inclusive, not exclusive; the last thing we should think of doing is to make a claim to truth that would close anybody out. We are like the fellow who believed that two and two make four but was too much of a gentleman to press the point. This broadmindedness, this inclusiveness, this tolerance, has led inevitably to grayness, to a blurring of margins and a confusion of things that differ. We seem unable to acknowledge that some claims to truth are incompatible with other claims to truth; that not everything is a matter of both/and, but may be a matter of either/or, so that we must sometimes choose between conflicting assertions.

This "tolerance" has led us to say some very silly things indeed; and one of the silliest things it has led us to say is that all religions are really the same. All religions are really not the same. And this is discernable, not as a claim of faith but by the

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exercise of rational thought. Anybody who has given ten minutes of his time to the study of comparative religions knows that all religions are not the same.

They know, for example, that all religions may be divided into two distinct groups: To the first group belong the faiths which believe what we might call cosmic personalism. Cosmic personalism affirms that God created the world, is separate from the world and is therefore free to act upon the world. The second group consists of those faiths which are pantheistic. They believe, not only that God is in everything, but that God is everything, or that everything is God. He is neither separate from, nor independent of, the world, but is to be identified with the world. He therefore has no being apart from it, and is unable to act upon it.

Now, that's the division; and it separates Judaism, Christianity and Islam from Hinduism, Buddhism and many of the other Eastern and Oriental religions. That is the division. Notice that when we say so, we are not saying which group is better or worse; we are not elevating some faiths over others. The only judgment we are making is the judgment which recognizes things that differ; and this judgment is enough to demonstrate clearly that all religions are not the same. They differ in their understanding of the being of God, of the nature of creation and God's relation to it, of the meaning of history and human destiny. To say that all religions are the same is to ignore fundamental differences which become obvious once we ask even the most superficial questions concerning them.

It is equally foolish to claim that within this broad division, all religions are really the same. Judaism is not the same as Christianity, neither Jews nor Christians would wish to say that it is. Each makes a claim to truth which is incompatible with the other's claim to truth. Notice, for example, how they disagree about the Prologue of St. John's Gospel. In it we are told that Jesus is the Eternal Word of - God made flesh; that God became incarnate in Christ to show us His grace and truth and to accomplish our salvation. This claim is not merely a universal claim for Christ, it is a cosmic claim. And that claim echoes and re-echoes through the New Testament. Paul says that in Jesus God has revealed His secret purpose that the whole ~ universe should find its unity in Him.

All religions are not the same. Judaism and Christianity are different. You can prove it by asking Jews and Christians whether Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, God's Anointed One. Christians believe that He is, and believing it, have given Him their devotion. Jews say that He is not. Some Jews believe that the Messiah is still to come.

Again, Jews and Christians do not agree about the claim of Jesus, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No man cometh unto the Father but by me." That is an exclusive claim. Christians believe it to be the truth of our Lord's nature and work while Jews believe Him, to be mistaken and His claim to be false.

Our conclusion is a simple and obvious one: all religions are not the same. The differences between them will occupy our thought and form the substance of the remainder of this sermon.

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What are we to do with the matters about which we differ so fundamentally? What place do tolerance and love have when we disagree so profoundly? They have a very large place indeed, for it is disagreement that makes tolerance possible. Had that occurred to you? We don't tolerate the things we agree about; we accept and share them. We tolerate each other only when we disagree. It is not tolerant to pretend that there really aren't any differences between religions; that is dishonest and foolish. And it does not mean that we are intolerant simply because we acknowledge our differences. To be tolerant is a way of dealing with the differences we acknowledge. Tolerance means that we will not allow our disagreements to estrange us. To love others does not mean pretending that we think in the same way and acknowledge the same truth. It means that we treat with respect those who differ from us, and that we deal with our disagreements with humility, grace and a common regard for truth. Where there are no differences there is no place for tolerance. Tolerance is relevant only when people disagree. But where there are the real and acknowledged differences of opinion we have noticed, what are we to say of them?

Please listen with great care to what I am about to say, for I don't want you to misunderstand it. I will say it as carefully as I can: Christians do not believe that Jesus is the only way to God. We have said that, and have given our reasons for it. Christians do believe, however, that Jesus is the only way to *the Father*.

That may sound difficult, but it is really a statement of massive simplicity. To believe in the God whom Jesus reveals you have to believe in Jesus. No one but Jesus shows us "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." No one else even claims to. If Jesus is the One who reveals the Father, then to come to the Father means coming through the One who has revealed Him. We should not have known what the Father is like if Jesus had not revealed Him. To say, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one cometh unto the Father but by me" is not to make a narrow, intolerant claim, it is to state the obvious truth that we cannot come to the God Jesus revealed except through the One who revealed Him.

But is our Lord's revelation of the Father unique? Professor Jeremiah tells us that nowhere else, and never before, had anyone taught us to call God Abba, which means Father. Abba was among a baby's first words. He learned to say it as our children learned to say mama or papa. It sounds the same, and it means "daddy." Jeremias has scrutinized the evidence, he has examined his sources with great care and not only finds this message of Jesus to be among the central messages of the New Testament, but can find no other instance of it in the literature of the time. No one else said that God is our Father in this individual, personal, intimate, familiar way. If we believe that God is our Father in this sense, we do so only because Jesus revealed Him.

But there is another way for us to consider our assertion that to believe in the God Jesus reveals means believing in Christ. It has to do with the most fundamental truth of faith and it may be expressed in a question: Is God the kind of God who loves us so much that He would become incarnate for our sake? That is the question.

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How may it be answered? The answer is not something God can tell us. If He is indeed a God who loves us enough to become incarnate, we can know it only if He does it. Some truths can be known only if they are done. They cannot be told; they can be known only by being accomplished. How do you know that I love you enough to marry you? The only way I can persuade you of the truth of that is to marry you. Why do we believe that God is the kind of God who comes all lengths to meet us, taking our nature upon Him and laying down His life for our sake? We believe it because He has done it. There is no other way by which we could believe it. The truth of it can be told only by being done, and Christians believe that God did it in Jesus, the Word made flesh, dwelling among us, full of grace and truth.

This does not mean merely that Jesus was a good man who showed us what God is like; in other words, that Jesus is like God. Nor does it mean merely that God is like Jesus. It means that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus are God's work; that "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself"

The uniqueness of Jesus does not consist in what He taught us about God. He is Himself the teaching. The truth about God is not something He told us, it is something He is. He is Himself the Truth. He does not simply show us the way, He is the Way. He becomes one with us to make us one with the goodness of God Himself

The same is true when we speak of God's grace. Jesus did not come r to tell us about God's grace, He is the grace of God. It is not that grace was His message, He was Himself the message of grace. For the Christian, God's grace is not a truth Christ taught but what Christ is. He is Himself "full of grace and truth." What He revealed cannot be separated from what He was. He is "God's presence and His very self " Christianity is Christ. When Christians affirm that Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life, and that no one comes to the Father except through Him, they are not attacking other faiths. They are describing what Christianity is. They are telling us that their understanding of God is inseparable from Jesus of Nazareth who has revealed Him in this unique way. Believing this is what makes us Christian. This is not what Jews believe; it is not what Muslims believe; it is what Christians believe. To believe in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is to believe in Jesus.

Does this mean that those who do not believe in Christ are lost? Is it part of Christian faith that men and women who belong to other faiths are shut out of heaven? Some Christians think so. They believe that the millions of devotees of other religions, many of whom died before Jesus was born, along with those who have never heard of Him, are eternally lost. I do not agree with them. I believe that such a doctrine is unchristian and unscriptural. It is, in the words of Charles Darwin, "a damnable doctrine," and one which drove him from faith, for he r regarded it, as I do, as immoral. I have no patience with those Christians who would think themselves cheated and their faith diminished or discredited if anyone of another faith were to be saved.

That such a belief is unscriptural is made clear in two New Testament passages I should mention. One is the account of our Lord's Transfiguration. You will remember that Peter, James and John went up the mountain with Jesus and that He was

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transfigured before them. They saw Him walking and conversing with Moses and Elijah. He seemed to be on very good terms with them, and they with Him, in mutual sympathy and acceptance. Moses and Elijah had never heard of Jesus, for they were dead long before our Lord was born. Yet they were not rejected by our Lord but welcomed as being of the same Spirit. With Elijah and Moses He spoke of his own "Exodus" which He should accomplish at Jerusalem.

The second passage is in the First Epistle of Peter where we are told that after His crucifixion our Lord preached to "the spirits in prison." The Apostles' Creed affirms the same truth when it declares, "He descended into Hell," that is, into Hades, the abode of spirits. This means that the souls of the departed who died without ever having heard His name are not excluded from His saving work. *It means that those who died without Him may yet be saved through Him.* That is our hope. It is a belief in the continuing ministry of our Lord to those who have died without knowing Him. And it is taught in scripture and confessed in one of the basic creeds of the Church.

But there is something more to be said. So far, what I have tried to do is state clearly the substance, the *matter* of faith. But we must also say something about the *manner* of faith. Sometimes, sadly, the truth of faith has been denied by the manner in which we have declared it. This is to our shame. We have not been content to say what we believe; we have not been satisfied, in the splendid words of John Wesley, "to offer them Christ." We have done it in a way that denies the Spirit of the Christ we offer them. We have declared the Gospel of grace gracelessly. We have spoken of the Divine mercy mercilessly, and have ourselves become a reason for unbelief. How are our Jewish friends to believe us when we speak of "the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ" when they have seen so little of it in our treatment of them either in the history of their race or in our personal walk and conversation? Not all Presbyterians are loving; not all Methodists live up to the grace which is the very heart of their message. Pride of religion has often led to hate, and our faith has been used as an instrument of humiliation to diminish the faith of others. When it is, our faith is discredited and we deny the Spirit of Christ. As Berdyaev tells us, "we have turned crucified love into coercive love and have denied the fundamental principle of Christ."

Here is a good sentence from Benjamin Whichcote with which to end. He wrote, "I will not break the certain laws of charity for a doubtful doctrine or uncertain truth." St. John tells us that it is the unloving who know nothing of God. There is sometimes more love in people of other faiths, or in people of no faith, than there is in us. I tell you frankly that if I had any choice in the matter I would much rather spend eternity with Mahatma Gandhi or Martin Buber than with some Christians I know.

A Saint of the Church once said that every true Christian practices being God. What does that mean? It means seeing with His eyes, feeling with His compassion, caring with His kindness, understanding with His sympathy, loving with His magnanimity. Love is the test. If we do not have the Spirit of Christ, we are none of His.