

THE ANONYMOUS CHRIST AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

by

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Based on an Address Delivered on December 21, 2008 at the Sydney Unitarian Church

“Then said Jesus unto his disciples, ‘If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.’” (Mt 16:24)

Greetings, welcome, and peace be with you all.

At this time of the year [the Christmas season], when we celebrate the birth of the man Jesus and experience him in spirit and by imaginative reflection, we would do well to recall his very own words telling why he came into this world. Those words were these: “I am come that you might have life, and that you might have it more abundantly” (Jn 10:10).

The reason I am a Unitarian, and a Unitarian Christian, is that I do not believe that Jesus was, or even claimed to be, God in any exclusive or unique sense. Divine, yes, but not God in any exclusive or unique sense. I believe in the *Divinity* of Jesus, but not the supposed *Deity* of Jesus. There is an important theological difference between the two. The message of Unitarianism and Universalism is this – we are *all* divine. Even Jesus himself affirmed, “Is is not written in your law, I said ye are gods” (Jn 10:34; cf Ps 82:6). What a wonderful heresy to affirm and believe in!

However, I truly believe that Jesus is much more than a teacher, moral exemplar and way-shower. Yes, for me, and for many other Unitarians and Universalists over the years, Jesus is much more than that. Although I seek and find the Divine

in various places and sources and persons, I fundamentally encounter it through and in the person of Jesus, whose Divine personality abides in each of us as our potential perfection. In that sense, for *me* at least, Jesus is “Lord”, because he reveals in a very special and preeminent way both the nature and essence of the Divine Life which is love and the nature of my manifold imperfections and shortcomings.

What about “Savior”? Well, certainly not in the sense of Jesus dying vicariously for my sins in order to placate any angry, punishing God, because on my prayerful reading of the Bible I do not believe that Jesus thought that his death was in any way necessary to secure my forgiveness or that of any other human being for that matter. And what is the evidence and authority for my belief? Jesus, himself. Read the Lord’s Prayer, and the Parable of the Prodigal Son, among other portions of Scripture. However, if one is lost in a very dark and heavily wooded forest (in this case, a forest of largely self-imposed selfishness, self-absorption, self-obsession, loveless behavior and a state of profound separation from others and from one’s true Self), and someone, in this case Jesus, can provide a means of escape and show you the way out of the forest - this state of spiritual darkness - and bring you back into the light of day, then that person may rightly be referred to as one’s savior, metaphorically or otherwise.

Now, in the 25th chapter of Matthew’s Gospel, in the New Testament of the Christian Scriptures, we meet what has been called the “Anonymous Christ”, and we read that the person of Jesus can be experienced even today as a living presence, for he comes to us, and visits us, in our home and in our community. Yes, Jesus’ spirit, the Spirit of God that was in Jesus of Nazareth, can live in us. How? Well, the person and personality of Jesus may come to us, appropriated by faith, through an idea, imaginative reflection, a word we hear, as well as through a person who is suffering or joyful. We encounter this personality of Jesus in our interactions with others. Everyone we meet, everyone we serve, is in the image

of Jesus. Roman Catholics understand this so much better than Protestants. Yes, the Anonymous Christ, as it is known, comes to us in so many ways, and we fail to recognize that Jesus' incarnation, the very manifestation and Self-expression of the Living Christ, continues all the time, in us and in other people. We read about the Anonymous Christ in Matthew 25:34-40:

Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."

Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?"

The King will reply, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."

Jesus' followers were originally known as "people of the way". Jesus, in his vision of the Anonymous Christ, offers us a vision and a challenge. The call to follow is not a call to worship Jesus. He never sought nor wanted that. No, the Way of Jesus is a call to follow Jesus' path, to live as he lived, and to serve others as he did.

Biblical Unitarianism offers what I believe is *true Christianity*. Christianity is the true religion *of* Jesus – the religion that Jesus taught, and by which Jesus himself lived and died. Jesus called it the "gospel of God", and told us that the Kingdom of God was *within* us (see Lk 17:21).

Harry Emerson Fosdick, the distinguished American Baptist minister, author and academic, wrote that a Christian is one who answers Jesus' two-worded appeal, "Follow me." The Presbyterian theologian Samuel Angus described a Christian as a person who is inwardly and whose life is moulded after that of Jesus. In

other words, to believe in Jesus is to confess that in him we find the true essence of the Divine, which is love. Similarly, Brennan Manning, in *The Relentless Love of Jesus*, wrote:

To be a Christian means to stake one's life on the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

Now, this is my point. Many people I know, even many who do not formally identify themselves as Christians, live lives that are so much more nobly and deeply and closely moulded after that of Jesus than those fundamentalist and evangelical Christians who claim, ever so proudly, to have been washed in the saving Blood of the Lamb and who have forsaken the true human Jesus of the Gospels (who *never* used any language of sacrifice, bloodshed, propitiation or expiation) and who have substituted for him a Christ of dogmatism, metaphysics and pagan philosophy. I repeat, many people, who would not identify as Christians, are real followers of the way of Jesus. There is a wonderful hymn, in *The New St Alban Hymnal*, written by Marguerite Pollard, which contains this wonderful verse:

And there are some who love him well,
yet know not it is he they love;
he tends the holy fire within
and draws them to the heights above.

Yes, the Kingdom of God (also known as the “Kingdom of Heaven” in Matthew’s Gospel, “eternal life” in John’s Gospel [but also in the Synoptic Gospels], and the “Beloved Community”) is essentially a kingdom of humanity and of human concerns - irrespective of class, creed, color, race, belief-system or any other little human distinctions – a kingdom of sensitivity between people, and of love and peace and goodwill for all the people of the earth, indeed for all created things. Jesus can never be restricted to one denomination, theological position or even religion – not even Christianity. As E. Stanley Jones, the famous Methodist Christian missionary and theologian, pointed out, the Kingdom of God is founded

directly on goodwill and universal brotherhood – life as it ought to be. It is a spiritual kingdom, a spiritual community of souls in whose hearts the universal spiritual values I referred to earlier are recognized as supreme and sovereign – hence the expression, the sovereign, righteous reign or rule of God in which power and goodness, judgment and mercy are combined.

This kingdom is a *past*, *present* and *future* reality all at the same time.

The Kingdom is a *past* reality because it has been in preparation - and been prepared for us - from the very foundation of the world (cf Mt 25:34) in the form of

... the Oneness
That spans the fathomless deeps of space
And the measureless eons of time,
Binding them together in act,
As we do in thought. ...

... the unity
Of all that is,
The uniformity of all that moves,
The rhythm of all things
And the nature of their interaction.

So wrote Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism.

The great American Unitarian minister of yesteryear Robert T. Weston expressed it beautifully when he wrote:

There is a living web that runs through us

To all the universe
Linking us each with each and through all life
On to distant stars.

The Kingdom of God is for all humanity, and has both an internal and an external aspect to it. Externally, the Kingdom of God is that creative Oneness that holds, sustains and governs the entire universe and everything in it (past, present and

future) – something that is truly beyond our mortal comprehension. Internally, the Kingdom of God lives as a present reality in the human heart, in our innermost being. In the oft-cited words of St Augustine, “I sought you outside and you were inside.” Jesus, the Way-Shower into the Kingdom of God, was a human who was utterly obsessed by humanity, and it is his birth and life that we celebrate today. Samuel Angus wrote in *Jesus in the Lives of Men*:

Jesus made the great discovery of oneness with the Father which he lived out in its expansive fullness in his own experience; he invites each of us to rediscover that discovery and to live in its thrilling and life-transforming power.

And what did Jesus say about the Kingdom of God? Well, many things, in fact far too many to mention this morning, but perhaps his greatest pronouncement on the Kingdom is this, “... the kingdom of God is *within* you” (Lk 17:21).

It was Alfred Lord Tennyson who wrote, “Men may rise on stepping-stones of their dead selves to higher things.” Tennyson was a believer in the humanity of man, that is, the Kingdom of God. Another such believer was the Unitarian Charles Dickens. He was no believer in cast-iron creeds; he put his faith implicitly in the humanity of man. His wonderful story *A Christmas Carol* is itself a parable or object lesson on the besetting sin of selfishness and how it can, and must be, overcome. D. N. Brereton has written about Dickens and *A Christmas Carol*:

His powerful appeal to that better nature which he devoutly believed every one possesses is made with the aid of every artifice known to his decidedly histrionic genius.

Brereton also wrote this about Dickens’ Unitarian understanding and literary expression of Christmas which was embodied in so many of Dickens’ writings on the subject of Christmas:

The spirit of Christmas – giving to the world more than one takes from it, devoting oneself to others, striving to be entirely unselfish – surely that is the true spirit of the Founder.

I have said this before, so forgive me for repeating this. I firmly believe that all we really need to know about Jesus and what is, or at least ought to be, our vision and challenge, can be found in one verse of the Bible, namely, Luke 9:11, which reads:

When the crowds learned [where Jesus was], they followed him; and he welcomed them and spoke to them of the kingdom of God, and cured those who had need of healing.

First, the crowds followed Jesus. The Lord Christ continues to speak to our time, saying, "Follow me". One of my favorite Christian books - it was also my mother's favorite Christian book as well - is *In His Steps* written by Congregational minister Charles M. Sheldon and first published in 1896. Sheldon, a leading exponent of the Social Gospel, challenges us to ask ourselves, in every situation in which we find ourselves placed, "What would Jesus do?" We can reword that question as, "Where is the Anonymous Christ now?" In 1 John 2:3-6 we read:

We know that we have come to know [Jesus] if we obey his commands. The person who says "I know him" but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person. But if anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in that person. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.

Secondly, Jesus welcomed the crowds. No one was turned away. That is why we do not turn away any person who comes here with good intentions. That is why we erect no barriers around our altars. That is why section 20(d) of the *Unitarian Church Act 1927* (NSW) provides:

(d) The congregation shall not at any time make any rule whereby the acceptance of any creed, article or profession of faith shall be established as a condition of membership of the congregation, and any such rule if made shall have no force or effect No particular doctrines or opinion are or shall be required to be taught or observed or forbidden to be taught or observed in such congregation

However, more is required of us than that. We must make sure we erect no barriers outside this place as well, for the Anonymous Christ can be found everywhere.

Thirdly, Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of God, which he came to establish, and to which he brought an entirely new conception. Yes, he came not to establish a church but a kingdom. The church itself is not the Kingdom of God. The latter is not of this world (see Jn 18:36), for Jesus gave the words “Kingdom of God” new meaning. The Kingdom of God, for Jesus, was a spiritual kingdom (and an ethical and moral one at that), not a physical organization, and it was a *present* and *future* reality all at the same time.

As a *present* reality, Jesus revealed that the Kingdom of God was already present in his own life. Jesus formed a community that strove, in steadfast service, to be a living model of God’s reign. We accept the Kingdom of God, and help to make it a *future* reality as well, by building it here on earth – a kingdom that will develop and grow to maturity with Jesus as the Great Exemplar, inspiring us all to believe that God is love (1 Jn 4:8) and to follow his example. Yes, “Thy kingdom come” (Mt 6:10), and we need to pray and affirm that because - and I include myself in this - not yet are all of us, or perhaps any of us, ruled by God in every thought, word and deed.

The Kingdom of God – a past reality, a present reality ... and a future reality. What an incredible concept.

And what is the “entrance fee”, if you like, to enter the Kingdom of God? In the excellent commentary on the Gospels, *The Mission and Message of Jesus: An Exposition of the Gospels in the Light of Modern Research*, by H. D. A. Major, T. W. Manson and C. J. Wright, we read:

Jesus teaches that entrance into the Kingdom of God is dependent not upon race but upon character and conduct. ... Where God reigns in

human personality, there the Kingdom of God has come on earth, and it is for this kind of advance of the Kingdom that Jesus taught His disciples to pray.

That is why Unitarians of yesteryear would affirm, in what was known as “The Unitarian Covenant”:

We believe in:
 The Fatherhood of God;
 The Brotherhood of Man;
 The Leadership of Jesus;
 Salvation by Character;
 The Progress of Mankind
 onward and upward forever.

“Salvation by character”, or, in the words of Major, Manson and Wright, “character and conduct”. Nothing about being washed in the precious shed blood of Jesus Christ. As I have said, so many times before in this pulpit, that butchers shop theology owes its origins, not to the teaching of Jesus, but to a most uncomfortable mixture of certain notions of Jewish sacrifice and a very heavy, indeed fatal, dose of Greco-Roman mystery religion. That sort of theology has no place in any self-respecting Unitarian church or in any other church or fellowship or society of men and women who wish to remain faithful to the spirit, teachings and religion of Jesus and other enlightened leaders across the years. Read, especially, the Gospel of Luke, which makes it very clear that Jesus did not accomplish his work of salvation through vicarious sacrifice but by liberating us from sin and selfishness, thereby enabling us to be restored to health, joy and peace.

The Kingdom of God, sensibly interpreted, is not some supernatural event that will supposedly come to pass when this world comes to an end but a kingdom of this world in which there is justice, equality and freedom for all. “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (Mt 25:40, 45). I mentioned earlier that in John’s Gospel the Kingdom of God is generally identified with “eternal life”. Eternal life, in New Testament terms, is

not so much ever-enduring life but life of a certain quality – the life that Jesus seeks to give us, the life lived as Jesus himself lived his life, that is, a life of love and selfless self-giving to others (the Divine ideals manifest in the Person and spirit of Jesus). Again, in the immortal words of Tennyson, “Men may rise on stepping-stones of their dead selves to higher things.” So, “seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Mt 6:33).

Fourthly, Jesus cured those who needed healing. Whether those healings were miraculous (whatever that means) need not concern us. As Unitarians we are rightly skeptical of so-called miracles and the like. Nevertheless, our task here, in this Church of ours, is to provide opportunities for healing, particularly through the power of the written and spoken word. We come here as broken, damaged people in need of healing. The healing words of Jesus and other enlightened teachers, thinkers and writers, as well as the healing power of music, have the power to change lives. Yes, the Anonymous Christ is present here in all who come for healing of body, mind and soul. Jesus rightly saw healing as *the* sign of the Kingdom of God coming upon us. As a church, we exist to point to the Kingdom of God - sensibly and properly interpreted - preach that kingdom, and help to bring into visible manifestation, in this dangerous, broken, and very sick world of ours, the marvelous works of that kingdom.

At the risk of sounding heretical - not that that's a bad thing, being a Unitarian – I think that Jesus himself was both a Unitarian and a Universalist. He was undeniably a Unitarian in the sense that, as a Jew, he believed in the Jewish Shema, namely, that God was one. He was also holistic and progressive in matters of faith and religious practice, crossing narrow religious laws and boundaries. He was a Universalist in the sense that he warmly welcomed faith, love and righteousness wherever he found them, even in Samaritans and

Romans – those groups which contemporary religion condemned and excluded. There's a lesson for us there, as well.

I am reminded of something else that Samuel Angus wrote, which is contained in his wonderful book *Jesus in the Lives of Men*:

Jesus is not accredited to us today by his miracles, or by a virgin birth, or by a resurrection from an underworld, or by a reanimation of his body from the grave, or by fulfillment of prophecies; he is accredited by his long train of conquests over the loyalties of men, and chiefly by the immediate, intimate and inevitable appeal made by him to everything that is best and God-like in each of us, and by his ability to "make men fall in love with him", and "to win the world to his fair sanctities".

One of Jesus' most interesting and powerful, indeed confronting, parables is the one known as the Parable of the Wedding Feast (also known as the Parable of the Marriage Feast and the Parable of the Unwilling Guests). In Matthew 22:1-10 we read:

Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son. And he sent out his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding feast, and they were unwilling to come. Again he sent out other slaves saying, 'Tell those who have been invited, "Behold, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and my fattened livestock are all butchered and everything is ready; come to the wedding feast.'" But they paid no attention and went their way, one to his own farm, another to his business, and the rest seized his slaves and mistreated them and killed them. But the king was enraged, and he sent his armies and destroyed those murderers and set their city on fire. Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. 'Go therefore to the main highways, and as many as you find there, invite to the wedding feast.' Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered together all they found, both evil and good; and the wedding hall was filled with dinner guests."

Note how the rich and powerful – the so-called "big end of town" – were all too busy to come. Nothing has changed. The poor, the maimed, the hungry, the halt, and the blind – they are not too busy to show up. The Kingdom of God that Jesus

spoke about – indeed, it was his entire message (what he called the “gospel of God”) – is a very different sort of kingdom offered by the world, whose kingdom is an altogether materialistic and consumeristic one, symbolized in the Bible by the great whore of Babylon. As the October 2008 edition of *The Beacon*, the journal of the Melbourne [Australia] Unitarian Peace Memorial Church, points out, in its editorial, the present economic crisis has occurred “as a result of massive greed resulting in the most obscene and ongoing profiteering, manipulation of markets, unbridled gambling in stocks and shares, the amassing of immense and unprecedented personal wealth, and the unregulated freedom to speculate and gamble.” Is this the Kingdom of God of earth? Is this the meaning of Christmas? Of course, not. Herbert Spencer was basically right. The world out there is basically a jungle and only those who have the instinct to compete for survival, and who share its materialistic and hedonistic values, are able to live in it.

The late Dr Norman Vincent Peale, in a sermon preached many years ago at his Marble Collegiate Church on Fifth Avenue, New York City, reassured his wealthy congregation that they had been made rich by God because they deserved it. Now, as most of you already know, I have always been a great admirer of Dr Peale, who ministered to the needs of millions of people throughout the world during his long lifetime, but where in the Bible is it written that God never intends His children to suffer poverty? The great Biblical scholar J. I. Packer, in his book *Keep in Step with the Spirit*, has written:

The claim [that God never intends His children to suffer poverty] may sound plausible when made by a wealthy banker in a luxurious hotel ballroom, but one only has to imagine it being voiced to Christian villages in India or Bangladesh or some drought-ridden part of Africa to see how empty it is.

Remember the words of Jesus, as recorded in Mark 10:25, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the

kingdom of God.” The Bible condemns greed, materialism and exploitative profiteering in no uncertain terms.

Well, what does, or ought, Christmas mean to Unitarians? May I suggest that Christmas is, or ought to be, a time for deep self-reflection, self-abandonment and self-surrender. The true message of Christianity is that it is better to give than to receive, and to love rather than hate, that getting rich at the expense of others is evil, that oppressing, subjugating, exploiting and manipulating others is evil, that destroying the planet and all that is sacred and holy is evil, and that helping others (especially those who are marginalized and otherwise unable to help themselves), working for justice and to end oppression, and promoting harmony, peace and goodwill is good. Christmas is not just about the birth of some Jewish kid who was born some 2,000 years ago. Christmas is about the birth and the ongoing rebirth, that is, the bringing into daily conscious existence the Kingdom of God, which is something fundamentally spiritual (that is, non-materialistic) in nature, even though its various manifestations are entirely practical, physical and earthly.

We are told in Romans 12:1 to present ourselves as a “living sacrifice”. We do that by living selflessly for others and showing reverence for the Divine in all people and in the whole of creation. We then not only encounter the Anonymous Christ, we also share our saving experience of the Anonymous Christ with those with whom we come into contact. Yes, we must work, in steadfast service, to bring about the Kingdom of God on earth, so beautifully encapsulated in those undying words of Christmas, “Peace on earth, goodwill towards all people.” For so many people – and this is nothing new – Christmas is simply a time for, and season of, frivolity and good cheer. Now, don’t get me wrong. Those things have their place, and we intend to have some frivolity and good cheer, indeed joyfulness, immediately after this service, but let’s never forget the true Unitarian meaning of Christmas ... “Peace on earth, goodwill towards all people.”

Remember, we are here to build, and not to destroy. We are building the Kingdom of God. Do you want to know more about this kingdom? Well, may I offer this. It is in the doing, rather than the questioning, that the truth reveals itself, and the kingdom is made manifest. Let us make the Kingdom of God a *future* reality ... until that day, on which there will be no sunset and no dawning, of universal restitution and restoration of all things and people, when all things and people will eventually be restored to their Source and Original Essence.

In summary, irrespective of whether or not we individually identify ourselves as Christians, Christmas is all about the birth, or the rebirth, of the Kingdom of God (also known as the Kingdom of Heaven in the Christian religion) in one's heart and mind. That Kingdom - the essential message and theme of all of Jesus' teachings - is the reign and sovereignty of God (that is, that which is the Divine, no matter what name we use to describe the ineffable and ultimately inexpressible) over all life but especially as a present, personal and spiritual (that is, non-material) reality in our own individual lives, in which the Divine Ideals of Love, Purity, Truth, Beauty, and Light (in the spiritual sense) are dominant. This is the "Gospel of God" preached, taught and lived by Jesus.

And how does one enter into this Kingdom? Entrance into and acceptance of the Kingdom is dependent upon character and conduct, in faithful obedience to the Divine Spirit that was in Jesus. Finally, what is the "result" (if that be the right word) of our entering into and experiencing this Kingdom? The realization of our God-given potential, and the full release of the yearnings and the powers of our respective personalities, through self-sacrifice and obedience to and acceptance and expression of the will of the Divine on a daily basis, and being loyal to the spirit of Jesus and trying to follow his example and that of other enlightened leaders and thinkers throughout the ages, serving the Anonymous Christ wherever we find him or her. Finally, what are we to "do" with the Kingdom of

God? We are to live it, and share it ... and how very appropriate that is at this particular time, for Christmas is supposed to be all about sharing.

May you have the spirit of Christmas which is peace, the gladness of Christmas which is hope, and the heart of Christmas which is love. For Thy love's sake. Amen.

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