

“Personal Christianity”

a sermon by

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**Texts: “... and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”
(Galatians 2:20)**

As we move through the Advent Season and prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ, I am aware that there are two different Christs of which we speak, both of which are important to understand the significance of this season.

The first is the Christ of history: “Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judah in the days of Herod the king.” We are celebrating the birth of a real person.

There is, however, a second Christ, the Christ of experience. Paul put it like this, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”

Now, the Christ of history is real. On several occasions I have visited the land of Israel. Even after all the years there is much that remains the very same as the time of Jesus. From Dan to Beersheba, from the Sea of Galilee in the north, to the Dead Sea in the south, the land of Israel today bears many famous landmarks that ring true with the pages of the New Testament.

I.

Now, of course, people through the ages have sought to understand the “historical Jesus.” Over a hundred years ago, the famous physician and scholar Dr. Albert Schweitzer wrote a book entitled *The Search for the Historical Jesus*. Schweitzer was determined to separate the Jesus of history from the Christ of the New Testament. In the 1970’s a group of New Testament scholars established what they called “The New Quest” for the historical Jesus. In more recent times the Jesus Seminar has sought to recover the Jesus of the early Christian community.

So, once again this Christmas we will remember the Christ of history. Real events and real people are a part of that story: Herod the king and Caesar Augustus, the emperor who called for the taxation of the people; and there are stories that are a part of the birth of Christ – shepherds, angels, wise men, the birth of a child, the flight into Egypt, the settling in Nazareth.

But, there is this other Christ – not the Christ of history, but the Christ of experience. The Apostle Paul got it right when he said, “Even though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now we know him so no more.” This is a way of saying that there is not only the Christ who was born in Bethlehem and who died in Jerusalem but there is a living Christ, who lives in you and me. That is the Christ of experience. That is the Christ we desperately need today, not just the Christ that forms the center of the New Testament, but the one who lives in us, whose spirit encourages us, and who calls us to live a life worthy of his life.

That is what Philips Brooks meant when in his hymn he wrote, “O Holy Child of Bethlehem, be born in us today.”

How sad it would be for any of us if we were to observe the Jesus of history without somehow experiencing the Christ of experience.

III.

One of the ways that we experience this transition is when we recognize Jesus’ greatness. There are two kinds of greatness. One is the greatness of a very talented individual. Napoleon Bonaparte was a great general. Albert Einstein was a great scientist. Thomas Edison was a great inventor. These are individuals who possessed real genius, real intellect, and tremendous drive.

But there is another kind of greatness. It is the greatness of an individual who points us beyond himself to something greater than himself.

This past week I read in *TIME Magazine* an interview with the actor Morgan Freeman, who is portraying the role of Nelson Mandela in a movie about Mandela’s life, “Invictus.” Morgan Freeman acknowledged that it was a great challenge for him to play this role for a number of reasons, the first being that he and Mandela have been friends for a number of years. Freeman also acknowledged his great admiration for Nelson Mandela.

There have been very few individuals on the world stage over the past fifty years to match the witness of Nelson Mandela. Imprisoned for twenty-seven years for his opposition to apartheid in South Africa, he has never demonstrated any bitterness or hatred to those who imprisoned him. On one occasion he commented that he would have gladly given his life for the cause of ending apartheid. That is real greatness.

It is the kind of greatness that Jesus demonstrated as well. Jesus resisted all flattery. His goal always was to point people to God. “He who believes on me,” he said on one occasion, “believes not in me, but in the one that sent me.”

On another occasion Jesus said, “I am the door.” You do not stop at a door. A door is a passage way to another place. In that sense Jesus points us to God.

One of the key aspects of our faith is the “centrality of Jesus Christ.” In the Presbyterian Church we have always affirmed the uniqueness of Christ. One of the greatest affirmations of our faith is that insofar as any of us can know God, we know God in Jesus Christ. He is the way, the truth, and the life.

That is why whenever we try to keep Christ back in history, he will not remain there. He comes out of history. He leaves Bethlehem behind him and he forces us to face the fact of his life in our lives.

That is personal Christianity.

III.

Then, too, personal Christianity also affirms that there is something about Jesus that is inescapable. That is to say, in the birth of Christ a spirit was unleashed that today remains alive and well.

On one occasion Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever would become the greatest of you, shall be the servant of all.” Greatness defined by usefulness – he let that loose in the world.

When Dr. Elsie McKee was here several weeks ago for our Willard Lecture series, she spoke that Monday evening on “A Week in the Life of John Calvin.” Most of us knew that Calvin was a prolific writer. His book *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* remains today one of the classics of the Christian faith. He wrote commentaries on almost every book in the Bible. He kept up a massive correspondence with people all over Europe.

But as Elsie McKee pointed out, Calvin was primarily a pastor. He preached five times a week, lectured on the Scripture, visited the sick, and conducted weddings and funerals. Eighty percent of his time was spent doing the ordinary work of a parish minister.

Thomas Aquinas, the great theologian of the middle ages, believed that the greatest good was the contemplation of God. For Calvin, the greatest good was the service of God.

In that sense Calvin’s work was a return to the emphasis of Jesus who insisted that “The Son of man came not to be served, but to serve.”

Moreover, this inescapableness of Christ also touches our individual lives. Flannery O’Connor once wrote a book in which she spoke of the Southern United States as a “Christ-Haunted Landscape.”

There is, I believe, something very personal about this. There is something very compelling about Jesus, something that we cannot get rid of, no matter how hard we try. We have to deal with it one way or another, either to follow it, be true to it, or else be haunted by it.

In his book *The Sacred Journey*, Frederick Buechner relates a life-changing event in his own life. After graduating from Princeton University he taught for a number of years at the

Lawrenceville School near Princeton. Eventually, he moved to New York City to pursue a career as a writer. It was during that time that he began to attend church. In this case it was the Madison Avenue Church where Dr. George Buttrick was the minister. Week after week Buechner found himself returning to that church and particularly to the preaching of Dr. Buttrick. It was during a worship service that something happened to Buechner that changed his life. Listen to how he describes it:

“Something in me recoils from using such language, but at the end I am left with no other way of saying it than what I found finally was Christ. Or was found. It hardly seems to matter which. There are other words for describing what happened to me – psychological words, historical words, poetic words – but in honesty as well as in faith I am reduced to the word that is his name because no other seems to account for the experience so fully.”

That is personal Christianity.

IV.

Then, too, in this Advent Season it is important to recognize that what we observe is the coming of a real person. That is at the heart of the incarnation. As Christians we do not worship abstract notions like goodness, righteousness, justice, or peace – important as they may be.

The heart of our worship is a person. Harry Emerson Fosdick once observed that “ideas are poor things until they become incarnate.” Nothing ever becomes real until it becomes personal.

My mother, who died two years ago, had a great love of wildflowers. In the years after my father’s death she spent a great deal of her time on wild flower hikes in Eastern Tennessee and Western North Carolina. She gave every one of her grandchildren a small magnifying glass and a book on wildflowers. And she took them on hikes. Every one of her grandchildren today remembers those hikes. They all love wildflowers and they can all identify many wildflowers.

You see, that is one of the most important ways that we learn. Show me a young person who loves music, and chances are there was someone along the way who taught that love to them. Show me a young person who loves to read and chances are there was a teacher, a parent, or some other person who taught them that love.

That is the real message of Christmas. Our religion is not impersonal. It is incarnate. Christianity is Christ. And to know him and love him until his spirit is in us – that is vital Christianity.

There is a real divine presence that invades our lives. Sometimes Paul calls this presence the Spirit – “Be filled with the Spirit.” Sometimes he refers to this presence as God – “filled with the fullness of God.” Sometimes he calls it Christ – “That Christ may dwell in your hearts in faith.”

You cannot keep Christ back in history – no matter how hard you try. He is inside every one of us. How sad it would be if we were to miss this. How sad it would be if Christmas for us was only about the birth of Christ – the Christ of history. It is more than that. It is the Christ of experience as well.

This is what we mean by personal Christianity. Many people today are weary of denominational fighting. They are worn out by the endless clash of issues that divide us.

But there is something far greater than these things. “It is no longer I who live,” writes Paul, “but Christ who lives within me.”

That is personal Christianity and it will not fail us.

Amen!