

“Christ is not Jesus’ Last Name”

Steve Ramer
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Scriptures

Genesis 1:1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. 2 Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. 3 And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. 4 And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. 5 God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

John 1 :1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.

...in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it... 9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ...and his own people did not accept him. 12 But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God... 14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us...

Sermon

For our upcoming retreat we will be reading the first three chapters of *The Universal Christ*, by Richard Rohr. In preparation for this I would like to begin discussing some of his initial thoughts this morning.

First, according to Rohr there are basically two forms of knowing.

One is experiential - we know something to be true because we have experienced it.

We can observe something over time or it can be a sudden burst of revelation.

We can feel it, usually in our heart or in our stomach.

This way of knowing can also be called intuition, or mysticism.

The other form he calls, “text book” - or that kind of learning that is academic, intellectual and dogmatic.

It resides in the mind far away from our feelings.

Both forms of knowing can certainly lead to truth but either can also lead us to falsehood or partial truth.

And when we focus too much on one at the expense of the other

we can find ourselves in erroneous consequences.

Rohr feels strongly that Western Christianity (both Roman Catholic and Protestant) has focused too much on the academic form at the expense of experience. He challenges us to consider a necessary and radical correction. He calls us to look east to the Orthodox traditions (Greek, Syrian, Russian, etc.) that are much older than ours, and where they have done a much better job of maintaining the experiential and mystical ways.

As Annie explained it to me, Rohr is trying to be provocative by challenging some of our most closely held beliefs.

One example of how he feels western Christianity has erred is in our limited understanding of the idea of incarnation. Incarnation literally means embodied in flesh or taking on flesh.

Now if I was to ask you all this morning, “what is the incarnation?” Most of you would give me the traditional western interpretation, that THE incarnation was God taking on a specific flesh through one individual, Jesus.

Christ is the eternally co-existing member of the Trinity along with God the Creator and the Holy Spirit.

The eternally existing Christ becomes the one who reveals the Trinity’s ultimate plan which we call, redemption or salvation.

Christ became flesh and bone; a living, breathing and yes bleeding fully human being just like you and me.

The moniker, “Jesus Christ,” then encapsulates this mysterious thought that not only can God be totally integrated with humanity, but that God can also be revealed through earth bound humanness. This truth can be known experientially in our heart. It can be personal as well as a corporate experience.

But this has also led some to place all the emphasis on the need for each individual’s own personal salvation or the expressions of various emotions that can prove one has been redeemed.

But Rohr wants to make it clear that Jesus Christ is/was not God’s first and only incarnation.

The first was/is the created universe all around us.

As Kevin read, prior to creation The Primordial Source (God) existed as mystical or unknowable spirit.

Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

But then the Infinite Spirit Source poured itself into finite forms.

“Creation is the first Bible,” Rohr says, that was followed billions of years later by the written one.

Creation then was/is the First Incarnation

as God became the finite forms of everything that we see.

The fact, then, that “Light” was the subject of the first day of creation makes complete sense.

We know that we can only see something because light is reflecting off of it.

“Light,” Rohr says, “is not what you see but that by which you see everything else.”

John’s gospel corroborates this understanding as he lays down his sacred cosmology.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.

Christ, the Incarnate Word, was present from the beginning, and this is the same eternal Christ that also took on human flesh.

...in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him...

But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God...

It is also important to note that the term, “flesh” here is not singular but plural, leaving open this idea of Christ’s multiple incarnations!

This whole thing was also central to Paul’s thinking.

Colossians 1:15-19 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning... For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell...

“Everything around us” Rohr says, “is both the hiding place and the revelation of God.

And so then, Jesus as the second incarnation, he says, “came out of an already Christ soaked world.”

But we knew this already, right?

After all we repeatedly sing and read this truth Sunday after Sunday,
“And the trees of the field will,” what... “clap their hands...
“the mountains and the hills will... what,” break forth...”

Creation reveals and revels in its oneness with the Divine Source.
And the Divine Source seeks only connection
and communion with what they have brought into view.

Rohr again states it so simply and so beautifully,
“But God loves things by becoming them.”
I’ll repeat and give you a moment to let it sink in a bit,
“But God loves things by becoming them.”

Just as John later declares in his gospel,
“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”

It is in what we might refer to as ordinary matter that God is found.
And No one and No thing can be excluded
from this ordinary substance that makes up God’s body.
Every thing is now somehow usable, enchanted
and filled with potency and potential.

That also includes pain, suffering, betrayals and even crucifixions.
And if God is hiding all around us in a world full of people, plants
and all sorts of critters “sopping wet” with Christ,
then we certainly ought to be a lot more careful
in how we treat that world which reveals the Christ to us.

But “doing right” or ortho-praxis has always been more important
than mere “orthodoxy,” right thinking or even “correct sayings,”
at least we read that in our second Bible.

By focusing so much on correct theology we have been led
into parochial forms of thinking and competitive clannish groups!
A quick review of history exposes so many evils that have been wrought
in the name of God and religion because of our chauvinistic impulses.
We destroy God’s creation for short term gain rather than holding it in awe.
We send our mercenaries, armed to the teeth, to the corners
of the earth to murder and enslave those who think,
look, or worship differently than we do.
Rather than consider the truth they possess we destroy them

while holding desperately to our own limited understandings.

I like how Rohr cautions us all.

“A merely personal God or Christ becomes tribal and sentimental.
A merely universal God never leaves the realm of abstraction.
We must put them together.”

But he also points us to yet another, a third incarnation,
which he calls the “Beloved Community.”
Hey, that’s us, y’all!

But don’t we also go around saying and singing about this as well?
“We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord...
and they’ll know we are Christians by...” what? By our correct theology?
By our personal salvation and ticket to heaven?
Or will it be by our love? Or our right livin’?

Rohr believes, and provokes us to think about a true
comprehensive comprehension of the mystery of Christ.
This is the key he feels to a foundational reform of the Christian religion.
A radical and necessary transformation that calls us
to move beyond any and all attempts to be exclusive.

Considering the current state of things, the world could use
some of this radically reoriented religion for a change.

His advice is pretty simple and straight forward,
“Take your Christian head off, shake it wildly, and put it back on!”

So I would challenge you and invite you all to join us
in the wild mountains of Sky Ranch in two weeks,
as we soak ourselves in the Christ incarnated in creation
and try to shake some of those old cobwebs out of our heads.

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