

Response

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‘Why Can’t Jesus Be Like Superman?’

This question from a child of a friend of mine, then five years old, came to mind upon reading this article of Dr. Lohdal, whose gentle tone is much like its main insight -- the quiet, unassuming presence of the re-creative Spirit of Christ in our humanness.

My comments are more in the nature of resonances – words and phrases that, like Mary, you ‘ponder’ or move in your heart until indeed, you come to that place in your inward being where ‘deep calls to deep.’

Let me just name some of these themes which rolled in my mind, like threads going round and round a spool. There was, first, an awakening in me to the ever-present possibility of the Almighty acting ‘irresistibly,’ – like ‘overpowering’ the double-bladed gift of ‘yetzer hara.’ Second, there was the constant reminder of the ‘knot which we are unable to untie,’ – the mystery of divine power and human agency -- unsatisfactorily loosened by the notion of a prevenient grace. I prefer the author’s idea of God ‘empowering’ human nature by ‘sharing’ his divine character and power. And thirdly, there is for me some discomfort in the rather strange Wesleyan assertion that “the work of God is uniform in all ages.”

From where I sit, I certainly resonate with Dr. Lohdal’s concluding remark that “God’s mode of labor in the world is that of the quiet, unassuming persuasion of love,” with the church serving as social context where the saving power of God is made visible, and as a Sign, however dimly, of the age to come. How and why this happens needs some more explaining, however.

For God can, and has in times past, acted ‘irresistibly’ – there was the apparently inexorable march of fated destruction and bloodshed as God wiped out the Canaanite nations, for instance. Later, there was the terrible judgment of Israel, God vomiting them out of the land because of idolatry and oppression. Why stop short in containing wickedness, I wonder, -- leaving it to the uncertain choices of a community whose morals are not exactly far above the usual norms of the larger society?

The hint of an answer is perhaps better located, not so much in navigating through such tortuous antinomies as divine sovereignty and human responsibility, but in the effort to make a straightforward reply to the child’s question: “Why can’t Jesus be like Superman?”

Contrary to Wesley's rather a-historical notion that "the work of God is uniform in all ages," something happened two thousand years ago that is not quite our usual understandings of what it means to rescue people, -- or at least, not quite the way Superman would do it. God became, in our weakness and vulnerability, quite like us. In the incarnation, God immersed himself in the life of the world without the usual trappings and, more importantly, immunity. Willingly and willfully, he circumscribed himself within the history, the limits and the mess of our humanity.

"It is fitting," he tells John, "that all righteousness should be fulfilled," and so submitted himself to the cleansing rite of John's baptism of repentance. This is the 'second Adam' who stood in our stead, and who, while without sin, was neither immune to temptation, nor to our inherent weakness and frailty. He in fact became, in the provocative language of Paul, 'sin' for us.

No other religion speaks of God in this way. Hinduism speaks of avatars that make fleeting appearances, but not of a god who entered the human story and 'dwelt' there -- walked the dusty streets of Jerusalem, shared in the pain and struggles of its colonial history, and for thirty years was shaped by the rugged terrain and geography of Palestine, the Torah and the feasts and traditions of his culture and people. You can pin him down on the calendar and locate him within Israel's social history, just like the way Luke did in his Gospel account.

It is in the incarnation, and, later, in the indwelling Spirit of Christ among his people, that I find the locus of our optimism about human nature. A theologian once said that God became a man, not so that we may become divine, but so that we may become more truly human. In that event, something happened to the 'original creation' that was not there before -- he re-wrote the commandments into our hearts, giving us, by his Spirit, 'a heart of flesh.'

Also, a new element in our history has appeared, which gives us warrant for optimism. Out of human failure, and the collapse of the political and religious institutions of Israel, came the promised king -- riding humbly on a donkey, destined to fulfill the messianic expectations of Israel, though not in the way they imagined it would be. The 'kingdom is within you,' he tells his disciples. To the extent that we are truly his subjects, the kingdom advances. The parable of the wheat and the tares tells us that while the world grows worse and worse, it is also getting better and better. The kingdom is at work, and soon, the 'kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdom of our God.'

So we do not despise the 'day of small things.' The mustard seed is growing. While there are moments in history when we sense that 'the axe is laid at the root of the tree,' and all is eruption and upheaval, Dr. Lohdal is correct in sensing that for the most part, the work of God is not apocalyptic nor catastrophic, but continuous with the humdrum ordinariness of human life.

Creation is being renewed every day, in so far as we participate in the work of God in the world. “Behold, I make things new,” we are told. This is not just future eschatology, but present reality. I have just been to a conference where a speaker was expounding on Revelation 19. The Rider on the White Horse and his army of saints are massing together against the army of the Beast and the Antichrist. Quite startlingly, it was pointed out, there was no battle. The enemies were captured, and the saints were not even in battle gear. They were instead dressed in white, an image of purity that suggests to us that perhaps this is really all that we need to be on the winning side.

On the cross, the crucial battle had long been over. Paul’s ‘war among the members’ – this conflict between the first and second Adam in our nature, has been decisively won. Our ultimate destiny is not primarily making it to heaven – by the way, we are told that we shall inherit the earth, not heaven – but being conformed, gradually, to the image of God’s great Son.

And so we take heart, confident that while evil may seem strong, it is in fact on its death throes. There is a hiddenness to the kingdom that makes its work unspectacular. It does not advertise itself. And like yeast, we do not see exactly how it works. We only know it by its effects.

I am increasingly convinced, as I study social movements, that the kingdom is not so much revolutionary as subversive. It goes in quietly, penetrates deeply, and transforms, -- without fanfare and the glare of publicity,-- apparently monolithic structures of injustice and unrighteousness. And like the mustard seed, --- without our knowing it, -- we wake up one morning into the awareness that it has grown into a mighty tree.