**The Trouble with Jesus**

Matthew 25:31-40

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The trouble with Jesus is that for all his fame, we actually know very little about him besides the twice- or thrice-told tales in the New Testament, written long after his death. And so, generation after generation, humans have remade and reimagined Jesus to suit themselves.

For example, there was that time—hundreds of years, in fact—that Christians thought of Jesus not so much as a first-century Jewish carpenter and rabbi, but as a king or emperor.

Here’s the background. For the first three hundred years or so, after Jesus’ death, being a Christian was dangerous. Roman emperors saw allegiance to Jesus as a threat to their own authority. Christians, after all, called Jesus “Lord.” They sometimes used the language of kingdom—even if it was only to say that Jesus’ kingdom was not of this world, but within themselves. Christians were pacifists, too, and refused to fight in Rome’s armies. As a result, the Roman authorities rounded up Christians, imprisoned them, and sometimes even killed them.

But the church kept growing. You see, although there were great theological controversies about what Jesus actually was . . . perhaps a God, or not; perhaps a substance, or not; perhaps descended from the Spirit and the Father, or not . . . Christians were kind to strangers and to slaves. Christians fed the poor and visited those in prisons. One Roman governor, writing to the emperor, said that when Roman citizens saw the kindness of Christians, how they looked after each other and even after strangers, then everyone saw in Christians what the empire lacked.

Finally, as the church grew, one emperor, Constantine, finally decided to become a Christian himself to win this growing demographic to his cause. He went into battle with the cross of Jesus on his banner, and won. Suddenly it wasn’t dangerous to be a Christian anymore.

In fact, almost overnight, as the religion of empire, being Christian became a stepping stone to great everyday success. Clergy went from wearing everyday clothes to wearing uniforms that mimicked those of powerful government officials—today’s liturgical vestments. Christians went from being pacifists to commanding armies. They went from prison to statehouse, from the margins to the halls of power, and from poverty to riches. And to justify all this, Christians began to see Jesus less as a rabbi who taught love and more and more as a cosmic king who delegated his authority to whoever was emperor in Rome.

Today is Christ the King Sunday, and to illustrate what I mean, Mark chose Gabriel Fauré’s *Cantinque*, which proclaims, “Word, equal to the Most High, Eternal, Spread upon us the fire of your powerful grace that all hell might flee at the sound of your voice.” This is Jesus masquerading as a Roman emperor.

The trouble with this is that all human kings soon justified whatever they did as being sanctioned by King Jesus, who they said had appointed them to rule. So, for a thousand years, nearly every war, every tax law, every genocide, and every colony was justified by saying that the kingly rulers of earth ruled by divine right from Jesus himself. And since Jesus was now understood as the source of all secular power, such power was divine and could not be misused. This alliance between ungodly rulers and Jesus brought Christianity into disrepute.

Things have changed. We now think of Kings and Queens as being quaint but irrelevant. I’ve noticed that my Google news page lists stories about William and Kate under the entertainment heading. So, kingship being mere entertainment, lately Christians have reinvented Jesus again. For the past hundred years or so, we have remade Jesus into a buddy that we can have a personal relationship with.

People today crave authenticity, personal enlightenment, and connection. In part, this is because so much of society works against these values—we are cogs in the machine, victims of a gig economy, we move far from friends and family, and we feel alone. Science seems to have answered all the great questions, and religion has been left with nothing but feelings and emotions.

So now, far from being a most high king with fiery grace battling hell, Jesus walks with me and talks to me. He lays things on my heart and whispers them in my ear. Phillip Yancey, a famous popularizer of Christianity in America, says getting to know Jesus is a lot like getting to know a person. You spend time together, whether happy or sad. You laugh together. You weep together. You fight and argue, then reconcile. One popular Christian singer, Kim Walker Smith, puts it this way in a hit worship song: Jesus, “move around me. Meet me face to face. Stir my heart. Awaken love within me. Jesus come, Jesus come, my first love . . .”

But can we really have a personal relationship with Jesus, at least in the plain English sense of “personal relationship?” Can you pick up the phone to talk with, or share a glass of wine with, or play street hockey with Jesus?

Of course, there is an ancient and long tradition of Christians seeking a mystical connection with Jesus. These saints engaged in life-long spiritual disciplines of prayer and silence, of study and poverty, of asceticism and hermitage, seeking either to understand Jesus’ teachings, or to achieve a fleeting personal connection with Jesus. But now some Christians insist that a personal relationship is the easiest thing in the world. Jesus is there for anyone, anytime, at no cost, sort of like a child’s invisible friend.

I fear all this talk about Jesus putting things on our hearts, or opening doors for us is really a way of rationalizing what we want by appealing not to wisdom or scripture, but to whatever we most want ourselves, deep in our psyches, good or bad. Many Christians baptize any and all feelings or wants as “Jesus in my heart.” The Christianity of a personal relationship with Jesus has replaced Christ the Cosmic King with me the King, the captain of my own soul, a Christianity anchored in self rather than what we can glean from scripture.

This morning, I want to suggest a different approach to Jesus. Instead of making Jesus in whatever image is culturally acceptable and cool, let’s leave who or what Jesus was, exactly, alone. Instead, let’s just try to do what Jesus told us was most important. In the words of Jesus, people will come to know him by the fruit of what we do.

That is, let’s love our neighbours. Let’s let our children learn about his way, as Ava will learn. Let’s visit the sick and imprisoned, and work to achieve justice and mercy for all. Let’s welcome the stranger and bind the wounds of the ill or starving. These are the things Jesus asked us to do in today’s scripture, if we want to figure out what he’s all about. As followers of Jesus, let’s do our part to make Toronto and Canada a beacon of human rights, a place where life is not only good for us individually, but a place where even the marginalized, the first nations, the immigrant, the special needs person, the #METOO victim, finds a good home and hope.

We live in a time of great challenges. People are looking for populist kings to solve—or ignore—issues like climate change, like mass migration, like dying oceans, like the widening gap between rich and poor, and on and on. Figuring out who Jesus is, whether he’s human or divine or both, one essence with the father or not, begotten and whatever that means . . . Figuring out who Jesus is doesn’t address any of the key issues facing the human race.

But trying to do as Jesus did and taught gives us, at least, a place to stand as we seek to become fully human, and as we try to make Jesus real for others.