

The Presentation of our Lord 02/02/2020

Holy Spirit, descend upon us. As with Simeon, fill our hearts and minds with your presence and guide us along the path you wish us to follow as we search for you. Amen.

What Jesus do you follow? Seems like an easy question doesn't it. You may answer, "the Son of God". Others; "My Lord and Savior". Both good answers; Both accurate. Other countries and different cultures will often have other answers. Jesus has always seemed to be very popular in the United States both for Christians and non-Christians alike.

Stephen Prothero, who is in the Department of Religion at Boston University, wrote a book called, 'American Jesus'. Even in our own country, if you talk to a Hindu, he or she might tell you that Jesus is an avatar of the god Vishnu. Ask a Jew and you might be told that he was a great rabbi. In a best-selling novel from 1925, Bruce Barton described Jesus as The Man Nobody Knows. Americans of any religion and even of no religion have felt free to embrace their own version of him.

So which Jesus **are we** talking about? Professor Prothero identifies four different Jesuses that have shown up in American Christianity, plus several reinventions of him that some other religions have welcomed.

Those Jesuses, within Christianity itself, include first, the “Enlightened Sage.” This was the Jesus that Thomas Jefferson envisioned. Yes, the third president of the United States. When he was president, Jefferson spent a few evenings, in 1804, scissoring out of the gospels all the references to miracles and Jesus’ divinity, ending up with a slim volume he called ‘The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth’.

Jefferson’s Jesus prayed to God and believed in an afterlife, but he did not die for anyone’s sins. In fact, **that** Jesus did not come to save, but to teach. And lest you think that this line of thinking died out over 200 years ago, check out the Jesus Seminar sometime. You can read about it on the Internet. This group of 50 biblical scholars and 100 laymen, do not believe in the deity of Christ, the resurrection of Christ, the miracles of Christ, or the atonement death of Christ. The group was founded in 1985 by Robert Funk. The seminar was very active through the 1980s and 1990s, and into the early 21st century.

Another Jesus is what Prothero calls the “Sweet Savior” and was a product of the evangelist fervor of the 19th and early 20th centuries. The call of evangelism was to an intimate walk with Jesus — so intimate, in fact, that preachers felt compelled to talk more about Jesus as a close friend whom we could come to know and hang out with, rather than either an historical figure or an object of faith.

To make this work, this Jesus had to be described as approachable and friendly, meek and mild, rather than harsh and demanding. A Jesus that embodied warmth, caring, humility, piety and so forth. The religion of this Jesus was not so much to be thought about, as one to be felt.

A third American version of Jesus, says Prothero, is the “Manly Redeemer,” a reaction to the soft and gentle Sweet Savior. Beginning in the late 19th century and elbowing its way into the 20th century, Jesus as a strong, robust hero came to the fore. Books with titles like ‘The Masculine Power of Christ’ and ‘The Manhood of the Master’ appeared. This Manly Redeemer was no more linked to the historic creeds of the church than was the Sweet Savior, but at least he was the one who was ready to lead Christians to war against the social ills of the culture.

Finally, the fourth and most recent incarnation of the American Jesus is the “Superstar.” This is the version of Jesus that became so important to me as a teenage and one that I could relate to. In the 1960s, a Jesus movement among the youth started to see Jesus as a revolutionary, a leader of an underground Christian liberation movement. Jesus became the subject of the rock musicals, ‘Jesus Christ Superstar’ and ‘Godspell’. This Jesus was certainly not accepted by mainstream Christianity at that time, but was relevant to many youth of the day.

But are any of these Jesuses actually the Jesus we encounter in the gospels? That is an important question. We can draw closer to God and to Jesus through cultural expressions of who Jesus is. We have been taught that God is revealed to us through Scripture, Tradition, and Reason. Tradition passes down from generation to generation the church's **ongoing experience** of God's presence and activity. Reason is understood to include the human capacity to discern the truth in both rational and intuitive ways. The study of Scripture is important in helping us to know who Jesus was and is.

We can start looking for the scriptural Jesus in today's reading where Mary and Joseph bring Jesus to the temple as required by Jewish Law. This was to complete Mary's ritual purification after childbirth and the redemption of the first-born male in obedience to the Torah. We know very little about Jesus' youth except this story and his parents finding Jesus teaching in the temple at age 12. Both stories in Chapter 2 of Luke. Upon entering the temple, Mary and Joseph encounter Simeon. And they are amazed at what he tells them. Jesus was still an infant, so one could interpret that this was **Simeon's** version of Jesus. But it is important that we are told three times that the Holy Spirit **rested** on him; that the Holy Spirit had **revealed** to him that he would not see death before he had seen the Messiah; and that he was **guided by** the Spirit to be in the temple at that

particular time. Mary and Joseph may not have known this, but we are aware that this scenario is fully guided by God.

The question of who Jesus is, if we are guided by Scripture and the Holy Spirit, as Simeon was; includes the following:

--Jesus is the one, who, after he was baptized, lived up to his baptism every day by the way he honored and obeyed the heavenly Father.

- Jesus is the one who proclaimed the good news of God, preaching repentance, and announcing that the kingdom of God had begun.
- He is the one who embodied the very authority of God. This was so evident that people who heard him commented on it.
- Jesus was the one who did not avoid sinners, but welcomed them; and who called them to repentance and a place in the kingdom.
- He is the one who repeatedly withdrew to pray.
- Jesus is the one in whom his contemporaries recognized a special connection with God — a recognition that led Peter to call him “the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16).

- Jesus is the one who went to the cross, understanding that in doing so, he was being obedient to the will of God, and was doing something profound for humankind.
- And He is the one who arose victorious over death on Easter.

Those are the things the Bible tells us. We may not understand the implications of all that we can say about Jesus from Scripture, but those things are enough to help us frame an answer to the question, “Who do you say Jesus is?” He is “example,” “teacher,” “guide” and “Savior.”

There is a new show on Netflix which admittedly, I had been hesitant to watch. It really shouldn't be an issue for me since the writers clearly admit that this is not a true story. The show is called “Messiah”. The series chronicles what it might look like if Jesus' second coming happened in today's political and cultural climate. It is an interesting show. I have only seen the first 7 episodes.

Although, we can draw some conclusions about what Jesus might do or say if he were in the flesh today, we should do that only with humility, knowing that such judgments are speculation at best.

Stan Purdum, recently published a book about Jesus in which he looked at the gospels to see what they actually said about Jesus during the active ministry

period of his life, and he then identified specific themes. Purdum says that some of the responses he received from readers, concerning this, were from longtime Christians who, referring to some of his points in the book, said, “I didn’t know that about Jesus.”

Perhaps that should not surprise us. We are all affected by the various images of, and ideas about Jesus, that have floated around in our culture. Those things have shaped our thoughts about Jesus, and unless we read the Scriptures thoroughly, we may find ourselves confusing the American Jesus with the scriptural Jesus, or, more likely, mashing the two together. We can certainly read books by Christian authors and biblical scholars, but we need to study Scripture ourselves. Group Bible study can be helpful.

The other source of understanding Jesus, is the inward inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This is something that we ask God for in prayer.

To be a Christian means, by definition, to be a follower of Christ, and so it is important to learn all that we can about who Jesus is, what he expects of us, and what he gives to us.

Thus, asking for God's guidance to help us see Jesus as clearly as we can, is **never** wasted effort for us who bear the name of Christ. In fact, it is necessary for our spiritual growth.

We know that due to Scripture, Reason, and Tradition, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, our journey in discovering who Jesus is and his importance in our lives is never complete. This journey only ends when we are with Jesus in eternity. It is a journey we must take as followers of Christ.

Simeon held the Child in his arms and he saw the salvation of Israel.

Whom do we see?

Amen.