

The Shape of Divine Humanity

Proper 29
Year C

Luke 23:33-43

Imagine that, in a remote corner of the universe, in a galaxy far away, on a world quite unlike the Earth, intelligent life has evolved. Let's further imagine that this form of life is quite unlike anything we know or can even imagine.

We affirm that Jesus is the Christ for us. When we claim this, we are saying that Jesus is the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Savior, the Redeemer. Can Jesus be the Christ for life on the strange, remote planet we have imagined?

I could make an argument that, in a highly abstract, symbolic way, yes, Jesus is the Christ for all the universe, including life on this remote planet. But I think that the better answer is no, Jesus, a Palestinian Jew who lived and died 2,000 Earth years ago, human nonetheless, cannot be the Christ for the strange inhabitants of an alien world.

Why is that the case? I think this is so because, when we affirm that Jesus is the Christ for us, we are making the claim that the divine has been united with the human in a way that has particular meaning and significance for us.

We live our lives in state of alienation or estrangement from our essential being. Existential philosophy deeply appreciates this point. Our religious tradition labels this as living in a state of sin. I think that most of us can agree with this. We know this at an internal, psychological level, as a longing for meaning, for something more, for identity with a greater whole. When we hold ourselves accountable for the state of alienation or separation, we may feel this as personal sin, for which we are accountable. We also know this when we survey and appraise the world around us. All clearly is not as it should be, as it seems that the world is intended to be. This we might consider to be a state of original sin.

When we embrace Jesus as the Christ, we say that in Jesus, this state of alienation and estrangement—we can also call it sin—has been overcome. The divine has embraced the human, and in doing so, has shown us the being of a person, the contours of a life, lived when this alienation is overcome. We see life perfected. We see the human become divine.

For this to be the case, for alienation and estrangement to be overcome, the divine must fully be united with our life, in all its particulars and ugliness. That is why I doubt that an Earthly Palestinian Jew, a human being, can be the Christ for life on a distant, alien planet. For the Christ to be the Christ, the divine must be fully present in life as it is lived. I think the life forms in a far corner of the universe need a Christ who is manifest and known in life as experienced by those beings.

This morning's gospel gives us our Christ experiencing the very worst our world has to offer. Jesus is labeled as a criminal, which he was not. He is crucified as King of the Jews, a political claim he never made. People scoff at him and ridicule him and mock him and deride him. And then they kill him. This man, our Christ, fully knows and experiences life as we live it estranged from God. It is precisely because Jesus does this that he can be the Christ for us.

So far, I've tried to make the case that for Jesus to be the Christ, he must fully know life, and even death, as we experience it. And I've made the case that Jesus knows the worst we have to offer.

What, also, is the redemptive vision that Jesus provides. What does he show us of life lived in unity with the divine? What does such a life look like?

Leander Keck of Yale's Divinity School reminds us that as Christians we must continually ponder the meaning of the cross for an understanding both of Jesus and the God that Jesus trusted. The resurrection of the dead and buried Jesus stands as a vindication of the whole person of Jesus, including his execution. As Keck writes, "If God validated and vindicated precisely the Jesus who was executed in Golgotha, then Jesus remains the fractured prism through which ones sees the mysterious Reality called 'God.'"

A fractured prism. I think this is a wonderful turn of phrase. Through this fractured prism, we learn of God. Through this fractured prism, we learn the shape of a human life perfected by the divine. What does this fractured prism teach us of the shape of a life perfected in the divine?

There are, I think, three dominant characteristics of such a life. Some of this we see in today's gospel story. The totality of the gospel account reveals that rest. These three characteristics of a God-filled human life are, I suggest following Paul Tillich:

First, a life of self-giving love.

Second, a life of unshakeable serenity and dignity and majesty.

Third, and finally, a life marked by unperturbed unity of the divine and human wills, that is, a life firmly centered in God.

First, Jesus' life, a life perfected in the divine, is a life "marked by love free of self-regard and the need for approbation for doing good." It is a life of self-giving love. Today's gospel story, along with many others, teaches this lesson. The soldiers and the criminals together with Jesus at his execution urge him over and over to save himself. One criminal reminds the others that they deserve their fates, but that Jesus has done nothing wrong.

Jesus' work on the cross is not, however, about saving himself. Quite the contrary. Jesus on the cross is the Christ for us precisely because he takes on the worst the world has to offer. He submits to pain and humiliation and death. Through Jesus, the divine fully embraces the darkest side of human existence. There can be no more acute expression of self-giving love.

The famous Christological hymn of Philippians says this perfectly:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,⁷ but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form,⁸ he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.⁹ Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name,¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,¹¹ and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Second, Jesus' shows us that a life filled with God is a life of serenity and dignity. I've heard it argued that never in the gospel account is Jesus angry. I think that is right. People who want to dispute this cite the story of the Temple cleansing, but on close reading, I don't think that we can say that Jesus is angry there. Rather, he is simply taking care of business, tending to a situation that needed his attention.

The Jesus of the gospel account never loses himself to anger or fear or emotion. The Greek's had a term for this: *apatheia*. *Apatheia* is a state of imperturbable calm. There is no close cognate in English. Apathy does not mean the same thing. Apathy means not caring. *Apatheia* means caring deeply, but not being controlled by emotion. *Apatheia* knows all and feels all, but is not dominated by external circumstances. The best description that I have heard is that *apatheia* is like being in Montana. One can see forever in all directions, sensing and feeling reality deeply and fully. Yet one has great vision and clarity, and nothing sneaks up on you.

A state of being like *apatheia*, I think, characterizes a perfected human life.

Third, and finally, Jesus shows us a deep and unshakeable unity between the human and the divine. This unity, I would argue, is never broken in the gospel stories. If you think about the Temptation narratives, the devil never seems to come close to persuading Jesus. The hardest test case is the Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus is clearly troubled, and asks if this cup can pass him by. But, in the end, facing the imminent reality of his own death, the unity of being with God prevails. "Father, if it is your will, take this cup away from me; nevertheless not my will, but yours, be done."

Jesus can be the Christ for us because in the person of Jesus, the divine fully embraces the exigencies of human existence, including mockery, humiliation and death. Through the person of Jesus, we see the shape of a life perfected in God. This is the life that stands as a model and inspiration and source of strength for us. This is the life we are called to lead. It is a life of self-giving love; of life of dignity; and a life firmly grounded in the reality of the God who is love.

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Leander E. Keck, *Who is Jesus?*
Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume II*