

## **The Way and the Truth and the Life**

Of course at the heart of encountering the presence of God is Jesus, the Word who is God, who became human and dwelt among us for a while, God loving us not from a distance or not just a little bit but loving us enough to become one of us and die for us. Paul would write that “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself” (2 Corinthians 5:19). Jesus would say that whoever has seen him has seen God (John 14:9).

So in this person Jesus, a first-century village carpenter from Nazareth in Galilee, in this itinerant prophet or teacher, we see God.

In this person who absorbed the anger of the world all the way to an excruciating death on a cross, and who thereby turned evil back on itself, we see God.

In this person who transcended death, who transcended space and time in resurrection, we see God.

This Jesus came into the hill country of Galilee not so much to start a new religion as to launch a revolution of love and forgiveness worldwide. He came not so much to demand a set of doctrines and rituals for the few but to teach a way of being for everyone.

But then the night before he was killed, he told his troubled followers, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). It’s a fantastic text, except that this a leading candidate for the most misunderstood text in all of Scripture. Usually when this passage is read or cited walls go up. They go up because churchmen for years have used this text to build walls, high walls that suggest that if you do not understand Jesus in just one particular way and if you do not follow Jesus in just one particular way, there’s no hope for you. So this text is cited, and people turn inward in exclusion of others. The wisdom of others is disregarded. Time passes. Fear grows. And wars are fought in the name of Jesus. And atrocities are committed in the name of Jesus.

But none of this squares with the revolution of love and forgiveness Jesus had launched in Galilee and then Judea. And none of this makes any sense until we remember one thing – that Jesus was the most inclusive person who ever lived. Never forget that. It is Jesus who tells us to drop our anger. It is Jesus who tells us to see things as they really are and to stop judging others. It is Jesus who tells us to let go and trust God always, in all circumstances. It is Jesus who tells us to feed the hungry and give the homeless a room. It is Jesus who offers to all men and women everywhere whoever they are or whatever they have done the opportunity to start over, be reborn, be forgiven, and then to discover within themselves the Spirit of God. It is Jesus who tells us to forgive those who sin against us. It is Jesus who tells us to fraternize with those dismissed as “sinners.” It is Jesus who tells us to take seriously and respect the outcasts in society. It is Jesus who tells us to love even our enemies. And it is Jesus who tells us to applaud those whose faith exceeds that of our own communities of faith.

You see, Jesus was, emphatically was – go back and read the Story again – the most inclusive person who ever lived. He didn't get crucified for being too exclusive. He got in trouble in large part for welcoming sinners and prostitutes and tax collectors and Roman centurions into the kingdom of God. And that trouble eventually got him crucified. So we simply cannot take Jesus' statement that he is the way which was meant to draw all people together, and use it to keep people apart. When we do this, we end up in the wrong story.

Jesus then is saying that his way of inclusion, his way of love and forgiveness, is the way. His way of mercy and grace, trust and compassion, joy and peace, his way of hushing our egos and opening up to the whole world, is the way. But there is even more, and this is crucial to understanding of Jesus. Some of this comes from a book by Bruxy Cavey, **The End of Religion**, but when I read Cavey I simply found in his words the truths that in our hearts we had known for a long time. Jesus' mission was to tear down all the ways by which otherwise good people exclude and condemn others. As part of this Jesus tears down even religion. He tears down religion as the foundation by which people connect with God and instead offers us a direct line to God. He invites us to come directly to God – to come directly to God and drink: Whoever does, he says, streams of living water will flow from within him (John 7:37-38). He invites us to encounter the presence of God, to feel our oneness with God, to become fully open to the divine flow within us and all around us, to experience what it's like to be washed over and over in the warmth and light of the love of God. He invites us to commune directly with God which is the message of almost all the great spiritual traditions of the world at their best. In the end, Jesus wants people simply to "know" God (John 17:3).

But his message of radically sacrificial love, of radically accepting love, is too great to be contained in the forms and rituals of religion. God unties the knots that bind people to unthinking ritual and tradition, the countless ways we segregate ourselves from one another; he comes to us in Jesus in a form we can relate to, telling us, "I am the way." He is saying something marvelously simple, profoundly simple, and simply profound: God is the way to God.

The way is not the way of the Temple, or the Ten Commandments, or the Torah, or the Five Pillars, or the Six Articles of Belief, or the Seven Sacraments. It's to directly encounter the presence of God. It's to feel our oneness with God. It's to become fully open to the divine flow within us and all around us. And so we come to a moment – a moment in time – when we finally realize that God is Love. And God is right here. And when that moment comes, when that reality washes over us, a light switches on in our souls that can never be extinguished. And now we do what we do religiously – we study the Bible, we worship, we pray – not so that God will love us, but to experience and celebrate what we already know to be true, that God already loves us. And to drive this truth deeply into our souls so that we never forget it.

The challenge then is to see that God's love for everyone manifested in Jesus is the way and the truth and the life. Shortly after Jesus said, "I am the way," he also said that anyone who has faith in him will do even greater things than he did (John 14:12-14). We

think of the healings and miracles of Jesus, of walking on water, of multiplying the loaves and the fishes, of raising the dead, and wonder what we could do that would be greater than this.

But again Jesus, I believe, is saying something very simple here: The sky is the limit! No, not even the sky is the limit. Learn to encounter the presence of God, come to your moment of enlightenment when you realize deep in your soul that God is Love, and you can start saving the world. Streams of living water will flow from within you. And you will start rescuing, healing and transforming the world so that one day the earth will be filled with this knowledge of the Lord.

When the word gets out that the God's love is this wide and this long and this high and this deep, he will draw all people to himself. But God is the way to God. And this way is open to everyone, possible for everyone. And the really marvelous thing is that this truth was always right in front of you. You knew it all along. That's why Jesus said – remember – “You actually know the way to the place where I am going.” Deep down inside you always knew God is really this way, that his heart is really this large. And God is right here.

– Dale Pauls