



THE RESTORATION PROJECT: The Basics

9:00 AM – 10:00 AM, Fireside Room

The Basics of Christianity Part Two: *The Meaning of Jesus*

O God, who wonderfully created, and yet more wonderfully restored, the dignity of human nature: Grant that we may share the divine life of him who humbled himself to share our humanity, your Son Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.* (BCP, p. 252)

Faith, Baptism, and Jesus

In our first session we explored the layers of meaning when we say we have “faith in” or “we believe”. Faith, as you will recall, includes vision, assent (mental, emotional, and spiritual), belief, and commitment. We apply these meanings of faith as we examine the story of our faith both as it comes to us in Scripture, and through the central traditions of Christianity – baptism and Eucharist. Together, these tell us how God comes to us, how God seeks to restore relationship with us when it is broken, and how God would have us interact with our world and with those around us – through these things we are introduced to a way of life. That “way” is the Way of Jesus, the Way of the central figure of our faith and the one whom we follow and (on our best ways) seek to be more like. We do this in community with others who are on the Way with us.

The Baptismal Covenant we make with God and our communities says we believe in a God who created and ordered the world but who ordered it for a particular purpose: for beauty and relationship. We believe in a God who watches over human life and interacts with all life on earth, with a particular relationship to the human community, through Jesus Christ. We have faith in a God who desires that people be good, nice, and fair to each other, and who says we have a responsibility to take care of each other when we are poor, hungry, alone or in need.

We accept as true that Jesus Christ is the living, resurrected example of how humanity is to treat one another, and that we ought to seek to emulate his Way. (Andrew Doyle, Unabashedly Episcopalian)

The Meaning of Jesus

If Jesus is central to our life and faith, it is important to have a sense of who he was. Not much outside of the scriptures (either canonical or non-canonical) was written about Jesus around or near the time of his life and ministry, and so we are very reliant on the books of the New Testament, and particularly the

four gospels to get a sense of the historical Jesus. Only recently, in the last century, has the project of understanding Jesus through the lens of form criticism, which is looking at the literature and studying its possible sources, context, and history, become acceptable in the wider church as a form of faithful scholarship. Form criticism can tell us a lot about the authors of the New Testament and the communities around them, and as a result can lend quite a lot of understanding to who Jesus was, or at least who those first Christians believed him to be. Perhaps the best and most accessible book written on the subject is that co-written by two Anglicans and good friends, Marcus Borg, Episcopal Theologian, Jesus Scholar, historian, and Tom Wright, the retired Bishop of Durham, Anglican theologian, and New Testament scholar. Borg and Wright reflect two different streams of modern thought on the meaning of Jesus. While different, the variance is, at times, nuanced, and their book *The Meaning of Jesus* allows them to dialogue back and forth over where their rigorous scholarship has led them to different understandings.

*The four gospels of the New Testament are the product of a developing tradition. During the decades between the death of Jesus around the year 30 and the writing of the gospels in the last third of the first century (roughly between 70 and 100), the traditions about Jesus developed... There was a need to adapt the traditions about Jesus to new settings and issues as early Christian communities moved through time and into the broader Mediterranean world. Moreover, the traditions about Jesus grew because the experience of the Risen living Christ within the community shaped perceptions of Jesus' ultimate identity and significance. As developing traditions, the gospels contain two kinds of material: some goes back to Jesus, and some is the product of early Christian communities... The gospels combine history remembered with history metaphorized. (Marcus Borg, *The Meaning of Jesus*)*

*The Jesus I know in prayer, in the sacraments, in the faces of those in need, is the Jesus I meet in the historical evidence—including the New Testament, of course, but the New Testament read not so much as the church has told me to read it but as I read it with my historical consciousness fully operative. The Jesus whose love seems to go deeper and reach more of me than the deepest human loves I know... I see why some people find themselves driven to distinguish the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, but I do not think the early Christians made such a distinction, and I do not find the need to do so myself... History, then prevents faith becoming fantasy. Faith prevents history becoming mere antiquarianism. (Tom Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus*)*

Jesus' Self-Understanding: Mystic or Messiah

The Divinity of Jesus

The Death of Jesus: Fulfillment of Prophecy, or Logical Conclusion

Resurrection: A Physical Transformation or Spiritual Metaphor

Second Coming

Being Christian, Rowan Williams

Mere Christianity, C.S. Lewis

Mere Churchianity: Finding Your Way Back to Jesus-Shaped Spirituality, Michael Spencer

The Heart of Christianity, Marcus Borg

The Meaning of Jesus, Tom Wright and Marcus Borg

Unabashedly Episcopalian, Andrew Doyle

Unapologetic: Why despite everything Christianity can still make surprising emotional sense, Francis Spufford