

The Christian Gospel—A Brief Discourse

By Rev. Martin Ban

The Christian faith is a belief system that explains the “is-ness” of life—What is God? What is humanity? What is the purpose and destiny of humanity? The Christian faith also explains how things got here, why things are not the way they’re supposed to be, and what God has done about it. Such a grand story is open to criticism—as is any belief system that attempts to explain universal realities. On what basis does the Christian community for the last 2,000 years dare to make its claims? Know first of all that the Christian man or woman believes and declares this belief system, but does not create it.

Many religions are human quests reaching toward God with the hopes of making contact. Christianity is the other way around, hence counter-intuitive. The essence of the Christian faith is that God, in grace and fierce love, has reached down toward humanity in the person of Jesus Christ and given us good news (or “Gospel”)—that reconciliation with God, others, and self is accomplished and gift offered to all. The scandal of the Christian message is the message of grace. God offers forgiveness, redemption, community, and heaven (yes, heaven is real) to all who trust (exercise faith) in Him.

The Christian faith makes audacious, bold claims. And one might object to it because appears to be arrogant, controlling, and self-righteous. The Christian faith would be these things, and this is a big if—if it were a spirituality of “invention.” Any organization that independently creates a comprehensive philosophy for all of life would be arrogant, and controlling. Who are they to determine what is true? The Christian faith does not go down this path; in fact the Christian faith, does not “invent” any belief system at all. Rather, it discovers it and embraces it as revealed by God in Christ. The essence of the Christian faith is that God has reached down to humanity in grace and has revealed truth through Jesus. A bold faith? Yes. A scandalous faith? Yes. An arrogant faith? No. The Christian simply wrestles with the historical realities concerning Jesus of Nazareth and believes that He is who He says He is—the Son of God and God the Son. The Christian faith is revealed truth, not invented truth. One is certainly free to disagree with the Christian claim, but it’s important to know what that claim is and what that claim is not.

The unifying thread and hope of the Christian faith is the Gospel. The Gospel is not just a collection of four books in the New Testament recording the history of Jesus. The Gospel is the life giving and life sustaining message of Jesus Christ. The splendor of the Gospel can be described with three words that reflect it: clarity, mystery, and incarnation.

CLARITY

God is not a force. God is a personal being. We know God in the same manner we know one another—through a series of encounters and dialogues in real time-history. This may sound strange to equate the knowledge of God with the knowledge of your next-door neighbor because, after all, your neighbor speaks or communicates in some way to you with clarity. That is exactly the Christian claim—God speaks to us with clarity. God speaks to us in the beauty of nature. God speaks to us in the quietness of conscience. God speaks to us through His mighty deeds in human history recorded in the Old and New Testament. Finally, God speaks to us by entering into the course of human history by becoming a true human being—Jesus of Nazareth. This manner of “speaking” may appear ancient and not current—but it is. The

Christian claim is that God's speaking is both ancient and present. The Holy Spirit of God presently breathes into the ancient words of Scripture by illuminating our understanding of who God is and engaging our affections to trust in His gracious provisions. God also breathes into the life of the Christian community by way of His Holy Spirit. This way, God's communication to humanity is both logical (by way of history and statements) and super-logical or supernatural—by way of His Holy Spirit. We hope that this idea of Christian clarity sparks your curiosity. We also hope you'll pick up a copy of the Scriptures (the Bible) and investigate the Christian story by checking out the services at Christ Church Santa Fe. It's a great place to investigate the Christian faith.

MYSTERY

Christian mystery is not a secret. Christian mystery is not blind fundamentalism. Christian mystery is sublime truth that the Christian community embraces (i.e., apprehends) while recognizing that a lifetime of study cannot exhaust or plumb the depths of the greatness of that sublime truth. Take, for example, the Christian mystery of Grace. The Scriptures are clear. God loves broken, cracked, sinful, and marginalized people and extends His offer of the Gospel to them. The New Testament teaches us that when we are least like God (arrogant, narcissistic, or self-deceived) God is most drawn to us to extend His mercy. What hope! What mystery! When we are filled with arrogance, we are usually filled with self-loathing and we assume others—especially God—feels that way. Wrong! God loves cracked folks and offers them redemption. The scriptural accounts of Mary Magdalene, St. Peter the apostle (and loudmouth), Zaccheus the tax collector, and others demonstrate the mystery of Grace. The call of the Gospel is to believe in (apprehend) God's grace. But who can fathom that grace? It is as deep and wide as God himself.

INCARNATION

The Christian faith unapologetically asserts that the "God out there" came here. Incarnation means "enfleshing." The birth of Christ in Bethlehem, Israel, is the fulfillment of the Old Testament promise of Immanuel ("God with us"). While most of us are born to live, Christ, the Messiah, was explicitly born to die—for us. The paradoxical hope of the Christian community is the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus, the Sinless Son of God (and God the Son) died as a common criminal, though he committed no crime. In a divine transaction, God the Father places all the actual crimes (against God, others, and self) that we have committed and continue to commit upon Jesus and His cross. When Jesus died, our crimes, self-loathing, and guilt died along with Him. When He rose from the dead, our hope, identity, and redemption rose with Him. Access for all humanity to this divine transaction is "by faith through grace." "By faith" means that we access this gift by acknowledging our inability and wholly trust and depend upon Jesus and not ourselves to seek God's approval. "Through grace" means that our relationship with God rests upon God's unmerited favor (hence grace) toward us in Jesus.

The historic Christian faith is greatly misunderstood and, sadly, misapplied by many. Perhaps your past or present understanding of Christianity is as follows: the Christian faith is a religious belief in which you attempt to "clean yourself up" by following a prescribed moral code (in the Bible) in the hopes that God will approve of your attempt and your efforts qualify you for heaven. This is not the Christian faith.

The historic Christian faith is not a religion of self-righteous attempts to keep a moral code in the hopes that God is impressed. The Christian faith is a faith that demands utter authenticity and honesty. The Christian faith says that all are cracked about the head (and cracked morally and every other way) and need mending. The Christian faith says that God himself provides that mending through the person and work of Jesus Christ. The Christian call to humanity is not try harder. The Christian call to humanity is the Gospel— the Good News that Jesus heals and forgives and redeems cracked folks. Trust Him. Lean into Him. Embrace Him and He will never let you go.