

Dear People Whom God Loves,

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE STORY OF JESUS

JEWISH BACKGROUND

Since Jesus lived and died as a Jew, we must remember Jesus' roots.

The Jewish people named God Yahweh. That name was so sacred to them that they would never speak it. They used substitute words such as Adonai.

God was personal for them. So they could interact with God. They saw themselves in a covenant with God. "I will be your God, you will be my people."

The neighboring nations had laws which were similar to the last seven of the Jewish Ten Commandments. The religious genius of the Jewish people was not that they had commandments but that they connected them to God. Worship of God was not disconnected from how they treated each other. God cared about how they lived. Not just about their religious rituals.

Their part of the covenant was to obey those commandments and the rest of the law and God would protect them. (In their history the Jewish people had struggles with this.) This was enshrined in their essential prayer and commandments. The first commandment was to love God with their whole mind, heart and soul. The second was to love their neighbor as themselves.

We see love here. But it seems to me that the primary motivation was obedience. The crucial point, in my view, is that God was personal. God was someone with whom a person could interact. The psalms are full of this. Calling to God with all of their pains, frustrations, joy, praise, hopelessness, impatience and the whole gamut of human emotions.

It was into this culture that Jesus was born. Prophets before him had struggled mightily to keep the people on the right track. They wanted to reform the way that people were missing what their relationship with God should be.

Jesus saw this reform as the in-breaking of "the reign of God" – "the kingdom of God" or "the rule of God". Different words but referring to the same reality.

I think that it is pretty clear to scholars today that Jesus was not intending to start a new religion –though he was the impetus that eventually led to the

Christian religion and church. If we are to better understand what Jesus was about we need to reflect on what is meant by the reign of God.

REIGN OF GOD

Jesus invited people to enter into the reign of God. I understand this as Jesus inviting us to see things as God sees them, to become more like God in our actions –to treat each other as God treats us. He was calling us to repent. Calling us to metanoia. Calling us to change our minds and hearts. Calling us to be –as the eastern father called it–divinized.

This, of course, can only be brought about by the Divine Love that is in us, around us and through everything. Since Love allows us to be free, we have to be willing. But Love will also help us to be willing, while allowing us to be free.

We are invited to be willing to see honestly the dark parts that are in us and to be willing for Love to heal our spiritual woundedness. It is important to remember that Love is holding us, smiling at us and cherishing us through the whole process.

Let us now see what Jesus was about when he was inviting people into the reign of God. As Christians we believe that Jesus words and actions firmly show us what it means to live like God in our human lives.

1. We are called to imitate the mercy and forgiveness of God. Jesus tells the parable of the lost son. It could also be called the forgiving and merciful father. Lk. 15, 11-32.

The occasion of telling this parable was to respond about the tax collectors and sinners drawing near to listen to Jesus. Seeing this, the Pharisees and scribes complain and say, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them”.

The son is obviously a sinner. He ran off, wasted his inheritance in a wild sinful life. He then got a job caring for the pigs. He was hungry but no one would even give him the food of the pigs to eat. The son represents us deep in little, big or in between sins. We are certainly guilty.

The father represents God. The father is looking for his son and hoping that he will come home. The great Love we name God is reaching out to

us in the depth of our sins to heal us and bring us home. The reign of God is our home.

The son on his way home is scared. How will his father react when he sees him? Aren't we at times scared when we think about meeting God? Like the son, we don't know deeply the mercy, understanding, compassion and healing power of Love.

When the father sees his son a long way off, he is filled with compassion and runs to him and hugs him, kisses him and throws him a party to rejoice that his son is back home safe and sound.

Let us ponder this in our depths. I suggest reading the parable slowly and quietly. If we don't identify with the sins of the younger son, we have the opportunity to identify with the sins of the older son. The older son struggled with resentment at obeying all of his father's commands and his feelings of righteousness in compassion to his brother. I find some of each son in me. No matter which way we sin we are loved by Love.

2. Jesus not only talked about and acted out the reign of God, he also prayed. He needed this contact with Abba (Love) for the continued deepening of the reign of God within him, but also for the strength to live it.

When his disciples asked him to teach them how to pray, he gave them the prayer we now know as the "Our Father".

This prayer is directed to Abba (his loving parent). Abba is not only Jesus' Abba but our Abba too. Jesus is reminding us God is the merciful loving mommy and daddy for all of us.

"Hallowed be thy name." When we are grateful because we believe that we are held and cherished by Infinite Love, we want others to be blessed by that strengthening, comforting, and challenging belief as well.

"Thy kingdom come. They will be done." We are invited to be open to be transformed by Love and to allow love to heal all the parts of us that block our becoming compassionate, understanding, merciful and loving people.

"Give us this day our daily bread." We see that we have a need and a right to enough of the goods of the world to live a decent life and we become generous with those who lack that abundance. Also we look at

how our society is structured in a way that breeds the conditions that cause so many people to live on the margins.

“Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” There is a temptation to understand this in a way that misses the mark. We might think of God as petty-saying to us that if you don’t forgive others, then I won’t forgive you either. I understand it differently. As we allow Love to heal our woundedness, we will be a partner with Love in the healing of the wounds of others.

“Deliver us from evil”. We realize that Love is never going to lead us in the wrong direction. Love wants our goodness and happiness more than we do ourselves.

3. Jesus makes it clear that entering the reign of God requires that our insides have to be transformed. This is his strong language in Mt. 23, 27-25.

“Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You are like whitewashed tombs, which appear beautiful on the outside, but inside are full of dead men’s bones and every kind of filth. Even so on the outside you appear righteous, but inside you are filled with hypocrisy and evil doing.”

Following the rituals and practices of religion can be very valuable. I don’t think that we could have a religion without them. The danger is that we can be fooled into believing that following them means that we are religious. Entering the reign of God requires that we allow Love to change our hearts and minds into people of compassion, understanding, mercy and forgiveness.

Strange as it may seem, religion can become a substitute for God. It happens when we practice religion instead of surrendering to Love.

It is just a more hidden (even from ourselves) way of sinning. Love can mercifully heal the wound of this sin as well as any other kind of sin.

4. Since entering the reign of God means becoming in our humanness more like God, and since God loves everyone, it means our love must grow to include more and more people. That means loving our enemies. To put it another way. When we are in the reign of God there are no enemies.

This, of course, sounds impossible and perhaps foolish. But there it is. Again, this drives home the point that we can't enter the reign of God by willpower. Only Infinite Love can draw it into it.

Listen to Jesus again. Mt. 5, 43-44. "You have heard that it was said, 'you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes the sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and unjust."

This is echoed in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

This doesn't mean that we allow people to abuse us or that we don't prevent people from abusing others. It also doesn't mean that we must forgive others as obeying a command by will power. That is not possible.

When someone is an enemy, they have some kinds of power over us. Our lives are still affected by them even after there is no more interaction with them. What I think it means is that we are invited to enter the long, difficult process of letting go of our hatred and resentment. The end of the journey is the point where our wound has been healed. Then the resentment is gone, they have no more power over us. We are free. The word for that freedom is forgiveness. Forgiveness is a process not a will power thing. We need to be careful not to use the word forgiveness as a club by telling someone –you are a Christian you are supposed to forgive. We say such things out of ignorance. The good news is –Love is with us on the long painful journey.

5. It seems to me that there are three very human conditions that Jesus saw as big blocks to entering the reign of God. One is power over people, the second is money, the third is judging.

Let us look at power over people in Mk. 10, 42-44.

Jesus summoned them [his disciples] and said to them "you know that those who are recognized as rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones make their authority over them felt. But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all."

Power is not something bad. It is the ability to accomplish things and make things happen. Jesus was very powerful. Like all of our human capacities it can be used well or badly.

Entering the reign of God calls us to use our power to help people flourish. That is to help them grow more deeply human. We are made in the image and likeness of God. When we are growing in deep humanness; we are becoming more like God in a human way.

The power that we humans have varies greatly depending on our talents and the position we hold in society and/or church. For example: parents and children are all part of the same family. Parents have different power than their children. They use their power well when they help their children flourish by setting appropriate boundaries along with freedom and opportunities. There are of course times to be firm, but love and respect must always be present. One must listen to do this well.

I think that this applies in a similar way when we have power in our society and church. We all have power in some way. When we use power in ways that hinders people's flourishing we are not living in the reign of God.

Power has the potential of being very addictive. It can be used to satisfy our inflated ego needs. It can be used to satisfy inordinate needs for money. When this is present we will hurt people and at the same time without realizing it hurt ourselves. It shrinks our spirit that is the core of our humanness.

We need to be aware of the consequences of our actions. To use power well we must be willing to listen with compassion. We must keep aware that people under our authority are human beings like ourselves.

I remember talking to a young priest years ago about ministry. He said "aren't there times when you must speak hard sayings to people?" I said yes, but only after they know we love them.

Power gives us great opportunities to do much good. At the same time it so easily gets us off the track.

6. We come now to the second big block to entering the reign of God – money. Again remember entering the reign of God is not talking about going to heaven. It is about allowing Love to gradually change our hearts, minds and actions to be more the way God wants us to be. The reign of God will, of course, never be fully complete in the world we know. The beginnings can and will be here but it will never be complete until our world and universe are transformed hereafter.

What does Jesus say about money? Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Amen I say to you, it will be hard for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God". Mt. 19, 23-24. (The kingdom of God is another way of saying the reign of God)

And, "For the love of money is the root of all evils". I Tim 6, 10a. Note that quote for the first letter of Timothy does not say money is the root of all evils. Rather it says love of money is the root of all evils.

Why does it say love of money? I think that is because money is not evil in itself but it easily becomes addictive. When we are caught in addiction our life centers around our addiction. It subordinates everything else to our addiction. Whatever is the center of our life becomes our God. That center may be money, power or other things. It can be our most cherished beliefs and opinions. Perhaps that is why we stubbornly cling to our positions and not letting in any information that challenges that position can be called an ideology. It has become our idol- our substitute for God.

Obviously, we need to use our money to take reasonable care of ourselves and our families. There is a kernel of truth in saying; I have earned my money so I can use it any way I want. The kernel of truth is that we all need some kind of motivation. When deeper motives are lacking it, money can encourage us. We might also say I have used my talents to make money. Again a kernel of truth... However, as we enter the reign of God we realize that our talents are gifts. We didn't earn them. Again we might say that I have used and developed my talents. True enough, and praise worthy. Again as we enter the reign of God we realize that our talents are not just for us and a select few but also to others for the flourishing of the human race. Entering the reign of God does not mean that we lose our individuality but it ensures that we are also connected to the community of humanity. Interestingly, this connection with others also makes us become more who we are.

Again remember that growth into the reign of God is possible only because we are drawn into it by the Infinite Love from which we have come, that surrounds us and lives in the depths of our being. My experience is that this comes in baby steps. Steps forward and backward. But being drawn forward with all the ups and downs.

7. This brings us to the third big block to entering the reign of God. There are of course others but these are the ones that (in my opinion) Jesus saw as most important. That block is judging.

“Stop judging, that you may not be judged. For as you judge, so will you be judged, and the measure with which you measure will be measured out to you. Why do you notice the splinter in your brother’s eye, but do not perceive the wooden beam in your own eye? How can you say to your brother “let me remove that splinter, remove the wooded beam from your eye first; then you will see clearly to remove the splinter from your brother’s eye.” Mt 7, 1-5.

Here is my understanding of what this is all about. It helps me to distinguish between judging a person’s actions and judging the person.

I think that we can be reasonably accurate in judging the actions. They are usually quite visible. Even here we need to be careful. Some actions are more obviously bad than others. Also we people see things from different perspectives. From one perspective an action may be seen as bad but not so from another perspective. Reality is what it is. Reality is not changed by our perspectives. But our perspectives influence the way we perceive reality. And we judge from our perspectives. We need to make judgments to negotiate our life in the world. We can’t appropriately say “anything goes”. These are times that we need to act. At the same time we need to be humble about our certainties. We need to have a bit of self-doubt that enables us to be open to other points of view.

When it comes to judging a person as good or bad, we are presented with a more difficult problem. Let us suppose that we are accurate in judging that a person’s actions are bad. Does that mean necessarily that the person is bad? I don’t think so.

I remember reading about a young girl about 12 or 13. She suffered from a terrible case of ADHD. She was driving her parents crazy. She was impossible to manage. They took her to a doctor who prescribed a medication. She came home and was ever more unmanageable. In desperation they took her to a different doctor who prescribed a different medication. This one worked. She became a loving, vivacious girl who was a delight to her parents.

Was she a bad girl, a worse girl and then a good girl? If we just look at actions, that is certainly the case. But is she not the same person in all three states. Her brain was healed. So she acted differently. I submit that she was a good person all three stages. She had a brain disease. A

disease can cause extreme difficulty but a disease does not make us a bad person. We usually understand that with physical disease. We are not as insightful with mental and emotional diseases.

Another example. Trauma is a brain disease. We can be traumatized in various ways. It can happen when we are little or big. It can happen to a child who is abused mentally, physically or sexually. It can happen when a child rolls down the stairs. The child gets up and seems to be just fine. Sometimes that is the case. Also the damage to the brain may show up later or much later.

The trauma can lead to terrible destructive behavior. Is a person a bad person because they were traumatized? They are the same person that they would have been had they not been traumatized. But their lives are very different.

Imagine what life would be like if our brains were constantly telling us to kill people. Some people suffer from that.

We must be careful about our judgments. I can image Jesus saying "don't judge. You haven't got a clue about what is going on."

JESUS' SUFFERING AND DEATH

The next part of the Jesus story is his suffering and death. It is important for our understanding that we let go of some of the thinking that was prevalent in medieval times. This thinking grew out of the authority structure in place at that time. This was the time of emperors, kings, dukes, barons and so on.

The seriousness of an offense was determined by the position held by the person offended. The higher the person offended the greater was the offense. To offend a king was a greater offense than to offend a duke.

So when a "great" one was offended that offender had to go to great lengths to make up for the offense.

What does this have to do with Jesus? God is offended by sin. (This sounds to me that God was perceived as having an inflated ego.) Since God is infinite the offense is infinite. Since we humans are finite, there is nothing that we do to repay God for our offending him by sin.

Jesus to the rescue. Since Jesus is human, he can make recompense for us humans by his suffering and death. Since Jesus is divine, the

repayment is infinite. Therefore God is appeased and we are restored to friendship with God.

Ponder this image of God. God demands his "pound of flesh". Why was Jesus tortured and crucified? Jesus' proclaiming and living the reign of God led to his suffering and death. Jesus did not want to suffer and die. (The agony in the garden testifies to this.) Nor was God pleased by his suffering and death.

Jesus saw that the proclaiming and living the reign of God was his mission from Abba. Jesus chose to be faithful to that mission no matter what it cost. There was a cost because in living his mission he made powerful enemies who wanted to do away with him.

The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people, meanwhile were seeking to put him to death, but they could find no way because all of the people were hanging on his words. Lk 17, 47b-48.

Jesus was challenging the religious authorities and calling them to account. Jesus was a prophet. Prophets lay bare uncomfortable truths that people in power want to remain hidden. That is why prophets so often come to an untimely end.

In the mystery of salvation we Christians believe that God works through Jesus' whole life and being. But let us not think of God as wanting Jesus' or anyone's pain and tragedy.

Can we make some sense of innocent suffering while we believe that God is all powerful and good?

Some confusion can come from equating cause as applied to God and cause as applied to people. Creation and making things are not the same. Creation means making something from nothing. That is something different from what we do as people. We people make something out of something else. God is the source of being. We change being that is already there. This should warn us not to think of power in God as similar to power in us. Power applied to God is not a difference in degree from power as applied to humans. It is a different kind.

Remembering that God is love can also make us pause. The power of love is different than the power of force. Love requires that freedom is allowed. This indicates to me that we should expect freedom in the universe. When anything created is free, things will not always work

smoothly. There will be blowups and suffering and sin. If there were no freedom, however, there would be no love. At the same time we believe that this mysterious love we name God is working through all the imperfections to bring everything to goodness.

Jesus' suffering and death and surrendering to Abba reminds us that God identifies with all who suffer and is with us in our sufferings. It also tells us that suffering is a part of human history. God is responsible for a universe in which there is suffering. That doesn't mean that God is responsible for all of the suffering that accompanies freedom. Nor does it mean that God wants suffering. It seems to me that suffering is the price that is paid in order to have freedom and love. I see that as a painful but wonderful bargain.

The reign of God calls us to be co-workers with God in relieving suffering. Jesus was not only proclaiming the reign of God, he was living it. Notice how much of Jesus' life was devoted to relieving suffering. He was healing people who had various kinds of physical disease. He was casting out demons. I think that what this meant was that he was healing people with mental and emotional illness. He healed people with the painful wounds of sin. (I think of forgiving as healing the wounds of sin.) He confronted the religious leaders who laid heavy burdens on people who were already burdened. Jesus was not only doing acts of kindness but also challenging the unjust structure.

Think of the privilege of being invited to be co-workers with God in relieving sufferings. Perhaps in the big picture (though it may sound strange) God needs us to work with him in the evolving of our world. This is a vocation for everyone. It differs for different people according to our various talents and position in society and church. The call is for everyone. Not just big projects, though they are valuable and necessary. It can be holding a child who is sick. It can be taking a meal to a neighbor who has lost a loved one. It can be listening with compassion and understanding. It can be as simple as a smile. Let us each ponder about how we are going to be partners with God. As we relieve other's pain our own inner spirit is blossoming. What a vocation. What a vocation for everyone.

This leads us into the effect Jesus' crucifixion had on his disciples.

His disciples had high hopes that with Jesus the reign of God would be coming. In the appearance story of the disciples on their journey to

Emmaus, the two disciples used the telling words “we had hoped”. Their hopes were shattered. Their leader whom they admired and followed was executed like a criminal. Let us ponder this situation of deep dejection.

Moreover the male disciples had this great fear. Our leader has been crucified. Will they be coming after me next? They huddled together in fear. The female disciples were not in the same danger.

They must have been feeling much as we would if our family and friends were destroyed and we had no one to turn to.

JESUS’ RESURRECTION

We now turn to Jesus resurrection. Resurrection is what happened to Jesus. The Easter experience is what happened to his followers.

What happened to Jesus? He was transformed from the life that we have here to a new and glorious state with God. It is this state of being to which we give the name heaven. The resurrection is not a historical event. It is an event beyond history. This is not saying that Jesus did not rise from the dead.

What is the Easter experience? Jesus’ followers came to the faith that Jesus still lived. Not living in the same way as before but really alive. Coming to this faith did not come easily, but it did come.

The appearance stories in the gospels, which tell us about this journey to faith, tell of their struggle with doubts. It was Jesus but he was not the same as before.

This faith in the presence of Jesus still with them produced a dramatic change in his followers. They lost their fear and despair. They were full of courage and hope. They experienced Jesus presence in the “breaking of bread”. This likely means that they came together to share meals as they did with Jesus before he died. This was the beginning of the Jesus movement.

They believed that the Spirit of Jesus was with them and enabled them to preach and live the message of Jesus. They saw this as their mission from Jesus and the Spirit. This mission of the Jesus movement eventually became the church.

It is important to remember that we don’t first have church and then the church makes up the mission. The mission comes first. The church is

formed to carry out the mission. A phrase that is sometimes used: "the mission has a church".

THE JESUS MOVEMENT BECOMING CHURCH

At the beginning of the Jesus movement there was no dispute about following Jesus and living as a Jew. After all Jesus did that. Gradually tension arose when some members of the Jesus movement saw that the message of Jesus was relevant for those who were not Jews-the Gentiles.

A crisis arose in Antioch around 49 CE about becoming a follower of Jesus without following all the Jewish practices. This issue was taken up by the leaders in Jerusalem. The decision was made that the only Jewish practices that the Gentiles had to follow were the dietary laws. This allowed both the Gentiles and Jewish followers of Jesus to share meals together.

This brought some relief but tension continued. A lot of the harsh things that are mentioned in the gospels are not conflicts between Jews and Christians but between Christians who quarreled over following or not following Jewish laws. This was part of the process of the Jesus movement becoming church.

After the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE the break between Christian and Jews was complete. The Christian church became separate from the Jewish synagogue.

The mission given by Jesus and the spirit was still the mission of the church. The mission given to the church is to preach and live the reign of God. That is briefly: the mercy and compassion of God for all people, God forgiveness and healing of sin, the embracing of all people –especially those on the margins, to see things as God sees them and to live them out by following in the footsteps of Jesus. For our believing in Jesus to be authentic we must be following him by exhibiting the characteristics he taught us in our own lives.

Smile, God Loves You,
Father Clay