

Christness:

The vocation of Christianity

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The purpose of the Christian tradition, its denominations and local congregations is not the preservation of its institutional life and programs as an ends in themselves. The vocation of each Christian church in every new generation is to transmit and form the experience of God present in Jesus of Nazareth to its members so that their lives make Jesus Christ tangible in the way they live. The tangible presence of Jesus in the lives of individual Christians may be called **Christness**.¹ It is not a personal achievement. Christness is an opportunity to collaborate with God's spirit to gradually become a sacrament of God's presence and grace in a sacred, yet troubled world. The core of Christianity is Christness not the institution.

In order to embrace the reality of Christness in each new generation it is essential to see its origin in the life of Jesus. This will give a glimpse of the importance of what follows in the rest of this little

¹ I am indebted to Raimon Panikkar for my understanding of Christness, a term I learned from him. It is his firm belief that Christian faith communities, usually called denominations or churches, are not ends in themselves. They exist to form persons into manifestations of Jesus' presence in the world today.

book. Jesus was convinced that God's presence was breaking forth into the lives of the people of Israel during his lifetime to restore their commitment to God's desires for human life (the Torah.) He called this "the reign of God" (sometimes translated "the kingdom of God") and exhorted people around him to join in this mission. This was his gospel (the good news). It began with the transformation of the lives of persons who had the greatest needs. Jesus walked throughout the towns and villages healing the sick, assuring people of God's love and forgiveness, and speaking out about the challenge to make justice and compassion tangible in society and religious life. Jesus exhorted people to join him in what God was making possible through his life. He was clear that this was God's activity and he exhorted a sacrificial response and commitment from all who would entrust their lives to God's presence in his life.

Jesus knew that complete commitment to the reign of God would be costly and dangerous. Jesus knew that execution would be an almost certain consequence of his spiritual path and teaching. He did not accept this without difficult interior struggle. Jesus accepted death because he would not deny his true self and mission in order to appease the self-serving power of some of the religious and political leaders of his day. Jesus' love for all those around him, including those who condemned him, was too powerful to allow false values to prevail over his personal experience of true human life. He accepted death to stand firm for authentic life. He was practicing what he preached. His non-violent response to those who chose to execute him was a powerful statement that

he knew that they had no idea of the emptiness of their values and power. He told them, “My power is not of this world.”

Why is Jesus called Jesus Christ?

Most readers already know that “Christ” comes from the Greek word “Kristos,” meaning a person who has been anointed. Yet there are many people who are unsure about why Jesus is called Christ. Who anointed him and for what purpose?

The Greek word “Kris” means to smear and is almost always used in reference to a sacred act of anointing with olive oil. “Kristos” or “Christ” in the New Testament is used with the name Jesus to claim that Jesus is “the anointed one.” The New Testament gospels and epistles used “Kristos” in place of the Hebrew word “mashiyah” meaning “anointed one.” It is the derivation of the English word “messiah.” In the Hebrew scriptures kings and prophets were anointed with oil for their sacred functions to care for God’s people, Israel. Usually they were chosen and anointed because the spirit of God had already “rested on their shoulders” and gave them power to serve the people on behalf of God. In like manner, when Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River the spirit of God rested on his shoulders and Jesus became “an anointed one.”(Matthew 3:13-17 & Mark 9:1-11) Soon after his baptism Jesus became aware that God was breaking into the lives of the people of Israel to restore them to faithful fulfillment of God’s desires for human life as revealed in the Torah.

Luke's gospel narrates that soon after Jesus baptism and temptations in the wilderness he began to travel to the villages and towns in Galilee because Jesus interpreted his anointing as being congruent with the vision of the Hebrew prophets that God would unite all Israel's people and free people who were burdened by illness or rejected by society. When Jesus was preaching in his home town of Nazareth on the Sabbath Luke narrates that Jesus proclaimed that he was the fulfillment of these words from the prophet Isaiah:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” (Luke 4:18-19)

Jesus saw his anointing with the spirit of God as a mission to make God's restoration of Israel tangible through his words and actions. *“But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you.”* (Luke 11:20)

The earliest followers of Jesus knew him as “the anointed one” and in the Greek New Testament gospels and epistles he is called “Christ.” A person who makes Jesus' life tangible in their life shares in his Christness.

The challenge of Christness

Jesus was passionate to share his experience of God and the vision of fullness of life it revealed with every person who desired to entrust their lives to him. His promise was very simple. By embracing God's presence in his life a person would receive the gift of participating in the nature of God.² The divine power and presence that was united with Jesus' humanity will be given to us. St. Paul describes this gift that transformed his life in this way: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." It is normal to ask, "But, what about me? Do I have to disappear?" The answer is "yes" and "no." Jesus response is very clear. If we maintain control of our lives we actually lose the life God created us to have. It's a matter of context. We can live according to our definition of a full and meaningful life. We can set the stage for living our life or we can let go of control and gradually entrust ourselves to God's vision for fullness of life. We do not lose the uniqueness of who we are any more than St. Paul stopped being who he was when his passion to persecute followers of Jesus was transformed to proclaiming fullness of life in Christ through a personal experience of the risen Jesus. Yet all that we are is transformed by the presence of the same divine life that made Jesus an authentic human being. Christness is fullness of human life because the life of Jesus, the Christ, shows us what human life is meant to be.

² "Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature." (2 Peter 1:4)

The mind of Jesus Christ

But how can we recognize and begin the journey to fullness of life? St. Paul exhorted followers of Jesus to have “the mind of Christ.” What did he mean? I am convinced that Paul exhortation was a challenge to some of the earliest followers of Jesus to discover the same view of reality and desires that motivated Jesus’ words and actions. Paul was inviting people to share Jesus’ experience of life because he saw life in the same way that God sees life. This was and remains the consciousness of Jesus.

Consciousness is the window or lens through which a person perceives her or his interior and exterior life. It is the way we “see life.” It is experience, not thought. This “frame” of awareness shapes a person’s knowledge, relationships, and actions. It will influence the development of a person’s core values. Consciousness is an essential aspect of our life with God, other persons, our work, families, society, and creation. This “vision” of life shapes our judgments, decisions, and behavior. Therefore, consciousness is a fundamental and practical part of getting things done and doing them well. The formation of our consciousness will determine how we live, and move, and have our being.

The four canonical gospels present a portrait of the consciousness of Jesus.³ Jesus taught that authentic

³ I have chosen to concentrate on the way the four canonical gospels record Jesus’ deep consciousness of God because they give more complete narratives of Jesus daily life and encounters with people as well as accounts of the last week

knowledge of God flows from experience of and union with God. Once God is known from personal experience, God's presence and wisdom are recognized everywhere in life. This is what Jesus meant when he said, "If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." (John 14:7 NRSV) People who listened to Jesus' teaching experienced his consciousness of God. "Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes." (Matthew 7:28-29) But how does our consciousness become congruent with the way God, in Jesus' life, sees and encounters the world?

Is Christness worthwhile? What will it make possible?

Will making the Life of Jesus tangible in our daily lives and seeing the world as Jesus sees the world make a difference today? If you believe that compassionate involvement in the lives of other people is needed in our world, then getting to know Jesus may appeal to you. He invites all of us to have hospitable souls. A hospitable soul is a soul open to the presence of God and our neighbor. Jesus' intimacy with God was the source of his compassionate involvement in the lives of people around him. Being a lover of souls was his highest priority. For Jesus it was more than words. The way he lived was his message. That's what attracted

of his life, his death, resurrection and risen life among his followers.

people to him. But do not take my word for it. Look at his life for yourself. That is the purpose of the rest of this little book.

Is Christness possible?

Jesus' prayer in solitude opened his heart to God's presence and spirit. It formed who he was as a person. His intimate relationship with God made him a complete and authentic human being. His intimacy with God became the source of all his words and action and determined his relationships with other people. His experience of God in prayer became the way he viewed and understood life. At the same time, his personal prayer took place in the wider context of his Jewish heritage, liturgical life, and his knowledge and understanding of Jewish sacred scriptures. This formative background gave birth to his compassionate engagement in the needs of his society.

Jesus, in his life of prayer, gives an example of how to listen to another voice. He lived a contemplative life and invites person who follow him to a disciplined pattern of listening to God. Jesus demonstrated that when a person listens to God through some form of meditation she or he will be able to hear that same voice in all venues of life. And it's not a loud or coercive voice, even when it challenges a person to some form of action. Jesus demonstrated that the life of God is always within us, waiting for us.

Jesus' life of prayer provides a unique example of what God desires for human life.

The evolution of Christness as a way of life

Perhaps the best way to describe Christness is to narrate my own experience of Christness. I have discovered that Christness is a reality to be accepted and not a theory or discipline to be mastered. My journey into Christness began by learning about the life of Jesus of Nazareth rather than a focus on theology about Jesus. I relied on the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. I was influenced, also, by the lives and witness of Jesus' earliest followers after his resurrection recorded in the New Testament book of Acts and epistles.

Eventually, I realized that my access to the gospels and epistles was part of a living tradition that extends into the lives of modern followers of Jesus. As I consciously became part of the life of a community of Jesus' followers I discovered that the life of Jesus is not a "past" life. Many persons in several differing Christian faith communities shared their own experiences of Jesus' continuing life through worship – especially the Eucharist (Holy Communion), fellowship, learning and personal involvement in the lives of other people.

I'm not sure when I, too, wanted to be a follower of Jesus. The more his life became real in a variety of ways, the more I was attracted to him. Eventually I wanted to be like him. All this did not happen right

away or with a single emotional “rush.” In fact, after more than seventy years, I’m still learning what following Jesus means. Somehow, when I became open to the possibility of being like Jesus I began to learn, unconsciously, that I was not in complete control of the outcome.

As I look back on my life I can see how I was being formed, gradually, into Christness without really knowing what was happening or having Christness as an objective goal. Most of the time I have learned about following Jesus by working with and observing persons whose lives, in small and larger ways, were congruent with the life of Jesus. I could see him in their lives. They became my mentors, although I was not always aware of what was happening.

Over the years, with these really fine mentors, I have learned that if my ultimate goal in life is to follow Jesus for the good of all, then I must, with God’s help, become a manifestation of Jesus’ presence in the world. For this to become an authentic reality in my life I must, like Jesus, develop a solitary and contemplative experience of God that will guide and empower the incarnation of God in my daily life. Although this is not unique for me, it will make it possible for my one life to collaborate with God’s desires for the life of the world. The path toward Christness is a combination of my own desires and behavior collaborating with the gifts of God’s spirit and grace-filled energy. It may begin with my desire and include continued effort on my part, but God will complete and sustain the manifestation of Jesus’s life in me. In the words of St. Paul, who at one time

persecuted followers of Jesus, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”

This will not happen overnight. I will be continually formed and sustained through my active life in a community of other followers of Jesus. Common work, study, and prayer will be the foundation of this environment of grace. The primary vocation of every Christian community is the transmission of experience of Jesus in such a way that he becomes tangible in the lives of its members as they make God’s desires for the common good a reality.

“For the things which belong to the story of Jesus are not yet completed.”⁴

⁴ A. M. Donald Allchin, *Participation in God*, 76. Quoted in David G. R. Keller. *Boundless Grandeur: The Christian Vision of A. M. Donald Allchin*. Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2015, 110.