

THE MIND OF JESUS

If we are going to talk this morning about the mind of Jesus, the first clear and obvious comment I need to make is that I don't have mind enough to talk about the mind of Jesus. That is more than just an appropriate humility. Whenever I am dealing with the Jesus records, I quickly run into the realization that Jesus is telling stories, having conversations with people, making decisions, teaching, making statements about things – all of which do not fall into patterns I am familiar with. Sometimes He is putting things together in a way that surprises me. But it goes beyond that, and I become aware that my ceiling of awareness is too low. His mind leaves mine behind.

Bear in mind the fact that I have been fascinated by Jesus since I was a young boy. For many years, I have been trying to fathom what He said, what He meant, how He saw things, how He thought. Along the way it has sometimes become necessary to simply shelve a story, an incident, or a teaching, knowing I was not comprehending it in any meaningful way. Some of Jesus' parables have eluded me for years. The story of the transfiguration baffled me clear into the tail end of my second parish. I could read it, of course, and know who was in the story, where they went, what they said, what they saw. But why? I could tell that I knew the story but didn't really know what it was about. To this day I still cannot predict when some new piece of the puzzle will suddenly fall into place. That is why I still think "it is necessary for us as Christians to study some portion of the Scriptures each day, seeking in grace and praise to discover God's will for our own lives on a daily basis." A significant part of that "seeking" is our attempts to comprehend with greater and greater clarity what was really going on with Jesus. We have other interests and other areas of life where we are trying to know more and get greater clarity. But if Jesus is our Lord, we never stop thinking about Him, or wanting to know Him better.

The problem isn't simply that the records are too skimpy, or that the Gospel writers don't all tell things in the same way, or that customs, language, and thought-frames have changed so much between His time and ours. These are all real difficulties, but it is more than that. Jesus thinks bigger, deeper, and with more comprehension than we do. We seldom hear anyone admit it, but more than a few have turned away

from Jesus because they do not have enough mental capacity or concentration to grasp what He is saying or to understand why He is saying it. They do not want to admit that anybody could be that much smarter than they are. It's important to note that with far less mental capacity, others have given Jesus their full attention, and they have found from Him more truth and hope than they have time to live out. Jesus always honors "all that we have." One of His profound teachings, by the way. But it comes with a sting in the tail: What if we come to Him with less?

To illustrate my point: I was enthralled one day when the story of Nicodemus suddenly started to clear for me in a way it never had before. Nicodemus, you remember, went to visit Jesus in the night so nobody would know he was interested in Jesus. Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin, and one of the most learned and astute citizens in the Israel of his time. Like me, Nicodemus was fascinated by Jesus, only it would have been dangerous for his career if anybody found out about it. And Jesus, you remember, jumped into the conversation far faster and deeper than Nicodemus was expecting. Jesus knows Nicodemus is spiritually hungry – why else would he have come? Jesus says, "*Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.*" (John 3:3) Clearly that is a multidimensional comment. Lots of us love the phrase and like to quote it, but that is no proof that we understand it.

Anyway, suddenly it became clear to me that in this story, Jesus realizes that He has lost (baffled) Nicodemus completely. Slowly and patiently, Jesus backtracks – not looking for approval or agreement; just waiting until Nicodemus can get hold of something familiar enough to get him back into the conversation. You have no idea what a special moment that was for me: other people were having some of the same problems I have trying to understand Jesus. But Jesus is patient and will keep circling back around until He finds some level where we can pick it up again. So that's how it works! That's okay, then. Faith does not depend on IQ. On the other hand, if we don't bring all the IQ we can muster, our conversations with Jesus will be few, far between, and mostly meaningless.

I want to skip lightly now over several areas and illustrations regarding the mind of Jesus, and that means we will not deal adequately with any of them. Let's start with the parables.

1.) PARABLES.

I started using Jesus' parables with the high school kids back in the church before my first church – that is, in Amherst, New Hampshire, when I was still a seminary student. Adults are always afraid of teenagers to some degree, especially in groups. Well, one of my assignments in Amherst was to be the advisor to the high school youth group. Parables seemed like my best shot for keeping high-schoolers interested. At least parables seemed better than trying to go through the book of Romans. In seminary I was far too busy with my studies to have much time left over for trying to understand Jesus.

It quickly became obvious to both the high-schoolers and to me that, in the main, I had no idea what Jesus was talking about. The stories seemed clear enough on the surface, but the moment we tried to delve into them, they would twist and turn in surprising ways and throw us off – kind of like a wild stallion will throw off a “greenhorn” who doesn't know what they are doing. Have you ever been a greenhorn with the Scriptures – or with Jesus? Have I ever been anything *else*?

Anyway, you have heard the old phrase, “You cannot teach what you do not know.” That's when the youth group started to get exciting. The more I stopped pretending I knew where the parables were trying to take us, the more interested the high school kids got in trying to figure them out with me. And thinking about the mind of Jesus, Jesus built these parables with hooks and grapples down inside so that if anybody gave them more than cursory attention, they would latch on and haul us into places we had no idea they could take us. They can do that still today. Even stranger, we end up loving the places they haul us into – at least eventually.

You are not the seed! You are the soil the seed falls on. (Luke 8:4-15) That changes everything. Funny how easy it is to change things around from what Jesus says ... to what we are expecting, what we are more familiar with, what we want to hear. I was actually in Bible Study groups for years where we were trying to equate ourselves with the seed. We even thought it was meaningful and that we were “getting it,” even though it wasn't really adding up. But if we are the soil, what kind of soil are we? And can we do anything about that? Can we change the kind of soil we are? Can Jesus change the kind of soil we are? If we had several months, perhaps we could let this parable talk to us and take us into some very interesting places. But that is not the point or purpose this morning.

In any case, what I discovered was that Jesus told parables in ways I would never have come up with. They didn't make the points I thought were important to make. They didn't teach the values I assumed were right and true. They didn't bring us to the nice and acceptable moralisms we were expecting and assuming. And they didn't have any endings. You would be surprised how many people do not know this. They think the parables are Jesus' way of wrapping up truth in nice, neat little packages. But Jesus' parables are open-ended. They bring us into situations or stories that are just for openers. The only way to know where the parable is taking us or what it's trying to teach us is to go live it out in real life. We end up deciding what the parable means – and how the story ends – by how we live.

That was about the time I stopped trying to be a smart-ass know-it-all with Jesus. And I stopped feeling insulted or being jealous that He is so much brighter than I am. That is always a great day for any of us. In any case, He is way beyond me. To this day I do not approach one of His parables with the assumption that I already understand it all. Jesus has hidden dimensions in these seemingly simple-sounding stories that are more like time bombs than a simple piece of advice. Why does Jesus say the old wine is good – better than the new stuff? Isn't Jesus Himself trying to bring new wine? We don't want the new wine Jesus is bringing us? Most of us think we do – *assume* we do – at least at first. Is what we know before we run into Jesus really better than what He offers us? Why would Jesus be saying such things? The only way to be comfortable with Jesus' parables is to make sure we are not paying very much attention to them. So enough about the parables for the moment.

2a.) Jesus always comes with A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE.

I have run into lots of people who are eager to tell me that they are “spiritual.” I am seldom clear about what they mean by that. I assume we all have souls. It does seem clear to me that all of us have some spiritual hunger and some spiritual awareness. I also assume, though I realize it is a big assumption, that all of us are created by God. But few people go around announcing that “I breathe air.” It is true and important, but too obvious to need comment. (NSS) So why do so many people want to announce to me that they are spiritual? Apparently they think I don't know this, or perhaps that I might even disagree with it? It must be because I'm a Minister. What other excuse could I have for being so ignorant that I don't even know they are spiritual? Actually,

I suspect that most of the time such people are saying to me: “I don’t go to church but I am still a good person.” Interesting, since I *do* go to church and I am not a good person. Oh well – “it takes all kinds,” as they say.

Silly semantics aside, Jesus’ perspective is surrounded by and permeated with His awareness of a realm beyond the physical world as I am usually aware of it. Tricky, since one of the interesting things about the mind of Jesus is that He doesn’t always think of the “spiritual realm” as somewhere in the future. So I put it poorly, but most of the people I know, including me, think of a present physical reality limited by time and space, and possibly we are headed toward a better, higher life when we die here – and perhaps then we get to move on in some fashion to a realm or realms beyond this one.

Mostly because of Jesus, I have modified this view and expectation quite a bit over the years. One of the hardest parts about trying to talk about the “mind of Jesus” is the fact that He has had tremendous influence on our culture, regardless of where a person fits within it – that is, whether they think they are “religious” or not. And Jesus has had an enormous influence on how I think and what I care about personally. Appreciation and gratitude cause me to wonder, at times, what life would look like and feel like to me if I had never felt any influence from Jesus. I think we often take a lot for granted. There is no clear way to even assess what life would be like today apart from Jesus. His influence, from my point of view, has never been as great as I would wish. But that does not keep me from realizing that the ethics, values, expectations, assumptions about individual worth, importance of relationships, and value of truth, hope, and love are all hugely influenced by the life of this one man. I even believe, though many would disagree with considerable feeling, that Jesus has influenced the thought and constructs of other great religions. For two thousand years now, they have been in competition with Christianity – for better or worse, and in more ways than are always obvious. As a result, I think they all talk a lot more about “love” than they did before – or ever would have, if it were not for Jesus.

But back to the point: Almost nothing Jesus says or does comes from the perspective that is usual and normal in our world. He is always aware of the Kingdom of God. He always lives for it. Frequently this makes Him seem to be almost oblivious to what we call “reality.” As has often been quipped: “If Jesus is correct about God and the Kingdom of God, then He is the most practical man who ever lived.” But the truth is, Jesus seems highly impractical to many of us a good deal of the time.

Many earnest people have said to me, “If I tried to live His Way, I wouldn’t survive here for very long.” Some of them even realize that *He* didn’t survive here for very long.

Thinking about the mind of Jesus, one of the keys to His unusual way of thinking is remembering (or at least wondering) what sort of character and behavior will be required of us if heaven is to be the kind of place we all hope it will be. When I think Jesus is sounding harsh or uncompromising, maybe He is just calling it straight according to the realities of the heavenly realm. How unforgiving can I be, in a realm of light and love, without wrecking things? It doesn’t much matter how many excuses I have, how my parents raised me, how hard my life has been, or whether I’m ready to change my ways yet. How unforgiving can I be, in a realm of light and love, without wrecking things? *“Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.”* And if not, well – if not, heaven cannot possibly be any better than the way things are right here and right now.

In any case, it puts many of Jesus’ sayings in a whole different light when we remember that His own awareness always included the perspectives of God’s Kingdom.

“Fear not, little flock, it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”

“Ask and you will receive; seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened unto you.”

“Not a hair of your head will be harmed”

“Do not be anxious. Fear not. Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”

“Seek ye first the kingdom of heaven, and all these things shall be yours as well.”

Only a blithering idiot would say such things, if this physical world is the only reality. “Nature, red in tooth and claw” (Tennyson) – a place where all things are getting old, wearing out, and dying. But Jesus goes right on claiming and proclaiming realities and promises and principles that can only be true if the higher realm is as real as the one we are seeing.

2b.) So, frequently we get what I call THE DOUBLE TAKES.

Thinking about the mind of Jesus, I also think of the many times my mind has done a “double take” when I was trying to comprehend Him. You know: I start to move on past it, then get this jarring shudder, and then realize that nobody else is seeing things the way He does.

“Which is easier – to say ‘your sins are forgiven,’ or to say ‘rise and walk’?” What has sin got to do with sickness, or healing? And don’t answer that or I will get really angry. Of course, I didn’t say it – He did. It would never have crossed my mind.

“He who is forgiven little, loves little.” Wait a minute! If I receive more forgiveness, I will be more loving? That doesn’t make any sense to all the things I have been taught. (Try telling it to my psychiatrist.)

“Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Ridiculous! Nobody works harder at righteousness than the Pharisees. You might as well tell us that we have to be born anew. Or that, of those born of women, none is greater than John the Baptist, but that the least in the Kingdom is greater than John. Have I lost anybody? But it isn’t me, you see – it is Jesus talking. It doesn’t matter if I have lost you. But if Jesus has lost you, is that still okay with you?

3.) A NEW COVENANT AND A NEW WAY.

We have been musing about a lot of details and little things. Not unimportant, mind you, just not the larger picture. From my perspective, the mind of Jesus goes off all the charts. He was (and is) the greatest strategist, the deepest thinker, the most aware individual who ever came to our planet. So now jump about ten levels with me.

Jesus knew the history and traditions of His people far better than we usually realize. Jesus knew the Scriptures of Judaism so thoroughly that, to our knowledge, none of the experts of His time ever stumped or trapped Him, though many tried. Jesus knew and honored the heroes of His tradition, and spoke of them often with deep appreciation and honor. He especially knew the prophets and, in many ways, embodied and incorporated the best of each of them in His own approaches and ministry.

ITEM: The prophets and Old Testament scriptures of Judaism looked forward to and believed in a time when the Jews would become the supreme nation on earth. It wasn't just ego; it was simple logic. They had the best and only true God; eventually they had to end up the greatest nation. Jesus *broke* from this view and announced that His Kingdom was not of this earth. Most Jews, Christians, and Muslims haven't followed Him around this turn even yet.

ITEM: Part of the mystique and hope of Israel was the belief that if faithful enough, God would fight on the side of Israel and make them victorious – regardless of the odds, and regardless of the numbers, the training, or the equipment of their enemies. Included in this mystique were the feats of many Jewish heroes, like Gideon, Samson, and especially King David. More recently, the Maccabees had won freedom against enormous odds in their fight against Antiochus IV (Seleucid Empire). Such stories and events were still inspiring Zealot bands to rebel against Rome. How could you know if you were the real Messiah unless you tried to free Israel? Maybe God would back you if you were bold enough and believed enough to try.

Jesus *broke* from this hope and mystique. He would not join with the Zealots. He lost many followers by being so “nonpolitical” and “nonmilitaristic.”

ITEM: Jesus put together a very different concept of the role of Messiah, and a very different picture of the hope of Israel. It was connected to Jeremiah's prophecy of a “New Covenant” not like the Old Covenant. This blasphemy against Moses and Judaism very nearly got Jeremiah killed, and of course it did get Jesus killed.

In the wake of this very new and different awareness of the spiritual and religious destiny of Judaism and the world, Jesus reworked or bypassed almost everything familiar to the Judaism of His time. His Sermon on the Mount did not sound sweet or nice in their ears, but instead challenged all Jewish constructs. “*It was said by the men of old ... but I say to you*”

In the eyes of the Pharisees, Jesus broke at least five of the ten commandments. And by His personal claims regarding His own identity, they believed He was breaking – if not smashing – the first and most important commandment of all.

Cutting to the chase: Jesus saw things in a light so new, so clear, and so powerful that it reworked all western concepts of religion, of what God was like, of what was expected of us, and of the purpose of Life itself. Jesus never broke from Judaism and was Himself a practicing Jew. All His short life, He participated in both synagogue and temple life, clear up to the time of His own arrest and execution.

But what Jesus taught and how He led the movement forming around Him – including His training of the twelve, and then of course backed up and supported by His resurrection – were so new and powerful that they could not be contained within Judaism as the Judaism of His time understood itself. Jesus was, in fact, a new wine that burst all the old skins. He led and leads us into a Life based on relationship – primarily relationship with God, but infecting everything about all our relationships with each other as well. Relationship before precept. Unheard of! Literally unheard of – unimaginable. Another way of saying: *Gospel* – the message that God loves us – *takes precedence over Law* – the teaching of how we must behave.

Until Jesus came, all religion believed that we had to get it right first – learn to behave the way we should first – and then maybe we could find acceptance and have a relationship with God. Jesus led us into a Way that claims we must receive and trust the love of God first, and only then do we have any possibility of changing our behavior in any significant or lasting way. The inside has to change before the outside can. Our world still hates this construct, and mostly does not believe it. And very seldom does it *act* like it believes it. Does *The New Church* believe it? We shall see.

Everybody knows now that Gospel supersedes Law in Christendom – that relationship outranks theory or precept. How interesting that we very rarely run into anybody who knows it, believes it, or acts like they truly understand or accept it. Jesus thought, spoke, and believed in ways completely different from the known and accepted precepts of our world. And to this very day, our world has not understood or accepted or trusted what He revealed to us.

All of our Christian institutions and representatives continue to go back to the ways the world believed and behaved before Jesus came. There is enough Gospel to intrigue, and to flicker here and there with new light. But everywhere, we still believe and trust more in the Law – more in the behavior – than in the love. We get brief glimmers of the New

Truth with Paul, Origen, Augustine, Luther, John Cotton, or maybe a special friend here or there for some of us. But then it is swallowed up again by the familiar, and by what we think is more sane or practical or realistic. Are the Christian creeds about Gospel – about how much God loves us? Or are they about what we have to *believe* in order to be accepted and to become acceptable?

The mind of Jesus is only part of His story. There is more than His mind that still eludes us and goes far beyond us. And I am too old now to believe that the world will catch on or turn to Him in a way that will truly transform our institutions and realities here. But I am not too old to believe that He will go on loving us, calling to us, and converting us all along the way. In the end, our world has no chance against Him. He is our true King – the true Messiah – and He will win us in the end. May it come much sooner for each one of you.