

Rolheiser: Jesus Christ – the person and the mystery

We quite naturally tend to think of the word “Christ” as Jesus’ second name. We think of the name “Jesus Christ” like we think of names like “Susan Parker” or “Jack Smith”. But that’s an unhealthy confusion. Jesus didn’t have a second name. The word “Christ” is a title which, while it includes the person of Jesus, speaks of something wider than Jesus alone.

WHAT’S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN “JESUS” AND “CHRIST”?

Jesus refers to a concrete person who, though the Second Person within the Godhead, walked this earth for 33 years and is still today someone whom we understand and relate to as an individual person.

Christ refers to something larger, namely, the huge mystery of both creation and salvation of which Jesus, as the Christ, plays the foundational role but which includes the Eucharist, the Christian community, the historical Christian churches, the community of all sincere people who walk this planet, and physical creation itself.

Jesus is a person with whom we seek to be in a relationship with in friendship and intimacy, while Christ is a mystery of which we and all creation are part of and within which we participate.

This has huge implications, not least in how we understand spirituality and church. In essence, this is what’s at stake:

What’s more central to us, what Jesus has done and asks of us or the person of Jesus himself?

It’s interesting to look at the various Christian churches in terms of that question: Are they more focused on the teaching of Jesus or on the person of Jesus? Are they more focused on Jesus or on Christ?

In terms of a large over-generalization, we might say that Roman Catholicism and mainline Protestantism have tended to focus on the teachings of Jesus and the demands of discipleship that flow from those teachings more than they have on the person of Jesus himself.

The reverse is true for the Evangelical tradition, where the emphasis has been and continues to be on the person of Jesus and our individual relationship to him.

IN FAIRNESS, BOTH TRADITIONS, CLEARLY, ALSO INCLUDE THE OTHER DIMENSION:

Roman Catholics and mainline Protestants haven't ignored the person of Jesus, and Evangelicals haven't ignored the teachings of Jesus; but, in both cases, one has been more central than the other.

Roman Catholicism, for its part, also emphasized the dimension of one-to-one intimacy with Jesus but placed that within its devotional practice more so than within its mainline theology which is focused more on the mystery of Christ than on the person of Jesus.

Spirituality, not surprisingly, tended to follow the same pattern.

Roman Catholics and mainline Protestants, unlike the Evangelicals, have not made one-to-one intimacy with Jesus the centerpiece of spirituality, even as they hold it up as the ultimate ideal. Their emphasis is on Christ.

Evangelicals, on the other hand, focused on an affective, one-to-one intimacy with Jesus in a way that often left Roman Catholics and mainline Protestants wondering exactly what Evangelicals meant when they asked us: "Have you met Jesus Christ?", "Is Jesus Christ your personal Lord and Savior?", "Have you been born again?"

Conversely, Roman Catholics and mainline Protestants often looked critically at their Evangelical brothers and sisters, questioning whether their over-riding emphasis on personal salvation and personal intimacy with Jesus does not distract them from having to deal with some central teachings of Jesus that have to do with social justice and with wide faith embrace.

Admittedly, both emphases are needed. We see that clearly in the preaching of the early church.

The renowned scripture scholar, Raymond Brown, tells us that, beginning already with St. Paul, the earliest Christian preachers shifted the primary focus of their proclamation to Jesus himself, almost as if they could not announce the kingdom without first telling of him through whom the kingdom was made present.

Proclaiming a person himself (rather than just that person's message) was novel for the early Christian preachers. Their proclamation of Jesus' person was radically different from the way the Hebrew Scriptures honor Moses, in that they honor his message but never draw attention to his person in terms of asking anyone to relate to him.

As an aside: There's a lesson here in terms of how we often treat our saints and holy persons. We honor them through admiration when what's really asked of us is that we imitate their actions.

Christian discipleship, clearly, asks for both, intimacy with Jesus and

attention to what he taught, personal piety and social justice, firm loyalty to one's own ecclesial family and the capacity to also embrace all others of sincere heart as one's faith family.

Soren Kierkegaard once suggested that what Jesus really wants is followers, not admirers. That's spoken as a true mainline Protestant. Evangelicals wouldn't disagree, but would argue that what Jesus really wants is an intimate relationship with us.

The earliest preachers of the Gospel would agree with both Kierkegaard and the Evangelicals. We need to proclaim *both*, the message of Jesus *and* Jesus himself.