

THE TWO FACES OF CHRIST

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To call a person two-faced is not usually taken as a compliment. "Two-faced" is an old expression indicating a double-dealing, deceptive, fickle kind of person. To be sure, this expression has been applied to half the human species. Those of us who were young in the nineteen forties may remember what Mamma done tole us:

"A woman's a two-face
A worrisome thing
To leave you to sing
The blues in the night."

I never quite understood how Mamma herself was exempted from that description. Of course, if a girl was singing a song, the sentiment was turned around,

"A man is a two-face."

But either way you sing it the sentiment is hardly complimentary to the opposite sex.

Therefore, it may appear highly inappropriate to speak of the two faces of Christ. Yet consider the Christ who appears in these two sayings.

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid." John 14:27.

"I came to cast fire upon the earth; and would that it were already kindled...Do you think I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division..." Luke 12:49-52 (part)

Those statements do seem to contrast rather sharply. Can it be that they reveal a Christ with two faces, the face of the man who reclaims lost souls, and the face of the man who storms into the Temple with a whip? Which is the true face? For what purposes does Jesus the Christ come into the world?

There can be no doubt that he does come as a peace-maker. He comes to bring shalom, a reality for which our English word, "peace" is a pale and sickly representative. The peace that Christ brings is the touch of healing that he bestows on persons and relationships. It is the power for wholeness and harmony that he releases into the lives of people. As the peacemaker, Christ brings atonement to the world, which is to say, at-one-ment. He breaks down "the dividing walls of hostility" within people, among people and between people and God.

In Reuel Howe's book, Man's Need and God's Action, there is a saying that sums up the deepest need of everybody:

"Some of our wants are immediate and superficial, some of them are deeper; but the deepest one of all is the desire to be at one with someone, to have someone who can be at one with us, and through whom we can find at-oneness with all."

That at-oneness is precisely what shalom, Christian peace, is all about. And that at-oneness was what Jesus did bring to people who knew him and who had faith in him. He was a person with a miraculous capacity to be at one with other persons, to be with people where they were, as we say today. At the same time he was a person who was at one with God in a way that was unprecedented in human experience.

So it was that the word "peace," "shalom," "eirene" in the Greek of the original documents, resounds through the pages of the New Testament. "Peace" is the word for describing the life of the Christian home and for the fellowship of the disciples. "Peace" is the term for expressing the inward quality of those who have "the mind of Christ." "Peace" is the term for that power that breaks through the guilt, the fear, the doubt, the anger that cut us off from God.

A few days ago the confirmation class and I looked at that line in Paul's Epistle to the Romans that made so much difference in the life of Martin Luther, and so in turn in the whole of modern Christian history:

"Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

"Peace with God" - this is the supreme gift that Jesus brings to people in his role of peace-maker. He fulfills that deepest want of all -

"To have someone who can be at one with us,
and through whom we can find at-oneness with all."

So then it is certainly fitting that Christ should enter the world to this chorus:

"And on earth peace..."

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But we noted that there was another face to Christ. He comes not only as peace-maker, but as trouble-maker. When I call him a trouble-maker, I do not suggest that he is like those people who reveal an unhealthy need to create petty disturbances wherever they go. I mean rather that Jesus Christ was and is a continuing aggravation to the conscience of the world.

If the theme of "peace" sets the stage for the coming of Jesus, so does the theme of "trouble." Do you recall how King Herod reacts when the wise men suddenly appear with their question about the King of the Jews?

"When Herod heard this, he was troubled and all Jerusalem with him."

From that time on Jesus continued to be trouble to people. He was trouble to his family: once they tried to bring him home because they felt he was behaving like a lunatic. He was trouble for his neighbors. They drove him out of town when it became clear to them what sort of character had grown up in their midst. He was trouble for the rabbis, for the priests, for the Roman authorities. And he was trouble for the man in the street.

Near the end of the story we find the men in the street lining up behind the priests, and in the translation of J. B. Phillips the exchange goes like this:

Pilate: "I find nothing criminal about this man."

Men in the street: "He's a troublemaker among the people."

So there can be no doubt that Jesus was regarded as a trouble-maker. And I think there can be no doubt that he continues to perform among us as a trouble-maker.

Jesus Christ is a trouble-maker because he disturbs us by the example of his own dedication and sacrifice.

Haven't you ever known somebody whose goodness, I don't mean phony goodness, but genuine goodness, became an irritation? Genuinely righteous people, people who do the right things that we never get around to doing sometimes strike us as a kind of indictment of our own existence. We say that they inspire us. But if we were honest, we would admit that they also annoy us.

I think Jesus always has brought that kind of annoyance to people.

Again Jesus Christ is a trouble-maker because he challenges the values by which we live.

It isn't simply that Jesus challenges us to live up to those values we accept. He goes further: he calls the values themselves into question.

What do you make of a man who tells you that when you throw a party, you shouldn't invite your friends, but instead go out and bring in all the bums off the street. How are you to take a religious leader who says that there are prostitutes who know more about the love of God than a good many Sunday school teachers, that there are people on welfare who are better neighbors than people in the Kitchi Gammi Club?

The humor of Jesus is especially troublesome. Humorists are usually troublemakers because the art of the comic lies in bringing home the truth that things are not what they are purported to be. There was a good deal of the humorist in Jesus. The mere fact that most people have never seen that in him is itself an indication of how we habitually close our minds to a disturbing influence. How can anyone fail to see that the sayings about taking the log out of your eye and about the rich man trying to go through the eye of a needle are bits of humorous exaggeration? Elton Trueblood did the world a service a few years ago when he published a book on the humor of Christ. Yet even he, perhaps, does not face up to the aggressiveness with which Jesus uses humor as a weapon against the Pharisees or to the dark, almost bitter humor in some of Jesus' sayings. The sort of person who believes that the only humor worthy of a Christian is pleasant and playful will be troubled when he begins to feel the sharp edge to the humor in Jesus.

Jesus Christ is a trouble-maker because he prompts us to take sides on issues. Knowing that Christ comes as a peacemaker Christians have always believed that they were assigned a ministry of reconciliation. Their task is to bring peace among conflicting parties. But sometimes this ministry can be perverted into an escape from moral responsibility. Going around saying "Let's be nice to everybody" is no substitute for taking a stand on the side of those who are oppressed.

The late Saul Alinsky shook up many church people when he said, "You've got to get away from all this reconciliation jazz. Reconciliation means only one thing - when one side gets enough power then the other side gets reconciled to it."

I don't accept Alinsky's moral cynicism. But his caustic attack on superficial peace-making was useful. It helped some of us realize that sometimes to take the moral imperative of Jesus Christ seriously means lifting up the sword of division.

Perhaps the trouble-making role of Jesus is summed up in the observation that he demands of each of us an act of commitment. "Either you are with me," he says, "or you are against me." As another old song from the forties put it, "Don't mess with Mr. In-Between."

Jesus Christ comes as a troublemaker. No one understood this better than Dostoyevsky in his marvelous tale of The Grand Inquisitor.

Jesus appears on the streets of Spain during the most dread days of the inquisition there. Immediately the Grand Inquisitor recognizes him and asks:

"Why then art thou come to hinder us? For thou hast come to hinder us, and thou knowest that.....But tomorrow I shall condemn thee and burn thee at the stake as the worst of heretics."

He will do this, he explains, for the sake of the people, out of concern for their peace of mind. For if he allowed Jesus to go free, the Lord would only upset that beautiful system of spiritual security set up by the church, a system in which the agony of personal decision is no longer necessary.

Peace-maker and trouble-maker. How do we reconcile these two faces of Christ? Only when we learn that peace does not come by ignoring the evil or smoothing over the wrong. Only when we see that shalom is itself the power that goes into battle for the sake of justice, righteousness and truth, only when we take to heart what Paul Hammer notes in Jesus' message about peace, that peace is not a superficial maintaining of the status quo, but a wholeness that is won out of struggle and change.

There are not two faces to Christ: there is only one. The person who weeps over the city of Jerusalem, saying, "Would that you knew the things that make for peace!" is the same person who an hour later creates a commotion among the money-changers. Only when the Temple is cleansed can shalom come to this town. Only when our hearts are purged can peace come to the spirit within. As we learn to see that in the two faces of Christ there is really only one face, so shall we come to understand in depth the song of the angels:

"Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased."