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Creed, Paul

Reflection Paper  
on  
*“Jesus the King - Understanding the Life and  
Death of The Son of God”*  
by  
Timothy Keller  
  
(Or *“The Jesus of My Youth vs. the Jesus of the Truth”*)

I have known Jesus my entire life. Our Catholic church was about three-quarters of a mile

to the right, my Catholic grammar school roughly a quarter of a mile to the left. These were the center of communal life for most people in my little town of Westport, Massachusetts. It was a different time then; stores were closed on Sundays, you could leave your doors unlocked, and everyone attended the Booster Club's spaghetti supper and raffle. Christmas was always celebrated with life-size Nativity scenes all over town - without angry protest marches.

The parish priests, Fr. Rene and Father Tim, would stop by periodically with Newport Creamery buttercrunch ice cream on a Sunday evening, just before The Sonny and Cher Show, to visit and chat. My mom and I sang in the choir and the choir director was my first piano teacher. My experience with Jesus and His people was sweet, pleasant and non-threatening.

I took First Communion at seven, and, while perplexed at the concept of the "transubstantiation", I was told it was the truth by people who loved me and who were obviously closer to God than I was, so, who was I to question? This was the era of "Jesus Christ Superstar" and "Godspell"; this pop version of Jesus was a big hit, and it helped make my little world a more comfortable, safe and happy place.

Growing up within this milieu I rarely, if ever, came across anyone of another faith or even denomination. When changing channels (all 4 of them) on television, and the occasional televangelist popped up, I heard about being a soldier for Jesus and the righteous wrath of God. Sometimes a black-haired septuagenarian would belt out non-Catholic hymns about the battle belonging to the Lord or how God is a mighty fortress. They were foreign to me and did not resonate. (Once, in the TV Guide I saw a listing for the ABC Monday Night Movie called "The Bishop's Wife" with David Niven and Cary Grant. I was totally perplexed. Bishops can't marry! They're celibate, for God's sake...literally!)

I knew Him as the Prince of Peace who turned the other cheek, suffered the little children

to come unto Him, and resided most of the time in the always-lit tabernacle just to the right of the folk group. I was taught all the stories: The Three Wise Men, The Prodigal Son, The Good Samaritan, The Wedding at Cana, and, of course, Overturning the Money Changers' Tables in the Temple. Since I was taught these from early childhood, I never questioned these offbeat stories. I never saw anything strange about why Jesus got so darned mad at the businessmen in His church that he wrecked the whole place, or why folks would even want to try and push a camel through the eye of a needle.

As part of my graduation requirement from Bishop Stang High School (yes, Catholic schools my entire youth) I attended a retreat at LaSalette Shrine, the sister shrine to the sacred spot of the same name in the French Alps where Our Lady appeared to two small children and gave them a message of hope. During this retreat I had a powerful encounter with Jesus, which awoke in me the idea of becoming a priest. (A decision I obviously did not make, as displayed by my wife of 25 years and four children). While my relationship with Jesus sustained me and shaped my worldview from youth to young man, it wasn't until my then new wife became born again - which, not so incidentally, nearly ended our marriage - and my own new-birth six months later, that I began to get the picture of who this Jesus really might be.

Reading "Jesus the King" not only brought back the memory of when I met Him (again), but it also reminded me of the realization that while, yes, Jesus is the Prince of Peace, He is also the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and those titles carry with them a fierceness that had been absent from the Jesus of my youth. Please don't misunderstand my meaning; this is by no means an indictment of my Catholic upbringing or the somewhat "After-School Special" version of Jesus I was shown. As with most things in life, you get out of them what you put in; if I had asked more questions, I'm sure there would have been deeper, more profound answers offered to

me.

Jesus seemed comfortable and that was very, well, comfortable. I was a chubby, smart outcast who was occasionally bullied and heckled, and so having a nice-guy Jesus was what I craved and, subsequently, received. As I've stated, I've never NOT known of Him, so the idea that Jesus broke traditions left and right in His deep desire to free people from bondage didn't occur to me. God was my God and He could be your God, too, if you went to church every Sunday and took communion. (But only if you'd gone to confession sometime in the previous two weeks and had been forgiven of all your sins up to that point; another feature of the faith I appreciated, but never fully comprehended).

The Hebrew notion of messiah, that he would be the anointed one that would come to rescue the Chosen people, a warrior king who would come in glory to rule Israel, never made much of an impression on me. I saw myself as God's child, Jesus' brother. He was MY God. So the juxtaposition of the traditional Jewish view of the messiah with what I had learned - that He rode into Jerusalem on an ass (which always got a chuckle from the boys in class), that He brought peace and gentleness, that He suffered apparent defeat at the hands of Pilate, was crucified, died, was buried and rose again, all for my sins - well, these were all just facts *everybody* knew, right?

“As Adam and Eve were banished from the sanctuary of God, they turned around and saw ‘a flaming sword flashing back and forth’” (T. Keller, *Jesus the King* pg. 172). I had learned of the garden of course, but this part was never emphasized. “The flaming sword is the sword of eternal justice...nobody can get back into the presence of God unless they go under the sword, unless they pay for the wrong that has been done...And if no one can survive the sword, then how will we ever get back into the presence of God?” (Keller, *Jesus the King* pg. 172). I hadn't

realized there was a time when we weren't in the presence of God, when no one but the Jews were able to enter His presence and then only through the high priest. Gentiles didn't have that chance to be reconciled with God at this point. Then, in walks Jesus, and this carpenter's son loses His *joie de vivre* right there in the area just inside the temple door, the court of the Gentiles - the *ethne*, or "nations" - the only part of the temple where non-Jews were allowed. All peoples, Jews and Gentiles alike, were able to witness the buying and selling and crass commercialism of this sanctum-turned-marketplace. Now it makes some sense; Jesus was clearing the temple *for the Gentiles*. In other words, for me. His death under the sword allows us to enter back into God's presence. "When Jesus went under the sword, it broke His body, but it also broke itself... the death of Death itself in the death of Christ" (T. Keller, *Jesus the King* pg. 174). The Stations of the Cross, stained-glass depictions of His miracles, parables, trial, death, resurrection take on a much deeper meaning; He went through all this to let me back into the garden, and into His family. I was God's orphan all my life and never knew it. I thought I was like Ramesses, the rightful son of a king. As it turns out, I was more like Moses. Adopted into a kingdom twice: once believing it was my birthright, and then realizing I was adopted and accepted by a Father even greater than the King I thought I knew.

In *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Jesus sings in the showstopper *Gethsemane*:

*Take this cup away from me / For I don't want to taste its poison*

*Feel it burn me / I have changed / I'm not as sure as when we started*

In the same song, Jesus looks up to God and sings, "I'm scared to finish what we started. What *You* started. *I* didn't start it." And that's how Jesus' relationship with God is portrayed in the

hippie musical: *You wanted this. I'm Your puppet. This is Your fault. Get me out of this.* I believed that idea as a child and sang it as a youth. In Isaiah 51:22 it is written, "The cup that made you stagger...the goblet of My wrath." Here you may say, "I don't like the idea of the wrath of God. I want a God of love" (Keller, pg. 193). And neither did I want the wrathful God. So, I developed this take on it: Jesus knew He was going to be risen, so, the betrayal by Judas, the sweating drops like blood in the garden, crying out in anguish from the cross, etc., that was part of the "God act." Yes, He suffered excruciating pain during His scourging and then His crucifixion, but He was only moments away from His eternal glory, so, it was really a display for our benefit. When I began to *really* get to know Him and He began to reveal His true nature to me, I realized how misguided this take on "the cup of wrath" really was. Jesus's suffering, physically and spiritually, was real and horrifying. Jesus suffered the full force of His Father's wrath for our sake. Yet, it is not in spite of God's love but *because* of it that He shows wrath. I remember once when my son Jack was three and a child pushed him down on the playground for apparently no reason; just to be mean was my conclusion. I was ready to thrash that kid. I mean, I started thinking of which Biblical-style plague I could reign down on this tiny demon from hell! I laughed at myself and thought, "If I'm this angry at some innocent little jerk - I mean, child - for simply pushing my son, how much more angry does God get when His children destroy each other, and destroy themselves?" If someone harms one you love and you *don't* get angry, then you don't care. God gets angry because He loves. "When we think of God's wrath, we usually think of God's justice, and that is right...but we don't ponder how much His anger is also a function of His love and goodness...if you don't believe in a God of wrath, you have no idea of your value...the God of the Bible who, because He's angry at evil must go to the cross, absorb the debt, pay the ransom, and suffer immense torment. How valuable are you to the God of the

Bible? Valuable enough that He would go to these depths for you” (Keller, pg. 194).

The mild Jesus I had viewed through the rose-stained-glass-colored glasses of my youth was truly not the sweet, gentle victim that was forced against His meek will to suffer for our good at the whim of this angry God, this wrathful “transcendental Shylock, demanding His pound of flesh” (Tony Campolo - *It’s Friday, but Sunday’s Coming!*). Jesus is the fierce God who loves us with such “furious longing” (Brennan Manning - *The Furious Longing of God*) that He suffers with us through our self-destruction, forgives us our destruction of others, welcomes us into His family, and extends His hand to us freely, even when it means it will be pierced by our own ignorance of His amazing love.