

# The difference of Jesus and the difference it makes

*This is the first in a series of articles encouraging evangelization in the Archdiocese of Chicago.*

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**T**he most basic content of evangelization is the breathtaking assertion that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. From this assertion flows another equally astounding bit of good news: Jesus is who he said he was.

Though it is all the vogue in academic circles today to say that Jesus was put to death because he befriended the marginalized or upset the social conventions of his time, the fact is that he was executed because he consistently spoke and acted in the very person of God. The most basic charge against Jesus was not political insurrection but blasphemy. What impressed the first Christians to a life-changing degree was how the resurrection validated the extraordinary claims of Jesus concerning himself.

But what precisely were these claims? Before healing the paralyzed man, Jesus said matter-of-factly, “my son, your sins are forgiven.” Shocked, the Pharisees responded, “how could this man say such a thing? Only God can forgive sins.” They were right, of course, which is the whole point.

If you had hurt me, I could with some legitimacy offer you my personal forgiveness; but if someone else had harmed you, I could scarcely offer that person my forgiveness for his sin against you. The only way that such a statement could be anything but blasphemous would be if I were the one who is offended in every sin, only if I were God. And this is just what the Pharisees correctly intuited.

In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus makes the jaw-dropping announcement: “unless you love me more than your mother and your father, more than your very life, you are not worthy of me.” At the limit, we could imagine a religious leader or founder saying something like, “you must love God more than your very life,” or perhaps, “you should reverence my ideas more than you do your father or mother.” But Jesus said that he himself must be loved above even the greatest values in this world, implying thereby that his person is itself the highest Good. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus ecstatically declared, “heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall never pass away.”

Who could coherently utter such a statement except the one who is himself the very incarnation of the eternal Word of God?

Having considered these statements of Jesus, there is, of course, a legitimate option that remains, namely, that he was mad, that he was a dangerous blasphemer. Let’s face it: lunatic asylums are filled with people who think they are God. And this is precisely what Jesus’ enemies concluded and why they hounded him to his death. What Jesus’ claims about himself rule out—as C.S. Lewis so clearly saw—is the bland middle position that, though he isn’t divine, he is a kindly and wise ethical teacher, one inspiring religious figure among many. If he isn’t who he says he is, he isn’t admirable at all, and this is why Jesus, more than any other of the religious founders, compels a choice.

The Buddha claimed to have found a spiritually liberating path; but Jesus said, “I am the way;” Mohammed could say that, through him, the final divine truth had been communicated to the world, but Jesus said, “I am the truth;” Confucius could maintain that he had discovered a new and uplifting form of life, but Jesus said, “I am the life.” Neither the Buddha, nor Mohammed, nor Confucius, nor Moses ever claimed to be God—and this is to their infinite credit. But Jesus did, and therefore, we have to decide: are we with him or against him?

The classical apologetic tradition put it this way: “aut Deus, aut malus homo” (either he is God or he is a bad man). The first Christians saw that God the Father had made the choice clear in raising Jesus from the dead, and it was this divine ratification that they presented as good news to the world.

St. Paul summed up the Gospel in the deceptively simple declaration “Jesus is Lord.” We have become so accustomed to this turn of phrase that we might miss its radicality. “Lord” (Elohim) is the title used throughout the Old Testament to refer to God, the one whose proper name cannot be spoken. Utterly basic to the ancient Jewish consciousness is that nothing here below—no country, no leader, no king, no culture—is God and that idolatry in all its forms must, consequently, be avoided.

Paul, trained at the feet of one of the leading rabbis of his time, was steeped in that tradition. That he could blithely identify the man Jesus from Nazareth as “Lord” reveals, therefore, all of the poetry and challenge of the Christian faith.

Do you believe that Jesus is God? If you don’t, you’re not a Christian. If you do, you must make Jesus Christ the Lord of your life, and you must declare him in season and out. You must, in a word, evangelize.

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