

The Ultra Terrestrial

There has always been in Christian theology a strong emphasis on the Second Coming of Christ. Suppose he were to come again, in our time. Do you think you would recognize him? God, in his marvelous and mysterious ways, might well use another disguise for Christ. 1900 years ago God revealed himself through the solitary figure of a peasant carpenter in Palestine. But he could come in a different guise. Think of what some of those could be:

-What if he came to Madison in the guise of a street-cleaner, or trash collector? Would you recognize him?

-What if he came as a paraplegic in a wheelchair? Would you recognize him?

-What if he came as a clown in a circus? Would you be too shocked and offended to recognize him?

-What if he came as a clerk at the checkout counter of a super market? Would you find that fitting, so that you could recognize him?

-What if he came as a chimney sweep, albeit with the dress of evening clothes and top hat, but with smudges on his face and ~~smudges~~ ^{soot} on his ~~clothes~~ ^{shoulders?} Would you recognize him?

-Now, perhaps most troublesome of all: suppose God in the twentieth century wanted to represent the divine nature in the person of a woman? God could do that, you know, because God is all-powerful. Would you recognize her as God's Daughter?

Before you dismiss the possibility that God could appear in some unexpected form to you, imagine this, as well: As the light of day is dimming and fading into dusk, you are walking through the Arboretum. Suddenly you hear a strange, mystifying noise, a kind of whirring, buzzing sound. You look up in the dim light ~~to~~ and there you see a huge lighted object, round and glowing like a Christmas tree decoration, gently and softly sinking to the ground among the trees. Frightened you hide as you watch with bated breath. A stairway opens underneath, just as you have seen the stairways open on an

airliner. It is lowered to the ground, a warm, ~~extra~~ ^{ecyie} glow flood of light falling upon the place ~~xxxxxx~~ beneath. Eventually you see a figure moving, a ~~xxxxxx~~ figure like you have never seen before in all of your life, or in your wildest imagination. You cannot believe your eyes! Then ~~xxx~~ it dawns on your consciousness that you are looking at a creature from outer space, an Extra Terrestrial, if you please. Meaning, something, or someone ~~xxx~~ not of this planet Earth.

Is this no more than science fiction? Or is it not possible that in the unimaginable reaches and immensities of the universe, God, our God, has created other beings who could reach us on our little planet, just as we are probing the universe for possible evidences of life as we know it? Now take a big leap in your imagination: in your most rational musing could you suppose that God, in his boundless greatness, could send us Christ from Somewhere Out There? Yes, Christ, not as a Terrestrial, but as an Extra-Terrestrial! Yes, that landing of a strange object in the Arboretum could be the coming of Christ, again. Would that be any more absurd to you than the Christ who was born in an animal stable so many years ago? *Wouldn't it make sense that since earthlings have not accepted one of their own, that God would send an Extra-Terrestrial?* Check your emotions: would you be frightened? Would you welcome him?

What if this new Visitor from God came speaking words like these:

- "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Blessed are the poor? Haven't you always thought of the poor as being damned or cursed?

- "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." The meek inherit the earth? I always thought it was the strong and powerful who inherit the earth. What nonsense!

- "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Who wants to be persecuted, for anything?

- "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal." What kind of a dummy would that make me? I work hard all day to feed and house my family and put my children through school.

Isn't that how you survive in this world?

-~~"Do not resist~~ ~~with~~ one who is evil. But if someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if any one would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to him who begs from you, and do not refuse him who would borrow from you." (Matt. 5:39-42) That is the dumbest collection of insanities I have ever heard. The guy who said those things must be from Outer Space!"

Yes, he's from Outer Space! So you react ~~with~~ in shock and disgust. This man is crazy! He's from Somewhere Else! We have to get rid of him! BUT WAIT A BIG MINUTE: Have you forgotten that the man who said all of those things, and many more just as troubling, was not from Outer Space, but that he came as an earthling? Of course the Bible makes it sound as though he was from SOMEWHERE ELSE. Listen to what the Letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament says of this man: "

In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers, by the prophets; but in these ~~latter~~ last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom ~~the~~ also he created the world. He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has obtained is more excellent than theirs. (Heb. 1:14, RSV)

Doesn't that sound like the description of an Extra-Terrestrial, meaning that he did not come from this earth? BUT WAIT A MINUTE, AGAIN: In that same Letter to the Hebrews there is another description of this man. Here we read:

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning. (Heb. 4:14,15, RSV)

If he is able to sympathize with our weaknesses because he has in every respect been tempted as we are, wouldn't you have to say that he is an EARTHLING, A TERRESTRIAL?

Few would doubt that what I am saying this morning has been prompted by the big hit movie of this past summer, "E.T." Most of you have seen this

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engrossing film. It tells of a space ship from Somewhere that has landed in a California forest at night, and how it left behind one little creature when it was forced to leave hurriedly. The little creature is discovered by a group of children, and they come to love and care for him. He "is vaguely human in appearance, with eyes and arms and elongated hands and fingers, with very short legs, an enormous head, and an extensible neck. His skin is sort of greenish hide. He chest glows when he is frightened; his fingertips glow when he is exercising his special power. From the start he is shown to be very far from a threat or monster: he is vulnerable, unaggressive, and frightened." (Stanley Kauffmann in New Republic, July 5, 1982, p. 26)

I must confess that I was deeply moved by this film. In a world where it is so difficult for us to accept people who look differently and act differently from us, I guess I was overwhelmed to be caught up in a story in which little children and a strange creature from Out There could come to love each other. And when E.T. at the end was preparing to go back on the space ship which had returned for him, and as he and the children said goodbye, I wept. I was embarrassed and in the dark theater ~~XXXXXXXX~~ shaded my eyes so the people sitting next to me would not see. Why did I cry? I think I cried because this science fiction story made me think about Christ.

Stanley Kauffmann, a tough old movie critic, in writing of "E.T." says:

I once read a ~~story~~ short story - by Ben Hecht, I think - in which Jesus looks down on Hollywood from on high and sees that a film is being made about him. For whatever reason, Jesus secretly takes the place of the actor portraying him and brings off the miracles without the help of special-effects men. The only way that Spielberg's religious films (as I'd call them) could move from centering on worship of film to centering on the film's subject would be if the equivalent happened here - if, for instance, an actual E.T. had substituted for the ingenious puppet that represents him. But if that happened, we'd probably have had word of it by now.
(Ibid. p.27)

Well, I want to say this morning ~~that~~ that in the case of Christ we have heard of it, and that Christ is no puppet, and no Extra Terrestrial. Christ is indeed a Terrestrial, he is of the earth as we are of the earth, but he is more than we. He is the ULTRA-TERRESTRIAL. The word "ultra" means "beyond what is usual, or ordinary, or established." Christ is a Terrestrial,

all right, but he ~~max~~ goes beyond what is usual, ordinary, or established. Though he may seem to be Extra-Terrestrial because he has gone so far beyond us, but he is able "to sympathize with our weaknesses, (because) (He is) One who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning." Because he is Terrestrial, however ultra, he is believable, and followable, and saving in his presence.

The late Southern Baptist preacher, Carlyle Marney, once wrote of what he saw as a major prob~~lem~~ for many Christians: "For 200 years Jesus has been kept so godlike, so divine, that he has not been relevant. . . .Religion in the south has kept Jesus in the heavens. Because if ever he gets in our alley, we'll have to be like him, and that'll make us clean it up. My whole ministry has been given to the proclamation that Jesus was human?" (Christian Century, Oct. 4, 1978, p. 920) He may be ultra-human, going way beyond our frail moral and spiritual capacities, but he is terrestrial and he is a savior.

John Shea, an imaginative Roman Catholic theologian and poet, has composed "A Prayer to the God Who Fell From Heaven:"

If you had stayed
tightfisted in the sky
and watched us thrash
with all the patience of a pipe smoker,
I would pray
like a golden bullet
aimed at your heart.
But the story says
you cried
and so heavy was the tear
you fell with it to earth
where like a baritone in a bar
it is never time to go home.
So you move among us
twisting every straight line
into Picasso,
stealing kisses from pinched lips,
holding our hand in the dark.
So now when I pray
I sit and turn my mind
like a television knob
till you are there
with your large, open hands
spreading my life before me
like a Sunday tablecloth
and pulling up a chair yourself
for ~~me~~ by now
the secret is out.
You are home. (from The God Who Fell From Heaven, p. 90)

Yes, the truth is out, that Christ came from God, not in a spaceship, or on a cloud of glory, but in a manger, and that this world is his Home.

I know not how that Bethlehem's babe

Could in the Godhead be;

I only know the manger child

Has brought God's life to me.

Last summer Betty and I were driving along the Pennsylvania Turnpike when we came up behind a North American Van Lines truck carrying a huge load of furniture. Painted on the back door of the van was a picture of the famous King Tut. And then these words: "We moved the treasures of a ~~king~~ King." Is it too much for me to remind you today that we, the Church of Christ, are something like a ship, if not in space, then on the seas of this earth. As St. Paul reminded us, "We have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us." (II Cor. 4:7, RSV) If the Church is a moving force in this world, and if we as members are those who help it move, then can we say: "WE MOVED THE TREASURES OF A KING." He is of this world, earthy; he is an ~~ULTRA~~ Terrestrial, and because he has first moved us, we move him throughout the world.