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## **ROOTED AND GROUNDED (II)--reprinted**

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The greatest oracle of the Word of God from the greatest of the prophetic books, standing right at the center of the Old Testament, gathers all this up: "For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater; so shall my Word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: It shall not return to me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it." The Word of God caused breath to come into us; we were given our soul in a garden; and we have this oracle of Isaiah. Even more, we have our Lord's parable of the sower and the seed, and we remember that moment where in another garden very early in the morning our nature was restored whole to God again. And therefore, along with our recovery of the sense of space, of our earth and all that it means, has come the recovery of our sense of Jesus, in the wholeness of his concrete self and person, where he lived and what he said and how he taught. Jesus is not simply, as Bultmann would have it, "the man on the cross". He is a most particular man on his own cross, and we are led once again back to the question which is oldest and most crucial of all: "What think ye of Christ? Whose son is He?" This was Jesus' own way of asking his first disciples whether they thought he was the Christ. They did, and then they wondered. We say we think so, but no doubt we wonder. As we read something like Jesus' parable of the sower and the seed I question whether or not Bultmann is right to say that such a story is only an echo in our minds of something once vivid, but now no longer real to us. Is it merely a part of faith kept alive by custom and habit, but not by conviction and commitment? Does it still function powerfully in our deepest imagination?

Just as all the great prophets are poets, so too are all the great poets prophets in some secondary way. The ebbing of faith is not something characteristic only of our own day. Matthew Arnold knew it more than a hundred years ago.

The Sea of Faith

Was once, too, at the full, and 'round

earth's shore

Lay like the fold of a bright girdle

furl'd.

But now I only hear

Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,

Retreating, to the breath of the night-

wind,

Down the vast edges drear,

And naked shingles of the world.

The basic question remains: how many compromises must we make with our so-called "modern minds" to live with the story of a man born in the country, killed in the city, and raised from the dead in a garden? Even more important, what does each one of us make of this and of the one who spoke such things as the parable of the sower and the seed?

I suppose it is inevitable and natural that different parts of our Lord's life and character appeal to different individuals, and that the most cherished image of him in one generation may become the scandal of another. Think of some of the images we have of him, all of them verifiable in the New Testament: Jesus crucified; the Word made flesh; the friend of publicans and sinners; the preacher of the sermon on the mount; the lover of the brethren; the Son of man who has no place to call his own; the Messiah; the divine conqueror of death; the sublime High Priest; the carpenter; the prophet; the cleanser of the temple; the one who forgives sins; the one who taught us how to pray; the good shepherd. All of these (and how many more?) are figures and names of Christ. He is in reality the hero with a thousand faces.

In our own time, only fifty years after the Galilean peasant was declared irrelevant for sophisticated, urban man-come-of-age, the Jesus who uttered the parable of the sower and the seed is once again the man whose image we cherish: the custodian of the garden; the patron saint and primary author of "ecology"; the friend of the earth and the Lord of the vineyard.

Alice Meynall wrote in her poem "Christ in the Universe".

These abide: the signal to a maid;

The lesson; and the young man

crucified.

St. Paul told his Corinthian converts that he was determined to know nothing among them save "Jesus Christ and him crucified." So be it, and doubtless St. Paul had a reason for claiming what seems to us an excessive and over-strained exclusiveness. His attempts at integrating the gospel with what we call "natural theology" had roused curiosity at

Athens and nothing more. But on the other side of the story we still commemorate the feast of the purification of the blessed Virgin Mary, when her infant son was presented in the temple in accordance with the ancient and traditional rites and ceremonies of his people. We know also that she tasted the water made wine by her Son at the marriage in Cana, and that she kept all the things and sayings about him and pondered them in her heart. If St. Paul stands somehow, as we do, outside the immediacy of Jesus' actual life, and sees him chiefly in the Passion and Resurrection, Jesus' blessed Mother reminds us of other realities about him — that he had a home, and home-ties; that he is no abstraction, but a concrete, individual person; that there is something very endearing and very simple and very winsome in our Saviour. Dr. Stewart, the wonderful and saintly teacher of theology at General Seminary fifty years ago used to say: "How natural that the supernatural should act naturally."

I think of this so often when we celebrate Holy Communion. This is where we are brought inexorably to the roots of Jesus' sensibility. The act by which he himself bids us remember him is the basic and necessary act of all — eating and drinking. We use the ordinary materials of wheat and grapes, transformed by human skill and labor into bread and wine; which is evidence of at least some good stewardship of our divinely-given inheritance of the earth. So we offer what the world grows and what we have made of it, all most natural, to find it blessed and transformed into our spiritual food and drink, the body and blood of the Lord, the seal and the wonder of our souls. In this the natural and the supernatural behave "naturally".

Jesus is inexhaustible in the New Testament. It is all there in him, not to be diminished. He has shown the power to enrich himself marvelously and continuously in all the experience of all the succeeding centuries of his Church since his own day. It is all there in him — the child born from the angelic signal to a maiden, conceived by the Holy Ghost; the Son of Man, the very form itself of what it means to be a human being, in his teaching, in his healings, in his incomparable sayings and parables; on his cross, the "one, full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice" for all the whole world's sins. It is all there in Jesus, the single person; and that person is here with us still, living and risen and ascended, triumphant over death, for us to know and worship, to love and to enjoy, in all his fullness and wonder, forever.

**The Rev'd. William H. Ralston, Jr.**



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