

'Who are you?': Contemplating who Christ is can help us smash the idols in our lives



When I was young – a little younger than my youngest son, Henry, who will soon turn 13 – I somehow became enamored of the idea that the Son of God became man so that God could experience what we experience in our mortal bodies every day, and thus understand us. Had I been more than a dozen years old, such musings might have pulled me toward heresy; at the time, they filled me with wonder at the thought that a perfect God would take on imperfection in order to love us all the more. That idea faded as it slowly dawned on me that, in his omniscience, God already understood us perfectly, and the Incarnation could add nothing to his knowledge, let alone to his love.

Forty years later, in the midst of our 40-day pilgrimage of prayer and fasting on the road to Calvary and, beyond it, to the empty tomb, this memory came flooding back during a recent Holy Hour as I read John 8:25: “So they said to him, ‘Who are you?’”

It’s all too easy for us to see the Jews who ask Christ such questions as merely hardhearted, full of pride, scornfully rejecting the God made man standing right there before them. Surely, we think, if we had been there, we would have recognized Christ for who he is. That such certainty echoes the prayer of the Pharisee (“O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity”) seems never to cross our mind.

But when I read that question – “Who are you?” – the other morning, I heard in those words a tone of amazement and wonder: not “Who are you (to be talking to us this way)?” but

“Who ARE you?”

In “Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry,” the philosopher Owen Barfield, friend of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, reminds us that the entire history of the Jewish people, “from Exodus onward,” is “the tale of their long struggle against [idolatry], their repeated lapses and their final victory.” Alone among the nations, Israel rejected idols, not out of a rejection of religion, but as an imperative of the religion that lay at the heart of their identity as a people.

Yes, they fell occasionally, most famously in the episode of the golden calf, just as Moses, at the end of his own 40 days of fasting and prayer, was preparing to bind Israel to the Lord in an unending covenant. But by the time of Christ, the battle had been won. The God of Israel was not made of gold and silver, wood and clay; he was pure spirit, wholly other, ineffable, known by his holy name that could be uttered only by his high priest, and only in the Holy of Holies: I AM WHO I AM.

And yet here, standing before them, was a man – “the carpenter’s son” – whose voice of truth shook their very souls. “Who ARE you?” they asked, both dreading and longing for his reply: “When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I AM, and that I do nothing on my own, but I say only what the Father taught me. The one who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, because I always do what is pleasing to him.”

The Son of God did not become man so that God could understand us and love us all the more; he became man so that we could approach the Lord, the great I AM, and love him. We needed Christ, not just to atone for our sins, but to smash the last remaining idol that the Jewish people had built and that, 2,000 years later, we continue to build in our minds: the idea that there is an unbridgeable gulf between man and God.

“Who are you?” they asked. “I AM,” he replied. And “Because he spoke this way, many came to believe in him.”

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