

The Christ Lecture

The Christian Self-understanding of Death and Resurrection

Genuine Humanness is Dependent upon Symbols

We are cripples at being genuine human beings before one another. You and I can be pigs without the use of symbols, but to be persons we are utterly and completely dependent upon symbols that mediate our deeps. For example, I have resorted to an ancient formula: “Grace be unto you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.”

Prologue I. You must understand that you alone can live your own life. My friend Luther stood in his pulpit one day and said something like this to his people: “When I got born-ned, you were not there. When you got born-ned, I was not there. When you get die-ded, I’ll not be there, and when I get die-ded, you’ll not be there. Everyone of us must do our own getting born and getting died utterly alone, because everyone of us has to live our own life.

Prologue II. St. Paul once said to all of creation: “As I follow Christ, as I live an authentic existence, so you must follow my pattern and live an authentic existence. As I reflect Christ,” he said, “you reflect me.” That, I wish to say to you, is exactly my stance. As I follow Christ, you follow me. As I grow with authenticity and integrity, you follow me. That’s what I mean to say to the world, that everyone must do his or her own living and his or her own dying. Alone.

Prologue III has to do with what we’re doing here. But before I start, I have poetry which D. H. Lawrence and I wrote together for you. He never actually produced these things I produce out here, so we’re a team.

As we live . . .

I wish I were an actor, rather than a ham [laughter], but I tell you, words just fascinate me. Have you ever noticed those good four-letter Anglo-Saxon words have whole universes in them? You have? Oh, I didn't think that you were that kind of a girl [laughter]. It's that word "live." How do we say it in such a way that those four letters, you know, just breathe meaning? This is one way:

As we live, we are the transmitters of life.
And when we fail to transmit life, life fails to flow through us.

That is a part of the mystery of sex, it is a flow onwards.
Sexless people transmit nothing.

And if, as we work, we can transmit life into our work,
life, still more life, rushes into us to compensate, to be ready
and we . . . [revel at life] through the days.

Even if it is a woman making an apple dumpling, or a man a stool,
if life goes into the pudding, good is the pudding,
good is the stool,
content is the woman, with fresh life rippling in to her,
content is the man.

Give, and it shall be given unto you
is still the truth about life.
But giving life is not so easy.
It doesn't mean handing it out to some mean fool,
or letting the living dead eat you up.
It means kindling the life-quality where it was not,
even if it's only in the whiteness of a washed pocket handkerchief.
(“We Are Transmitters,” *The Complete Poems* . . . , p. 449)

You like that poem? Wouldn't you like to have that power? Every time you moved your hand to touch another being, a new life they never dreamed of – well, you've got to be *alive* to do that. So unstop those ears. Unblock that tongue.

I love poetry, don't you? Another friend, this one named John, but I don't know his last name. He and I wrote a little bit of poetry that I want to read next.

Sometime later came one of the Jewish feast-days and [Joshua] went up to Jerusalem. There is in Jerusalem near the sheep-gate a pool surrounded by five arches. . . . Under these arches a great many sick people were in the habit of lying; some of them were blind, some lame, and some had withered limbs. (They used to wait there for the “moving of the water,” for at certain times an angel used to come down into the pool and disturb the water, and then the first person who stepped into the water after the disturbance would be healed of whatever he was suffering from.) One particular man had been there ill for thirty-eight years. When [Joshua] saw him lying there on his back, knowing that he had been there for a long time, he said to him, “Do you want to get well again?” [long pause]

“Sir,” replied the sick man, “I just haven't got anybody to put me into the pool when the water is all stirred up. While I'm trying to get there somebody else gets down into the water first.”

“Get up,” said [Joshua], “pick up your [life] and walk!” (Jn. 5:1-8, JBP)

The Christ Event

I want to deal first with the Christ Event, and second with the Christ Story, and third with the Christ Drama. Yesterday I was attempting to talk about life in terms of what I call the edge of life. And I came at that in terms of the two ways in which anyone meets it, and that's in terms of the overwhelming emptiness of life, and then the overwhelming fullness of life.

Let this little circle represent all of those structures of the civilizing process in which we find ourselves.

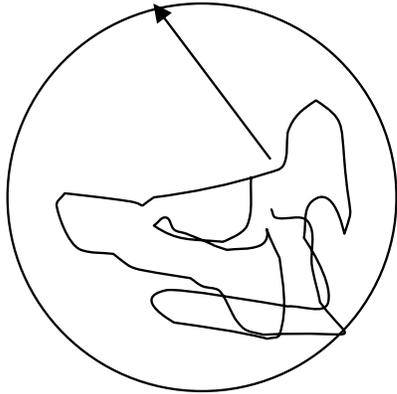


Figure 1-1: *The Edge of our Lives*

Yesterday I talked about that life situation wherein you and I get shoved to the very edge of life. Within this circle there are all kinds of complexes, or little games. The person, who knows what you and I know, knows that everyone lives by faith in some god, in something that bestows significance on life. If it isn't Mama, then it's Goldwater or Liberalism. And if it isn't Liberalism, it's the Methodist Church. And if it isn't the Methodist Church, it's something else.

Fifty years ago, people raised the question as to whether or not there's a God. That kind of a question is as anachronistic as anything can be. You can always spot a person who's either fleeing from life, or who is naïve when he or she raises the question Is there a God? The kind of a universe in which you can raise that question hasn't existed for a long time. The problem in the spirit of humans today is that we're aware that there are so damn many gods we don't know what to do with them. That's our problem. Therefore, the spirit question of life

is Which god is God? Which God am I going to get myself born before and get myself died before? Which one of the not-me-nesses in life am I finally going to live my life before? That's the question, not whether there's a God.

Finally, all other gods fail. Do you remember that time when Mama collapsed off of the pedestal for you, or hasn't she yet? I can remember the time when it happened for me. Mama sent me to the door to tell somebody who was knocking that she wasn't home. And it finally dawned on me, "Mama's a liar! Waaaaa!"

This is an amazing thing when the god called Mama cracks. She is delivered from the phony universe we stuck her in, because, mark you, my Mama was a creature, not a god. The worms got Mama like they got Plato and Kant. When this "Waaaaa!" happens, then you've got a genuine hunk of flesh and blood you can relate to, called Mama.

It doesn't always happen so dramatically. Being an upright Methodist clergyman, to say nothing of having been conditioned in a moralistic type of childhood, I used to hide from my Mama that I smoked. And it became finally ridiculous, because Mama knew that I smoked, and I knew that I smoked, and I knew that Mama knew that I smoked, and Mama knew that I knew that she knew that I smoked. I was going along one day driving Mama in the car, and I said to myself it's now or never.

"Mama, you're pretty old aren't you?"

"Yes, son."

"You're not going to live too much longer, are you?"

And she said, "Well, likely not."

I said, "Isn't it time you and I really become human beings before one another?"

She looked at me, you know. She never knows what to expect from me. So I said, "Now, over in that glove compartment are my cigarettes. I think you ought to be the one to hand them to me."

She looked at me seriously and then reached over and got them. I tell you, Mama and I were new people after that.

Do you grasp what I'm saying? Shall I rehearse the death of another god? When you finally become aware that the Methodist Church wasn't always here, and will not always be here, and when you see that, it's already gone. It's already gone. It can no longer be the meaning of your life. The cr-aa-ck has taken

place. The pedestal is broken. And when you see that the United States of America wasn't always here and isn't always going to be here, it's already gone. Cr-aa-ck!

Which is to say that I'm working up here to the edge of this circle. You see, everything that is, is in that same predicament. Everything passes away. Even your most favorite theologian passes away. Down at Perkins Theological Seminary, once a year they ought to get all the theologians up on the stage and have them turn sideways, and then strip stark naked before their students, so all can see our pot bellies and our flabby muscles, so they will never take us seriously ever again. We are only human beings that the worms will eat as they have eaten every theologian before us.

That's what I'm talking about by the edge of life where lucidity breaks in. Question: What are you up against? Nobody has ever known what he or she was up against. A student said, "Well, I'm just up against the great question mark. I'm just up against what the hell? I don't know." Any name you put on it, that's it. The great Mystery, huh? And in that awareness you become aware that your basic relationship that constitutes you as a person is the relationship to the great unknowable unknown.

Now, this isn't some kind of doctrine. It's not some kind of philosophy. It's just the way life is. At this point, the only real decision anybody ever had to make is *How are you going to live your life and die your death?* You get but one chance, not two. If I'd been God, I'd have given everybody two times around so they could have played with the first and come back sober for the next one. But you know that's not the way life is.

It's exactly at this point, and only at this point, that the question of God in depth is raised. If you're sitting around here nursing off of Mama, Methodism, Plato, Tillich, Mathews, Goldwater, Kennedy; if you're nursing any of those gods, you have never raised the question of God. Not of G-O-D. And only at the point where the question of God is raised for you is the Christ *word* relevant. The gospel of Jesus Christ has no meaning when you stand anywhere else. But when you stand at the edge of the circle, at the edge of your being, then you become aware of the relevance of what we symbolically call the *word*.

The Event

Let's see if we can ground this in life experience. My wife is literally the wrath of God upon me because she knows where my gizzard is. I mean, if the gizzard in a person is the illusion-making faculty, she knows more about my illusions than anybody in this universe. At times she sticks a knife into my gizzard. That's why she's the wrath of God upon me.

But the wrath of God is always God's love. Not that God's love comes sometimes and his wrath comes sometimes, or his mercy comes after his wrath. No, no, no. His wrath is his mercy. That is, you haven't the slightest chance of being other than who you are until some over-against-ness in life takes you and shakes you till your teeth rattle. Only when you die do you live.

I say my wife is the wrath of God. She's always calling into question my illusions. I remember a student who said that he came home to his wife after having a great theological dialogue over in the library with some of his buddies. He came waddling home in the image of being a really-with-it theologian, only to be met at the door by his frau, who pulled out her hatpin and stuck it into his illusion (POP! like a balloon) as she reminded him he was not a really-with-it theologian but a thirty-minutes-late babysitter.

Do you understand? When these negations move in, sometimes in these negations I am hurled out to the edge where I see the "No" of life. But not always. And especially as I grow more sophisticated and more lucid, it's increasingly hard to get to me. You see, the moment somebody moves in on your life, you have to kill 'em to protect yourself. But there're laws against literally slitting wives' throats – they put you in electric chairs and things like that – so us subtle people, we learn how to destroy and kill with kindness.

I had a group of students out to my house one night, and we were just sitting around, and I was just scintillating all over the place. Lyn, my wife, stood up and started out of the room, saying, "Joseph, I will see you in the kitchen." Now, when Mama – I mean my wife – calls me "Joseph," I feel guilty to begin with. I know I've done something wrong. So, without knowing how I was threatened, I was already sharpening my knives as I moved toward the kitchen. I quickly spoke first, "Lyn, you can't do this to me. Tomorrow I'm their professor. I've got to stand up and be their professor. You can't humiliate me by ordering me around in my house like that."

She said, “Joseph, you know women were given weapons. They’ve used them all their lives and they’re effective. And sooner or later, if you’re going to live with one, you’re going to come to terms with that fact.”

But I have other ways. “Well, I don’t care what I did, you’ve done worse” (laughs). I see that you understand what I’m saying. You understand that when someone destroys your illusions you strike back.

When you are not able to destroy the intrusion in your life, you’re thrown out here (in the circle) to the very edge where you see the collapse of the collapse of the collapse. There you stand utterly naked without any justification, without any excuse for having showed up in history.

The Seizure

It’s at that point that the *word* becomes relevant. This *word*, it came to me in terms of what happened to me. First, I experience it as a seizure. Second, I experience it as an offense. And, third, I experience it as a decision, a deadly decision, I might add. What I mean by that is that in those moments, a word breaks out of my latent memory into my active memory and addresses me. It’s a word like, “Joseph, you’re significant.” Now, mark you, I’m standing there naked as a jaybird. Caught. Unveiled. And that *word* moves in. “Joseph, your life is utterly significant.”

And I say, “Who, me? How could you make that kind of a statement?”

“Your life is utterly significant.”

Wesley said that it was something like this: you carry within your mind an abstract idea that God so loved the world, and that in a situation like this your name appears on that word. It’s like, “Joseph, your life is significant.”

That’s what I mean by “seizure.” It becomes relevant. And as a matter of fact, at this point it becomes the only relevant word. You are filled with the awareness that if that isn’t *the word*, then by god, there isn’t any word! At that moment, you don’t care when that *word* broke into history. It might just as well have come from the braying of a jackass in 1846 on the south slope of the Alps. Do you understand that? At that moment there isn’t any question of who first said that *word*, because that’s the only *word* that can ever have meaning. What Nietzsche saw very clearly is that if that isn’t *the word*, then either spend the rest of your life (and I’m gonna swear real hard because you swear down in your guts when you take this stance) saying, “This Goddamn universe!” Or else you conjure up a new rosy illusion like the characters in “The Iceman Cometh,” in which you pretend that you don’t know what you damn well know, and then the cussing comes out through the form of colitis, ulcers, migraines, tics, eccentricities, slobism. Do you understand what I’m saying? At that point, wherever that *word* came from, it is the lone *word* that has relevance. That’s what I mean by seizure.

The Offense

But there’s a sneakiness in this seizure. Let’s say that here I am seized by that *word* as that which pronounces possibility for my existence. That *word* is the kind of a word that is an utter offense. It strikes you and knocks you outside of yourself so that you are able to see old Joseph over there being seized, and yet here is Joseph seeing Joseph being seized, and seeing that it’s a scandalous seizure. The reason why it’s scandalous is because of intellectual and emotional, emotional and intellectual, insecurity raised to the nth power.

When you are seized, the scandal that causes the gap is first the intellectual scandal of “Who said so?” Now, I’ve already pointed to that in a way. But now you are facing it head-on. Here I am seized with the only *word* that has relevance, and now I want three good reasons. This is what it means to be a rational creature. But you see, at this time, none of this helps. If I say, “Tillich says so!” at this point I know damn well that the worms are going to eat Paul Tillich as well as me.

It doesn’t do any good to say, “My dear friend Luther says so!” Because, hell, Luther, he got eaten too. It doesn’t do any good to say, “The Bible says so,” because that’s exactly the problem. And certainly it doesn’t do any good to say “My eschatological hero, Jesus, says so!” Because who in the hell is Joshua to say this?

If I give you three good reasons why “A” is better than “B,” you aren’t interested. You’re interested in where in the wide world does a guy get three good reasons?

You are at the point of decision. You make a kind of decision. A person that stands at this point is the one who will step out beyond any cynic, out one step beyond any skeptic, a person who in principle is aware of every doubt possible in the whole universe. Maybe one day you’re going to see that the Christian faith is not to take care of those neurotics who can’t handle their neuroses. The Christian faith is that self-understanding that shoves a person to the limit beyond which there is no more truth. That’s what I’m trying to articulate.

The emotional insecurity is the other side of the coin – this person who dares to stand here and say “yes” to that *word* knows that no Mama can ever be a womb again, that no political cause can ever give security again, no religious institution can offer everlasting security, no friendship can take away the anxiety. At this point you have to become a “Goddamn liar” if you’re going to get any significance out of any of those authorities. Said theologically, at this point you have to build a lie that is damning to God, as you hide behind illusions that are known to be illusions. That’s the emotional insecurity.

Some of you look surprised that bourgeois philosophy is dressed up in Christian terminology: that Christianity is a matter of security. No! That’s the Christianity that denies God. The person of faith seized and offended by this *word* is out over 70,000 fathoms of insecurity for the duration of being.

That’s the offense. That’s why nobody ever heard this *word* save his or her life collapsed, or he or she hit bottom.

The Decision

And then the third part of the analysis of the dynamic of faith is the decision, a decision out over nothing. I mean the kind of decision that doesn’t have three good reasons for deciding anything. I mean the decision that has nothing as a basis for deciding. I mean the kind of decision in which the decision itself is the gamble of your own existence, remember, that only goes around the clock once. It’s the kind of a decision when you use pure guts to make your decision.

Let me be very clear: the *word* never comes to a person as truth. Good Lord, no! That’s the problem. The *word* comes to you as *possibility*, which is a question, which forces you to answer the question as to whether or not you’re going to live in the deeps of humanness, or whether you’re going to live in the lying, secure shallows. The *word* does not come as a truth. It comes as possibility, which is a question that addresses the very depths of your life and world. And you have to answer that question. And you have to answer it out over nothing. And the cost of it is your whole being. It’s that kind of word.

It’s as if the person of faith picks up every doubt in the universe. This is why that person out-skepticizes the skeptic. The skeptic knows nothing that the person of faith doesn’t know. The tragic hero knows nothing, the most lucid stoic knows nothing, the atheistic existentialist knows nothing that the person of faith doesn’t know. The person of faith knows emotional insecurities. The person of faith can be surprised by nothing. This person internalizes every insecurity, even some-body pushing the atomic bomb button – every insecurity in the universe.

Now, let me see if I can get a little more flesh and blood on that *word*. It’s been said in history so many ways, for example, that word of Augustine, which was “All that is, is good.” He knew damn well that anybody with two ounces of sense knew that this world isn’t good. “All that is, is good” is a confessional statement.

Trees talk to me. I used to have an office down in Austin, Texas, and the students at the university would come in and talk to me and pour out their troubles. I tell you, the students at Texas really had bellies full of problems. I’d sit there and I’d listen to them like I’d never heard things like that in my whole life, until it got so painful that all I could think of were my own problems. And when I got to thinking about my own problems, I’d sort of turn away, just a little bit, but pretend to listen. But I wasn’t hearing a thing they said. I was just consumed with my own problems.

And then I’d look out the window, and across the street there was a tree. That tree was a friend of mine. It was a strange old tree. In Texas they have hurricanes, and some of the limbs of this tree were knocked off, and there was a great big gash down through its psyche, I mean its trunk. And that black stuff

was smeared on it to patch it up. I knew it wasn't long for this world and the students would come by and they would pay no attention to it. Even the faculty members would walk right by that tree, my old friend, and literally ignore it. But in these circumstances that tree used to speak to me. Augustine went around and asked all the little flowers if the meaning of life was in them, and in those days, a lot of flowers could talk, and they said, "No, it's not in me."

This tree talked also. He'd start out, he'd say, "Hello, Joseph." He'd always call me Joseph. He'd say, "Hello, Joseph." And I'd say, "Hello, tree." And the tree would start in saying, "Look. I'm accepted in this universe," and I'd say, "What?!? You mean with all those stubby old limbs of yours?" And he'd say, "Yes, I'm received in the universe." And I'd say, "With that great big gash through your psyche, that you're never going to get over, and you're going to carry . . . ?" And he'd say, "Yes, I'm received, even with that big gash in my psyche." And I'd say, "You mean even though everybody pays you no attention?" He'd say, "Yes, I'm received." I'd say, "How do you know that?" And the tree said to me, "Look." And sure enough, I'd look. And whatever was sustaining everything else in being was sustaining my friend the tree in being! Just as it was! And then the tree would be sneaky. He'd turn it around on me. He'd say, "You know, Joseph, you're received in this universe." I'd say, "What do you mean? You mean this guy that can't even stand the pain of listening to this poor student?" He'd say, "Yes!" "You mean this guy who never was quite what his Papa wanted him to be?" "Yes!" "You mean this fellow who never quite made it like his brother made it?" "Yes!" "You mean this guy who's done all of these horrible things that you know damn well. . . ?" "Yes!"

And I'd say, "How do you know?" And he'd say, "Look." And sure enough, I looked down and there I am, and whatever is sustaining anything in this universe is sustaining me. Whether anyone likes me or not.

You know, whether you like me or not, whether my Mama cares for me, whether or not my wife likes me, whether or not I approve of myself. By whatever finally is going on in this universe, Joseph Wesley Mathews, as he is, not as he might have been, not as you think he ought to be, not as he might like to be, but exactly as he is, is pronounced utterly received. That's John 3:16. That's the *word* that seizes you as possibility. But you see it's not your *word* until you say, "I *am* the one who is utterly approved in this universe!" And then, that *word* is the *word* of my life. It's the anchor of my existence, and if you ask me, "Who says so?" Then I say, "I say so!" And only after I say, "I say so!" do I say "We say so!" Which means Mrs. Bigbottom and I down at First Methodist. Which means Luther and I, which means Paul and I, which means Amos and I, which means Bill sitting over there and I.

That's the Christ Happening. And our fathers had many wonderful parables by which they spoke of it. They said, "All my life I was maimed, but didn't think I was maimed. I thought I was a two-armed and a two-legged man, but I only have one arm and one leg. All my life I was maimed. And lo, in this Happening I am whole. All my life I've been blind," is what they said, "Oh, I thought I could see. But I was blind. And now I see. All my life I've been deaf. Now I hear. All my life I've been tongue-tied. And now I can speak. All my life I've been in chains. And now I am free. All my life I've been a cadaver. I've been dead. And, lo, now I am alive. I've been resurrected from the dead."

And the strange irony is that what I've described is nothing short of death in the deepest meaning of "death." Here I die to all of those illusions which seemed to give me life. And when I die to those illusions and become nothing, out over 70,000 fathoms, in my nothingness I discover I am approved by the cosmos. When I die, it is then that I discover this is my life and that I've had my life from the beginning. But I did not know I had my life, and therefore, I did not live.

Listen! The Christ Happening isn't something that took place 2000 years ago. The Christ Event is something that happened back in the beginning of time and it happens now in your life. And there's nothing religious about it. There is nothing pious about it. There is nothing dogmatic about it. It's as human as going to the toilet.

The Story of Our Life

Your next question, and mark you, this is your next question. Your next question is, "How can these things be?" "How can these things be?" When you and I step back from this Happening and try to think and talk

about it, we become aware that we cannot speak to ourselves about how these things can be, save we tell the *story* of our lives, which is the story of the community in which we live when this happening has become the Happening in and through which we define ourselves in history.

Let me tell you the story that the church knows. When you come to us as the church and ask us to talk about how this can be, you find us lying like sailors. That is to say, these people who say they have embraced their insecurity you find to be the most insecure people you ever saw. They lie like sailors. They begin to give you three good psychological reasons why this is true and three good philosophical reasons why this is true. And yet, when you yank the rug out from under them each time, which you have to do, because they're so insecure, these people, when you drive them into the corner, and finally you get them squatted down there with their heads between their knees and their hands over their heads, they'll finally say, "All right! All right! All right! I'll tell you the story of my life!"

And when they do, they tell a story something like this: One time we were not. We did not be. And then a configuration of happenings – the center of which was one Joshua – happened. I say, a configuration of occurrences occurred, after which here we be. You see that? They say, "At one time in history we had no being, and after a configuration of circumstances, here we be!"

It's sort of like the Revolutionary War. If you ask us who we are and we finally tell the story, and we say, well, one time we were not, and after a conflux of circumstances that we loosely refer to as the Revolutionary War, after which, here we is! Here we is.

"Jesus Christ" is not the first and the last name of a character. The term "Christ" is a title like "Mr. President," Harry Truman. So you have "Jesus" plus "the Christ" equals this Happening or Event, because this Christ is the significance for human existence. What I'm trying to say is that in and about some Joe Blow, about whom we know next to nothing, a new significance in terms of grasping what it means to be a human being got belched into history.

I said that when you stand on the edge it doesn't make any difference how that *word* came into history. But scientifically, apparently, and that's what you always have to say, this self-understanding, this possibility for being human, broke into history in and about the character named Joshua – one Jesus. But what broke into being was the self-understanding, which is to say, the Christ Self-understanding, or the possibility of the Christ Happening happening in history. And out of this happening, these people wove a tremendous story.

The Christian Story

And I want to retell you that story. I've never read a story like it. Maybe that's because it's my story. I mean, it's the story behind all of the stories in life that give meaning to my being Joseph Wesley Mathews.

And the story goes like this. You've got to go back and get their stage setting. Amy Sample McPherson wrote an opera, and there were three stage levels: Earth, Heaven, and Hell. I went to see it, and it was rather a phenomenal thing. Anyway, on this stage there are two levels. The lower level represents the civilizing process, or history, if you please. The upper level represents the cosmic, in the poetic sense. It represents the ultimate. It represents the final meaning of life.

These strange people of the church, to whom this thing happened – this new self-understanding, this awareness that they had divine permission to be human beings with all of the creatureliness that that meant – these people built two basic symbols. Those two symbols, in my opinion, are the *omega* – that's really the empty tomb – and the *cross*. Which is to say, that when we die, I mean die to all of our pretensions about life, we discover we've been resurrected, that we're alive. That we live! That we're really human beings.

To put it in another way, our fathers never separated these two symbols. This was what happened in history, those two symbols of death and resurrection. They told their story to try to say to themselves and the world that this is not just another happening, but it's the final happening of humanness.

What a story! First of all, they took these two symbols and put 'em up on the cosmic level, and then shoved the cosmic level in the play back to the beginning of the beginning. To get this little episode in the play, you have to go back to those primordial moments. You know, the Jews in the first chapter of Genesis have a great picture of it. You remember in the little play there, they waddle old Yahweh out on the stage

and have him hurl out a little bit of isness, and at the end of the day he steps back and says, “It’s good.” And then they waddle him out a second day and have him throw out a little more isness, and he says it’s good again. And when he wraps it all up – it took seven days to get through that little dramatic episode – when he got all the isnesses going, he stepped back and said, “It’s very good.” What a play!

You see the scene. Old Papa sitting on the throne back here in this scene, that means the ultimate up-against-ness in life, and guess what’s sitting on his lap? Well, it’s a little baby lamb. Now, just to be sure that you don’t get this mixed up with any antiquated literalism, it’s a lamb. I want you to understand that that lamb represents this symbol, right here, that if a person dies to any pretension or illusion, s/he lives. That’s what it represents. And to be sure that you get that symbolism that they used, this little lamb as it hops along, said “Baa, baa, baa.” Now you’ve got the picture in the play we’re rehearsing. And this little lamb, which was the Lamb of the world, back in the primordial moment, was sitting on the lap of the Papa. What a play! And guess what! In this play the little Lamb is the one who hurled into being all isnesses. Therefore, our fathers were saying that this self-understanding is the cosmic self-understanding that was there from the very beginning, whatever that means mythologically. And you and I haven’t the foggiest, for that was millennia ago when they were using all those mythological concepts and symbols.

Let’s go to the other act of this play. I tell you, this ought to be on Broadway. We’ve been talking about the pre-existence of the Christ Happening. Now we go to the post-existence. When the play wraps up, and history is all rolled up, whatever that means, you’ve got the old Papa, of course, sitting on the throne. But guess who’s on his lap. Why, the little Lamb is there. And guess who is the one who gets to say whether this whole play was good or bad. The Lamb gets to do that in the play. It’s the Lamb that was slain before the foundation of the world, it’s the Lamb that’s still dripping with blood, it’s the Lamb who decided what the play was about, and it’s the Lamb who decides whether the play was good.

Do you understand why, for me, it’s a matter of utter life and death that I’m washed in the blood of the Lamb, or that I’m given cosmic permission to live in the Christ *word*? There is nothing religious about it, nothing supernatural about it, nothing philosophical about it, nothing dogmatic about it – just the way life is.

There are a couple of tremendous little transitional scenes in the play. First of all, they had to get the Lamb into history. They had to get him into human form so that he didn’t say, “Baa, baa, baa,” but so he could say, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” They had to get the eschatological hero into history. They did it through that tremendous scene, the Virgin Birth. Wouldn’t you like to orchestrate that scene? If it’d been in our day, it wouldn’t have been that. We sure wouldn’t have done it with the Virgin Birth. Maybe we’d use a flying saucer. He wouldn’t have been a little old Lamb, he’d have been a little old Green Man from Mars.

But we didn’t write the play. It was written long ago. That’s the play, with the Lamb. Anyway, here he was hurled into being on a Virgin. Grace rode a Virgin. This is to say, you could no more get along without the Virgin Birth in the play than you could fly to the moon.

Then they had to get him off the stage of history. I like the way they did that – a lot of drama in it. You know, when I was a little boy, I lived in Ada, Ohio, and I went to Sunday school one day to see that strange picture of the Ascension. They’ve got this guy about halfway up in the picture? He’s on his way. I came home that afternoon and went out to the edge of Ada, to a little knoll, and you may think I was crazy, but anyway, I tried it; but I never got off the ground, except maybe a little jump. This is a tremendous scene in which the hero goes out. The meaning of existence beats the wrath of the worms, and he’s the only one that beats the wrath of the worms.

The Meaning of the Story

Now, the real question is, what does this play mean for Joseph Wesley Mathews? The self-understanding that bought my ticket, in the cosmic sense, was Jesus. In the earliest creed they said, “Jesus the Christ, Our Lord.” And it was the Lord. This community bowed its knee before this self-understanding. And the Virgin Birth pointed to the Lordship, the early scenes to the Lordship, the Ascension to the Lordship, the post-existence to the Lordship. It all pointed to “Jesus Christ is Lord.”

But what does that mean to this unique, unrepeatable fellow in the 20th century? It means that when I dare to receive the negations of my life and appropriate afresh the *word* that I am received; when the *word* intrudes in the flesh of my concrete situation, when the incarnation takes place for me, in that moment I become aware of grace.

From the beginning that *word* was over my life even though I never knew it. My whole memory is reconstructed, including the times that my Papa beat the daylights out of me for not shelling beans as fast as my brother. Do you understand how that scarred my being? And can you understand how I'm not over it yet? And can you understand that something has happened, because at least I can talk about it to myself? Can you understand that I am enabled to say that which is obviously *not good* is nevertheless *very good*? That it's mine! That all my life I have been an utterly approved man. And at this moment I know it. And not only do I have a memory, I have a capacity to anticipate, that is to say, shove out into the darkness of the future.

When I'm able to receive my life as significant, then I am able to grasp, first of all, that I haven't the slightest idea of what the future is going to be. I may be dead in five minutes. I may have one leg tomorrow. But there is one thing I am sure of, that the cosmic going-on-ness of this world pronounces my life approved! Approved, under any circumstances. This is to say, if I show up tomorrow as a one-legged man, I shall be accepted in the universe as a one-legged man, and dare to live my one-legged-ness to the hilt. And if tomorrow I am given the gift of my death, I shall grasp the fact, that dead, as well as alive, my existence is approved. And therefore I can pick up my death and die it.

That's what this strange story means. This is why this is *the* story, this is *the* play, without which history is not in the deepest sense history. This is why this is *the* story without which no human being, in the deepest sense, is ever a human being. This is to say the story isn't true because it's better than some other story. You see the joke of that, don't you? This is the story that is the last story. I mean, there's no place else to go. This is the end of the road of meaning. I mean, this is the final *word* on humanness. Before God, in Christ, one discovers in that *word* is our cosmic permission: if we die we live. Therefore, we can stand exposed in the white-hot insecurity of nothingness itself.

In the third act, therefore, we are able to pick up our lives and plunge them into the deeps of concern for the whole civilizing process. I remember "A Raisin in the Sun," a great movie. But they left out the punch line of the play. That was when the African Negro man asked the American Negro girl to marry him and go back to Africa. With amazing lucidity, the Negro girl reminded him of all the uncertainties, all the contingencies, of all the inhumanities, of all of the tragedies, all the dyings that awaited them if they went to Africa. And then she turned to him and asked him, "What's your answer to all these questions?" His reply, "I intend to live my answer."

So I say to you, the Christ Happening, the Christ Story, the Christ Drama in worship is that which gives me final permission to be the living embodiment of answers that I hurl into the face of the questions coming at me from the universe. That's what it means to be a Christian. But most of all, that's what it means for any person in this century to be a person of faith.

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