

Jesus of Moscow: Can We Ever Restore What 'Really Happened'?

Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini

April 1, 2012

Greeting, Centering, Kindling, Opening Words

We are here

on a spring day, to worship,

to forgo our day-to-day patterns of life

in order to spend time deliberately

being mindful of the deeper considerations

that bring meaning, vision and strength

to our whole lives:

And so, without guarantees, we lean into joy, and bend toward a just way of life, both for our own sakes, and for the sake of our children and all beings with whom we share the earth. We would engage our mission wholeheartedly, with courage, self-questioning, compassion, vulnerability and honesty.

Praising, Ingathering, Welcome and News, Affirmation, Sequence

Oh Love, I am trying to be here,
with all that I am, to be fully present.

But like so many,

part of me is still engaged in deep sympathy
with the Martin family of Sanford, Florida
who lost their amazing son in a sad scenario
that hurts the head and aches the soul.

As we approach the great story of liberation at Passover, I find myself wondering how many years we will all still be wandering in this dread wilderness of fear, racialized social norms, and the impossible grief that accompanies the violent loss of children.

O Love, I try to be here, to be fully present,

yet I am aware that there are many people on earth

who have never heard of Sanford, Florida, or Columbus OH: rose-petal merchants in Singapore, Ethiopian Jewish grandmothers preparing for the Seder in their villages around Lake Tana, mourners who have lost their children in Afghanistan; wedding planners in Vladivostok on the east coast of Russia; fundamentalist preachers in Kampala, Uganda; Inuit fishing families in Nunavut, Canada; archeology students at the State University in Santiago de Chile.

And all of these people, like the Martins, like me, like everyone here gathered, have known loss and struggle, impatience, gratitude and growth--

all of them stumble, laugh, weep and know wonder.

And all of us round the world are bound together by one shared moment, ***this*** moment, the very moment which is one with our breathing-in and breathing-out.

O love, I am here now – I am present.

Come and bless this precious moment with silence.

silence

Oh Love, I am here, but I am also wandering through my life in the landscape of my heart – my heart echoing with the voices of those I love, I miss, I struggle with, or grieve for. To be fully present, I name the people whose voices live in my heart, and lay them into the folds of this fabric of silence, held in safekeeping and gratitude.

naming

Oh Love, the music of this spring season of depth and beauty seals the communion of our memories in peace. Let us lift our hearts and receive the gift.

The First Readings comes from the novel *The Master and Margarita* by Mikhail Bulgakov. He started writing it during Stalin's time, but he wasn't able to get it published until the time of Premier Kosygin after Khrushchev had begun the de-Stalinization of the Soviet Union. In 2005, a made for TV version of the novel, extremely faithful to the complex novel, was shown on Russian TV, and over 40,000,000 tuned in, the largest audience in Russian TV history.

This conversation...was about Jesus Christ. The fact is that the editor had commissioned the poet to write a long antireligious poem for the next issue of his journal. Ivan, the poet, had composed the poem, and in a very short period of time too, but unfortunately, the editor rejected it. Ivan had painted the central character of his poem, that is, Jesus, as a suspicious, shadowy figure. But in the editor's opinion, the *whole poem* had to be rewritten. And so now the editor was giving the poet a kind of lecture on Jesus in order to point out to him his basic error.

It is hard to say what led the poor poet astray – the descriptive power of his pen, or his complete ignorance of his subject matter, but the Jesus whom he portrayed emerged as a well, totally life-like figure, a Jesus who had once existed, although, admittedly, a Jesus provided with all sorts of negative traits.

Thus the editor wanted to prove to the poet that the important thing was not what kind of man Jesus was, good or bad; but, rather, that Jesus, as an individual, *had never existed* on earth at all and that all the stories about him were mere fabrications, myths of the most standard kind.

It should be noted that the editor was a well-read man, and in his speech he made very clever allusions to ancient historians such as the famous Philo of Alexandria and the brilliantly educated Flavius Josephus, neither of whom had said a word about Jesus. With a display of solid erudition, the editor also informed the poet, in passing, that the passage in Book 15, Chapter 44 of Tacitus's famous Annals, where mention is made of Jesus' execution, is nothing but a later, fraudulent interpolation.

The poet, for whom everything the editor said was news, stared at the editor with his sharp green eyes and listened to him attentively.

"There is not a single Eastern religion," the editor ranted on, "where a pristine virgin does not, as a matter of course, bring forth a god into the world. And the Christians, displaying no originality

whatsoever, followed the same pattern when they created their Jesus, who, in fact, never existed at all. That's where you have to put your main emphasis..."

The editor went on and on, entering that maze, which only a highly educated person can thread through without getting lost. The poet learned more and more interesting and useful things about the Egyptian Osiris, and about the Phoenician god Tammuz, and about Marduk, and even about the lesser known terrible god Huitzilopochtli who had once been venerated by the Aztecs in Mexico.

The Second Reading is a piece by Kay Ryan, Poet Laureate of our nation from 2008-2010. It's called *All Shall be Restored*, on our monthly theme.

The grains shall be collected
from the thousand shores
to which they found their way,
and the boulder restored,
and the boulder itself replaced
in the cliff, and likewise
the cliff shall rise
or subside until the plate of earth
is without fissure. Restoration
knows no half-measure. It will
not stop when the treasured and lost
bronze horse remounts the steps.
Even this horse will founder backward
to coin, cannon, and domestic pots,
which themselves shall bubble and
drain back to green veins in stone.
And every word written shall lift off
letter by letter, the backward text
read ever briefer, ever more antic
in its effort to insist that nothing
shall be lost.

Sermon

(*Impromptu* prologue: I used to teach New Testament studies at our California seminary, Starr King School. Both Eric and I are graduates. So although I usually try to blend head and heart in my sermons, this morning I will begin with my critical mind, my head, and end with my heart.)

The violets are already ablaze in the lawns, although I think late April is their usual blooming time. The tulips are early too. But the Spring Holidays are right on time, shepherded by the round moon at the end of the week. The Spring Holidays are from our two taproot traditions, the Judaic and Christian traditions in all their antiquity. Passover, Palm Sunday, and Easter are the main events (even though the English word Easter is based on the name of an Anglo-Saxon goddess). But even April Fool's Day (although also rooted in the pagan Roman festival of Hilariter), has a Christian medieval origin, the celebration of the so-called Ass Mass, when *Hee Haw Hee Haw* replaced the *Amen, Amen*, of the liturgy, a sort of get-it-all-out-of-your-system-on-one-day playful blasphemy.

The holidays are, and have always been, complex, culturally intertwined, and jumbled in their themes. When someone tries to tell me the "Real Easter" is only the celebration of the equinox, I usually recoil, since *all* forms of expressed *Puritanism* – "this is the one purely authentic way for everyone on earth" – make my heart wince in pain.

Of course, folks have been claiming pure, absolute religious knowledge as necessarily universal for millennia. Our religious ancestors were burned at the stake for questioning those certainties. In the 16th and 17th centuries, Katarina Weiglowska of Poland, Miguel Serveto of Spain, Ludwig Haetzer of Germany, and Edward Wightman of England were each burned at the stake for daring to express their personal opinion that Jesus was a human teacher and not God, or the Be All and End All.

In our own lifetimes, opinions about Jesus have multiplied in ways that sometimes leave me a bit bewildered. There are well-worn books by individuals suggesting that Jesus was **a.** a space alien, the Star of Bethlehem being a misunderstanding of his spacecraft; **b.** a magician and charlatan; **c.** the biological son of King Herod the Great and Mary, and with a damaged leg that made him limp all of his life; **d.** a schizophrenic who talked to God because of his chemical unbalance; **e.** a Jew who traveled to India when he was a young man and studied with Buddhists, and who then taught Buddhism when he returned to the Galilee; **f.** a violent revolutionary whose story was eventually given a pacifist spin by cunning authors; **g.** a teacher of Astrology and the Aquarian Age; **h.** a failed messiah because he was never married, according to Sun Myung Moon; **i.** a prophet, according to some Muslim theologians, but one who died a natural death since God would never let one of his teachers be crucified as a young adult; **j.** a radical Essene with apocalyptic ideas about the world ending with fire and judgment; and **k.** the creator of a new royal dynasty by his marriage to, and children with, a wealthy widow from the Galilean town of Migdal-on-the-Lake. I could, of course, have gone from K to Z and all the way to triple Z, without any problem.

All of these books claim to be either "revealed," by some higher entity, or to offer some new scholarly opinion no one ever thought of before. I have never found any peer-reviewed scholars who have found reason in their critical historical study to support any of these theories.

And of course, personal opinions are sometimes not so personal, something made clear in the passage from Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* which you heard earlier. In the novel, three plots are intertwined in the service of critiquing the Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union. It was risky to write such a critique while Stalin was still living, and Bulgakov once had to destroy the whole manuscript to keep from being discovered and arrested. But some time after Stalin, the novel eventually came out. With the exception of a few Russian Orthodox clerics and elderly women who still practiced their religion, it was the first time most people in the officially atheist Soviet Union had ever encountered New Testament stories in any form. And Bulgakov goes on at great length about the trial and death of Jesus, using what few scholarly notes available to him in that pre-computer Stalinist era. And when the television series came out in modern day Russia, over 40,000,000 Russians watched the well-crafted film depicting the relationship of Jesus (whom the book and film call by his proper Aramaic name, Yeshua), and the Roman Governor Pilate, who is portrayed by Bulgakov as a model Stalinist bureaucrat. In Bulgakov's version, there was an historical Yeshua despite the insistence by Stalinist bureaucrats that he could not have existed. The editor's "personal opinion" was not very "personal" at all, but rather, an expression of the party-line. Bulgakov stirs the pot, to be sure. He says Yeshua was from the

town of Gamala, not Nazareth, and that his excellent observational skills led to his reputation as a healer. He even heals Pilate from a migraine, smiling warmly as he talks with Pilate about his pet dog. But even as the headache free Pilate questions him further, Yeshua is not going to back down from his main message, which Bulgakov puts this way: "All authority imposed from the outside is a species of violence." Pilate, of course, cannot support such an agenda, and has him crucified to stop the radical message in its tracks. He is put in a cart and carried off to be crucified, his sad face in the film especially suggesting that he is completely surprised and shocked by Pilate's sudden and impulsive cruelty.

Earlier in the book before Yeshua and Pilate are introduced, the poet Ivan and his editor are sitting in a park talking about the book he had been commissioned to write. The poet wrote about Pilate's life, but speaks as if Jesus actually lived, even though the poet dutifully portrays him in a negative way. The poet's editor insists by sheer authority that the figure of Jesus was made up by deceitful people interested in controlling everyone else. Bulgakov insists that the real imposition of authority comes from the state's insistence that if the word God is empty, then the existence of Jesus himself must be denied to suppress his influence over people. The editor is *desperate* to convince Ivan the poet...he even claims truth for things that are patently false, such as his claim that the histories of Tacitus are fabricated. They are not. They actually do bring up the execution of Jesus by Pilate. And while no one except the most stubborn fundamentalist denies the influence of ancient deities on how the life of the Jewish peasant teacher was eventually portrayed, the general consensus of scholars *around the world* is that he did indeed exist, and that working together we can get somewhat clearer about his life and teachings, *none of which*, mind you, had *anything* to do with St. Anselm's 11th century legal theory that he had to die in order to substitute for us, a doctrine still taught in many conservative churches.

Now to me, saying that there was no Jesus, because there were so many claims for miraculous births in ancient times, is the equivalent of saying that if there are pyramids in Egypt and pyramids in Mexico, there must have been some *original* pyramid they both copied in Atlantis. Coming to conclusions from merely apparent similarity breaks every rational historical method I can think of.

And of course I am not saying that anyone can construct what "really happened" in the first century down to the last detail. Every time some one discovers some hitherto unknown ancient gospel text – the gospel of the Magdalene, for instance, or the gospel of Judas – the populist press always leads with “Now we’ll learn what REALLY happened.” No we won’t. We can't even do that for Julius Caesar or Cicero or Sappho, all of whom received biographical treatments that vary wildly. In fact, I can't even establish a complete historical picture of *my own* life – my memories may very well confuse or distort some events. And so there is no way for even me myself to restore the complete history of my own days. Expecting that such absolute certainty is possible for *any* historical event is traveling down a dead-end path, as far as I am concerned.

But that does not mean studying history thoroughly is worthless, any more than the Greek advice to “know thyself” is a foolish pastime. Nor does the lack of absolute certainty mean to simply continue to proclaim as unquestioned truth things for which we have evidence that says otherwise. For example, President Washington did *not* have wooden dentures. Van Gogh most likely was killed by gunshot *accidentally* by some local teens playing Wild Bill Hickock rather than killing himself dramatically in a flowery field. Fettuccini existed as pasta in Italy long before Marco Polo was even born; and the first printing press book was not the Gutenberg Bible,

but a copy of the Diamond Sutra printed on Bisheng's press in China centuries before.

And yes, I am convinced by the work of the majority of peer-reviewed historical scholars that Jesus was not born in Bethlehem, that many of the teachings assigned to him were added by the early church, whose self-image itself was distorted by the horrific effects of the Jewish uprising of 66 C.E.

But none of this means that the story of Jesus is lost forever, or more foolishly, that his influence even in our century can be surgically removed by a Stalinist-like decree because some stories about him are not historically factual. *The Master and Margarita* makes that statement rather forcefully. Not long after it came out, Communist historians like Milan Mahovec began to write freely about the historical Jesus with fresh struggles to be honest in their evaluation of the texts.

To read and evaluate any text, like the gospels, first, you had better learn to read the language in which they were written. And the culture that informs that language. None of the authors who offer theories about Jesus being a violent revolutionary, a space alien or a crackpot can read Greek, or know anything about First Century Greek culture. Just like I said earlier, you have to study Russian to read Russian. Learn English to read English. Master Greek to read Greek. If you can't do that last one when offering theories of Jesus, then I am not much interested. Peer reviewed scholars around the world – Jewish, yes, and atheist, as well as Christian, Muslim, Buddhist and yes Unitarian Universalist, who study the New Testament *can* read Greek and know the Greek cultures of the day. I trust them first.

Second, to read any text, like the gospels, you had better know *more* than the language. You had better know yourself. *Your* context. Who are you? Do you have friends to please, family to fear, doctrines pro or con to defend? Do you have an emotional reaction to Christian texts, a desire to disprove them all because you were hurt by someone who abused them? Are you devout, and want it to be true in the way your beloved grandmother thought it was true? Are you an American, or are you French, or are you Jewish or Muslim or Bahai or an atheist or an eclectic Unitarian Universalist? What is your culture? What do you read, what films do you like? What music moves you? What was the emotional pattern of your family? Who are your friends – do you care what they think if you differ with them? What life crises are you facing? Are you grieving right now? Working too hard? Are you without work, or wasting yourself at a job that makes you mad? How are your children if you have them? How's your health right now? Without reflecting on such things, even great knowledge of ancient culture and ancient language will not serve you well.

Third, to read a text, like the gospels, you had better work together with others who are studying the same thing. Words in English and Greek have a variety of meanings and nuances. You need to know those, inviting sociologists, grammarians, archeologists, historians of other kinds etc into the conversation. No one working by him or herself is likely to have anymore than their own very limited view. I may know New Testament Greek, but know nothing of the sociology of village life in the year 95 when that Greek was being written. So, yes, I need to work with people who know about politics, all the meanings of *logos* and disease patterns in ancient towns. All of these have been studied, but not by me. As the poet Kay Ryan puts it, you can study the sculpture of a bronze horse, but to really understand it thoroughly, you have go back to the coins and pots that were melted to make the sculpture, and then go back to the green ore that first supplied metallic sheen to the coins and pots. There is no end to restoration she says. Just like there is no

end to scientific study, no final answer. But that does not mean the study of the universe is fruitless, just because we'll never get to some final absolute pure truth, any more than it's fruitless to study the life of the ancient and influential human life of Jesus, or Yeshua if you will. Believe me, one of the reasons Stalin didn't want him to exist, and one of the reasons that fundamentalists reject the scholarship of those who work together to study the man and his times, is that the Jesus they have slowly and painstakingly found (in part) does indeed seem to have had a problem with externalized authority and rules, does indeed seem to have questioned family and state systems that hurt our children, and does indeed seem to have questioned the right of the privileged and the cynical to keep everyone else away from the availability of healthcare, fair hearings and forgiveness.

Don't be fooled that all of this is an intellectual exercise – how people interpret texts is a life and death matter far too often. Miguel Serveto had the texts of his books strapped to his thigh when Calvin burned him alive for questioning the rigid status quo. And when Mr. Zimmerman interpreted the text of the Florida Stand Your Ground law, which uses the phrases like this: *if you "reasonably believe" that your life is in danger, you can use "deadly force."* Zimmerman's "reasonable belief" does not seem reasonable to me at all – how can reason be a spur of the moment decision? and a teenager's smiling image now lives only in the tears flowing from his mother's eyes, a woman who knows the language of grief fluently, a language, which I assure you, is as ancient as gospel Greek.

The spring flowers are here with the spring holidays. The flowers speak a language of redemptive beauty, but the texts of the holidays speak a language of liberation, love and life, which I for one need to hear and read each and every year.

Offering

All may participate in the life of the congregation with the gifts of their mind and hearts, their skills and time, their wisdom and their vulnerability, the gifts of their livelihood and the gifts of their commitment. Whether on Sundays at this time, or on Wednesday afternoon, whether by electronic means or gifts in a wicker basket, we offer of ourselves to make community happen.

Commissioning

Justice on this earth was not accomplished by Martin Luther King or Gandhi marching by themselves, or giving talks to themselves in the mirror. The two accomplished women of justice in our era, Vandana Shiva and Auu Sung Su Kyi in Burma, are brilliant and courageous and they are also supported by millions. It takes the many joining together to make justice on earth. And so we come to commission the BREAD Justice Team for this year of 2011.

The women and men who have graced the BREAD Justice Team of this congregation, and who have been trained in their work, have a simple, limited task. To bring themselves to the BREAD rally on April 16th at 7 PM and to invite at least three people besides themselves to join thousands of others at the Nehemiah BREAD assembly on Monday May 7th which this year will be at the Fairgrounds.

Where individuals gather in number, power gathers. Where power flows, positive change, even if

it's incremental, is possible. In a world distorted with systemic injustice, demands are necessary. No matter how politely expressed, demand will always be perceived as agitation by upstarts, but that is the way that positive change for more just conditions can happen. Justice does not descend from the sky.

We are not talking about power over, but power shared with others, power rooted in the spiritual grounding and ethical rooting of great traditions joining together for this work, despite their very real theological differences. The power of cooperation, not competition. The power of love, not control.

Would the members of the BREAD Justice Team present at this service please rise and come forward?

Please regard these people, your brothers and sisters, as partners in realizing our vision and mission. If you receive a call, please be clear with them if it's possible to show up for the Assembly. If you cannot, be clear about that too. Enjoy a conversation with these folks. They have work to do and you are part of it. Let us commission them with this wise song: #157