

THE ENCOUNTER

Jim Seghers

In his wonderful book, *Life of Christ*, Bishop Sheen made a statement that seized my attention and challenged my thinking: “The day Our Lord taught the Beatitudes, He signed His own death warrant. The sound of nails and hammers digging through human flesh were the echoes thrown back from the mountain side where He told men how to be happy or blessed.”¹ Doesn’t this statement seem a bit of an exaggeration? After all, doesn’t everybody want to be happy?

Yes, but the program Jesus laid out for happiness is radically opposed to the values of the world. The so-called wisdom of the world proclaims: “you only live once,” “take care of number one,” “eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die,” “get as much fun out of life as you can,” “what is sex for if not for pleasure,” “have a good time,” “be first,” “don’t let anybody take advantage of you,” “get even,” “happiness is found in success, money, and power,” and “in the game of life, he who has the most toys wins.”

Jesus’ message challenges these ideas, indeed utterly negates them, and that brings a violent response from those who are threatened by His teaching. Jesus acknowledged this reality:

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man’s foes will be those of his own household.” (Mt 10:34-36).

Peter Kreeft in his insightful little book, *Jesus–Shock*, comes to a conclusion similar to Bishop Sheen although he approaches it from his own perspective. He writes: “When this absolute God [Christ] steps into our world of relativities, full of problems and ignorance and sins, we have a shock like no other shock.”² Jesus changed every human being He ever met. He still does today. Eventually we are forced to take sides “with either His killers or His worshippers. For ‘Jesus-shock’ breaks your heart in two and forces you to choose which half of your heart you will follow.”³

That encounter is an unforgettable experience. It happened to me when I was sitting huddled against the cold on a bench looking at a grotto in Lourdes almost thirty years ago. I had achieved the trappings of worldly success, but deep down I sensed something was wrong, something was missing. Then that awful thought came into my mind, “When was the last time you told Jesus you loved him?” There He was looking into my soul like he looked into the face of Peter after Peter denied him three times (Lk 22:61). It was an awful moment of truth as I recognized my own betrayal and denial. In answer to the question, I couldn’t remember it has been so long ago. For the next hour I sat weeping convulsively still huddled against the cold. My heart was split in two - thankfully. I am sure that many of you could share your own experience.

¹ Fulton J. Sheen, *Life of Christ*, p. 114.

² Peter, Kreeft, *Jesus–Shock*, p., 38.

³ *Jesus-Shock*, p. 41

Everything about Jesus bursts our comfortable categories and transcends our feeble expectations. He's the gentle warrior, but a warrior nevertheless. In the words of C. S. Lewis borrowing from Revelation 5:5-6, "This lion is not tame!" What else can we say about a love so fierce that God became man to let himself be murdered by men in order to save mankind? It was His incomprehensible excess of love that drove Jesus to save us. In the words of John Paul II, "There are two concepts that surpass human understanding: the first is that God became a human person; the second is that this God-man wished to suffer, be crucified, buried, and on the third day to rise again."⁴

The Jesus of the Gospels is daring, exciting, and challenging. Too many commentaries about Jesus are dull and boring. Some are written by men with great reputations as scholars, but their books are less inspiring than studying amoebas. Apart from curing insomnia they are better left on some shelf collecting dust or serving as a door stop. Only intellectuals devoid of real passion can make the most beautiful and exciting love story seem boring. Love Him or hate Him; Jesus is always inspiring. He rouses His enemies to murder and His friends to martyrdom, but the real Jesus doesn't put anyone to sleep. Our culture has so filled our heads with the superficial and our hearts with emptiness that we are starved for the wonder that is Christ. Faithfully following Christ is never boring, dull, sissified, repressive, dreary, stale or unprofitable.

In his book, *Why Men Hate Going to Church*, David Murrow observes that men (and many women) are drawn to reward, accomplishment, heroic sacrifice, boldness, action, and adventure⁵ This is the Christianity of the Gospels. Jesus set high standards and let His disciples know that following Him is dangerous. Following Jesus is not for wimps! The heroism He inspires is unprecedented. Unfortunately, the Jesus that is often preached from the pulpit, according to Murrow, is the sweet, safe, and uninspiring. There is no challenge.

What is reasonable? The world proclaims that it is eminently reasonable to absorb the years of one's life with trivialities, but the all-consuming love of the saints who disdained the things this world treasures is viewed as the greatest folly. Yet their lives teach us the only reasonable response to eternity. Judas was prudent and practical according to worldly standards. In contrast Mary Magdalene threw caution to the wind when she chose to love the Absolute absolutely. Which of these two was truly reasonable? Now let's get back to my starting point.

How is it possible that the Prince of Peace (Is 9:5) brings conflict and division? Certainly Jesus is not the cause of discord in the sense of enmity, hatred, violence, and war. However, Jesus' words of love and truth demand a choice. They force us to take a side. This separates and divides, even families. It is the betrayals of family and friends that are the most painful. This explains why the Church is always out of step with the world. It must confirm to truth and reject the distortions and misrepresentations of truth that are

⁴ *Spiritual Advice from John Paul II*, August 16.

⁵ *Why Men Hate Going to Church*, pp. 15-16..

currently trendy and politically acceptable. St. Paul called the Church “the pillar and foundation of truth” (1 Tim 3:15), because the Church is the Mystical Body of Christ (Rom 12:5; Eph 1:22; Col 1:18; 2:19).

There exists today a pervasive apathy, if not a deep antipathy, to encountering Christ. The attitude seems to be, “Let’s not think about it,” or He is just dismissed as irrelevant. I suppose that is because some of us are afraid to give up what we love the most. Others are too busy “living” to reflect that they are racing to nowhere. However, in the end there is one encounter that no one avoids. In this life God never forces, because then our response would not be love to Love. That doesn’t mean he ignores us. Given a even a tiny opening He comes. If we respond with generosity everything changes for the better in ways we would never imagined. Then the thought that resonates within us is, “Why did I wait so long!”