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Columnists

Devotion to Jesus or the Kingdom?

By Father Richard P. McBrien

To judge by some of our television preachers and their followers, Christianity begins and ends with Jesus. To them, it's a religion that focuses entirely on him — as savior, lord, friend and brother.

These preachers constantly urge us to find Jesus, to accept him, to believe in him, to open ourselves to him, to let him rule over our lives, to praise him, and to confess his name.

One doesn't lightly criticize such intense devotion to Jesus, but criticize it one must. First of all, it simply doesn't ring true with mainstream Christians, Protestant and Catholic alike.

These mainstream Christians certainly believe in Jesus Christ and in the redemptive significance of his death and resurrection. But they also know that their faith doesn't begin and end with Jesus — that Christianity isn't only a matter of establishing a personal relationship with the Lord.

Christianity is about love, forgiveness, mercy, compassion, justice and hope. After all, Jesus did not preach *himself*. He preached the Kingdom of God. He invited people not to praise *him* but to do God's will.

"None of those who cry out, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven." (Matthew 7:21).

When the rich young man asked what he had to do to be saved, Jesus didn't say it was sufficient to confess him as Lord. He told him instead to sell all that he had and give the proceeds to the poor, and only then should the young man follow him (Mark 10:21).

The Scriptures tell us that the rich young man's face fell, and that he "went away sad, for he had many possessions" (10:22). It would have been a lot easier for the young man had Jesus only demanded that he cry out, "Praise the Lord!" Or, "Jesus, I accept you as my personal savior!" Then he could have continued enjoying his riches as a "blessing" from the Lord.

It would have been convenient, but that wasn't Jesus' idea.

Jesus corrected his disciples on several occasions for putting him — rather than the Kingdom of God — at the center of their lives. Peter protested when Jesus began to wash his feet: "You shall never wash my feet!"

"If I don't wash you," Jesus answered, "you will have no share in my heritage" (John 13:8).

When he finished washing the disciples' feet, Jesus asked them if they understood what he

Essays in Theology

had done. He answered his own question. Although they had properly acknowledged him to be their Teacher and Lord, he had washed their feet as an example.

"I solemnly assure you," he said, "no slave is greater than his master, no messenger outranks the one who sent him" (13:16).

Jesus had come upon this earth not to call attention to himself but to call attention to God and the Kingdom. He had been sent to serve, not to be served (Mark 10:45).

What Jesus demanded of his disciples was not that they should call him savior, or lord, or friend or brother, but that they should love one another just as he had loved them (John 13:34-35).

That was the one commandment he left them. And that was also the one sign by which all men and women would know that they were truly his disciples — namely, their love for one another.

But such love, Jesus insisted, is not to be reserved for one's relatives and friends, the so-called decent and respectable people of this world.

An authentic disciple will also love the enemy (Luke 6:27-28), renounce revenge (6:29), avoid judging and condemning others (6:37), and be careful not to dwell on the speck in the other's eye while missing the plank in one's own (6:41-42).

Indeed, Jesus warned against the temptation to use faith in him as an excuse for trying to control the lives of others. "You know how among the Gentiles those who seem to exercise authority lord it over them," he told the disciples. "Their great ones make their importance felt. It cannot be like that with you" (Mark 10:42-43).

During his most recent visit to Latin America, Pope John Paul II didn't urge his millions of listeners simply to accept Jesus as their personal savior. He summoned them to the practice of justice.

That's what it means "to teach as Jesus did!" And that's what being a Christian is all about.

Rhoda learns the power of prayer

By Cindy Bassett

My name is Rhoda. I work as a servant for Mary in a large house in Jerusalem. Even though it is dangerous, the followers of Jesus come here often. That is how I began to learn everything that Jesus taught.

One day, Peter recalled this story that Jesus told them about the importance of praying ...

"There was a dishonorable city judge who showed little regard for anyone. A widow came to him to make a complaint against a man. The judge completely ignored her and did nothing. But this woman was so determined to get justice that she kept on coming back again and again to appeal her case.

"Finally, the judge relented, saying, 'I fear neither God nor man, but this widow has worn me out with her constant demands. So I am going to make certain that she gets justice.'

"If an evil judge can be worn down like that, don't you think that God will give justice to his own people who plead with him day and night? You must keep on praying until you receive an answer!" Peter concluded.

I was soon to learn about answered prayer in a startling way. A short time later, Jesus' followers came to Mary's house to celebrate Passover. But when they arrived, they were very upset.

"It has started again! King Herod is seeking to please the Jewish leaders at our expense," one of them cried. "He is arresting the followers of Jesus."

"This is nothing new," Mary said calmly. "We will go on meeting here as always."

"That's not even the worst of it!" another said. "This time our own leader, Peter, has been arrested and imprisoned. Tomorrow, King Herod will execute him!"

It surprised me to see that Mary did not seem troubled by this news. "We will begin the Passover meal now, and afterwards we shall pray for Peter," she said.

We prayed together all night long. At dawn, I heard a loud knocking at the courtyard gate. "Who's there?" I called without opening the

The Bible Corner

door.

"It's me, Peter," he whispered back.

I was so excited that I left Peter standing there in the street and ran back to tell the others.

"Our prayers have been answered! Peter is here!" I told them.

"You must be mistaken. It couldn't be Peter," one of them said. "He is locked up in Herod's prison."

"But it is Peter," I insisted. "I know his voice!"

"Well then, it is the voice of an angel," someone else offered. "Peter must be dead!"

"Jesus taught us to keep on praying until we receive an answer! Your answer is here at the door," I cried impatiently.

"Rhoda has spoken well," Mary said to everyone. "We shall all go out and see."

When we finally opened the door for Peter, he told us that an angel had awakened him in the middle of the night. Suddenly, his chains had mysteriously fallen off while the guards slept. This angel then led him right to the door of Mary's house.

Jesus taught us many things about prayer. God hears all of our prayers and anything is possible. Sometimes, the answers are almost too good to be true.

Scripture reference: Acts, Chapter 12:1-19; Luke 18:1-8.

Meditation: "I will answer them before they even call to me. While they are still talking to me about their needs, I will go ahead and answer their prayers" (Isaiah 65:24).

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