

Representing Jesus

In the name of him who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him, dear friends in Christ: When assigned a role to play actors often speak of “getting into character”, by which they mean they want to do more than just spout off the lines they’re supposed to say like a trained parrot. No, they want (in their minds at least) to *become* the person they are representing. They want to try to get into the skin of that person, as it were, and see things through their eyes, and respond to the situations their characters’ faced exactly as they did, with the same motivations and the same thoughts. And what this means, especially if the person whose role they are playing is an actual historical figure, is that the actor has to do a very thorough job researching his or her character. To accurately play the part, they have to really know who that person was – and what they did, why they did it, and what they were thinking at every moment along the way. And this is what sets the very best actors apart from those who are merely good. A great actor gets into character and adopts the personality and thoughts and mannerisms of his or her subject and therefore performs the role by what you might call second nature. They know their character that well.

It makes you wonder, though, about those actors who have over the years played the role of Jesus in film and on stage, doesn’t it? I mean, he’s a very popular subject, and small wonder since he is without question the most influential person in the history of the world. Many actors have represented Jesus. Just to name a few you might be familiar with, Jeffrey Hunter played the role of Christ in *The King of Kings*, a film made in the early sixties. A couple years later and though critically acclaimed, Max von Sydow put forth what I thought was a rather effeminate version of Jesus in *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. In the early seventies Ted Neeley gave a freaked-out hippie rendition of the Lord in *Jesus Christ Superstar*. He had really weird eyes too; but man could that guy hit the high notes. I think one of the most disturbing portrayals of Jesus I’ve ever seen was the one by Willem Dafoe in *The Last Temptation of Christ*. The script was awful, so it was impossible to take the film seriously; but what made it worse was that Dafoe usually plays villains. It was hard to see him as Jesus and not think of those other roles. It was like, “Look out, here comes *evil* Jesus!” It didn’t work. Perhaps the best representation of Jesus I’ve seen in film was the one done by Jim Caviezel in *The Passion of the Christ*.

But how do you prepare for a role like that? How do you “get into character” when playing the part of Jesus? How does one get into the mind of Christ? Well ... the same way you would for any other role, I suppose: by really getting to know who Jesus is: by learning to think like him, and talk like him, and act like him—which is admittedly a tough task because we’re all sinners and he isn’t. So, even the best representation of Jesus an actor could do is going to be terribly flawed. Still, the better the actor knows Jesus and what he did and why he did it, the better he’d be able to represent him.

And I’m guessing that by now most of you know where I’m going with this. None of us is an actor by trade; but we have all been called to represent Jesus. It’s part of our calling as *Christians*, which means “little Christs”. The term was probably originally meant as an insult – applied by people who were opposed to the Gospel and wanted to ridicule the faithful. And certainly there are those today who still use it that way. But the name stuck; and when you think about it, it’s not a bad description of what we are supposed to be: each one of us a little representation of Christ to the world.

This is what Peter is talking about in today's Epistle lesson. He says that we who believe in Jesus should have a reputation for doing good. Christ lived a perfect life. And we who represent him should – *at a bare minimum* – be known as fine, upstanding citizens and never, ever, as crooks or villains or lawbreakers or dishonest people. But it's actually more than that. The term Peter uses is *Zealots*. He says that we are to be Zealots for doing good. It's an interesting choice of words that has lost its impact over time. You see, when Peter wrote this, the Zealots were a group of Jewish anti-Roman fanatics. They hated the Romans with wild passion and waged war against them using guerilla tactics and every dirty trick in the book. Think the Taliban or Hezbollah or Hamas and you'll have a pretty good idea of who the Zealots were. They were obsessed with violence and feared for their ferocity. I suppose they saw themselves as freedom fighters; but they were in fact mostly cutthroats, bandits, and terrorists. There was no reasoning with them. Their minds were twisted with hate.

Peter takes that kind of fanaticism and turns it around. Instead of being Zealots against law and order, he says that we Christians ought to be out there *fanatically* doing what's right and kind and loving. We ought to be known for *radical* goodness, *extreme* generosity, forgiveness that defies reason, and for loving kindness to all people – especially to our enemies. And this shouldn't surprise any of us for this is what Jesus taught. More than that, this is how Jesus lived during his ministry on earth. We're told that we went around always doing good. Wherever he went, he left in his wake a trail of people whose lives were changed for the better. The same is to be true of us. And I hasten to add that being a Zealot for good does not mean pacifism or never going on the attack against evil. Remember how when Jesus saw the way the Temple courts were being used as a market instead of for worship and prayer, he became angry and went on a rampage of righteous indignation, driving out the merchants and money changers with a whip. Being a Zealot for good means not only doing what is right, it means also being against that which is evil – and in particular against those things that interfere with the transmission of God's truth and that lead people astray, like false doctrine or turning the church and the proclamation of the Gospel into a business.

In the opening line of today's Epistle, Peter asks rhetorically, if we Christians had a reputation like that for doing good, who would be opposed to us or try to do us any harm? The implication is that they would be few indeed. But this is where Peter gets even more radical. Suppose, he says, that you *are* doing what's right – that you're living as a Christian ought – and you come under attack nevertheless. You are persecuted or insulted or harmed physically in some way for doing what is right; what do you do then?

It is in such circumstances, Peter says, that it's *most* vital for you to represent Christ and do what he did, which, namely, is to allow it, to accept it, and to embrace the cross you've been given in faith and patience; not returning evil for evil or insults for insults, not making threats; but rather humbling yourself under the mighty hand of God and submitting to his will. He is, after all, in control of all things. That's what you believe, isn't it? Therefore if you are suffering persecution or injustice at the hands of wicked people, or if your precious rights are being trampled, it's because the Lord has laid it upon you. He has a reason for it. And in due time, according to his plan and purpose, he will deliver you from it. Your task is to commit yourself and your wellbeing to him.

And it's important that we understand that this is not just theoretical stuff. The Christians to whom Peter first wrote this were well acquainted with persecution. They had been demonized by Jews and (at times) declared criminals by the Roman authorities. They were imprisoned, beaten, driven from their homes, deprived of their property – some were killed – simply because they confessed the name Jesus. As a matter of fact, it's probably the

persecution launched against Christians by Caesar Nero that Peter has in mind when he writes this. What happened was that there was a great fire in Rome. Much of the city was destroyed. And for a number of reasons that had to do with the way the Emperor responded to the crisis, a rumor spread throughout the city that he himself was responsible for causing the fire. So, with the citizens of Rome seething with anger and threatening to depose him, he concocted a plan to shift the blame from himself to what was then a small, little known minority group in the city: the Christians. They were rounded up by the hundreds. Under severe torture, a few of them “confessed”. And then it became open season on them. To mollify the citizens of the city who’d lost so much in the fire and regain their favor, Nero staged elaborate tortures and executions at Circus Maximus, the city’s chariot racing field. Christian men, women, and children were put to death in the most frightful ways imaginable. Some were sewed up inside the still bloody hides of sheep and goats and thrown to lions or packs of wild dogs. Others were crucified, their bodies covered in pitch and tar, so that after sunset, when it got dark, they could be set ablaze and serve as lights in order that the bloodthirsty crowd could continue to watch the continuing spectacle of diabolical horrors Nero had planned for other Christians.

It was to Christians who understood only too well what it was to suffer unjustly that Peter writes these words – Christians who could not have imagined how light and easy we have it today. And doing so, he sets forth Jesus as our example: how he, the only innocent man in the history of the world was falsely charged and condemned to death; and how he, on the cross, suffered and died for our sins, the righteous for the unrighteous. For our sakes, he submitted to all this. He didn’t fight it or lash out against his attackers. He let it happen because it was his Father’s will. He even prayed for the forgiveness of those who were killing him. And because that is what he did for us to save us from the everlasting punishment we deserve, it’s what we who represent him are to do also.

And Peter explains in part why this is necessary; first, because if it happens, it is God’s will. That, by itself, ought to be enough for us. God doesn’t owe us an explanation. He’s a lot wiser than we are. He sees the whole picture. And his love for us knows no bounds. So, if you’re called to suffer unjustly for your faith in Jesus, you can be sure the Lord has a good reason for it. Trust him. But Peter *does* offer us more than that. He suggests that when we are patient and accepting of unjust treatment – that is, when we represent Christ accurately in this regard – it makes a powerful witness to the truth. Then the contrast between our behavior and those who are attacking us is the sharpest, and their lies and false charges against us will be revealed for what they are. And those who are making the attacks and accusations will be put to shame. More than that, others will want to know why we are behaving the way we are – why we’re not acting as they would expect. That’s our opportunity to give the reason for the hope that lies within us; to explain who Jesus is, what he did for us, and what he has yet promised to do. And our testimony will be given weight by our behavior. Our best witness for Christ comes when we most act like Christ. It’s our task to represent him.

And all of this raises the question: how are you doing? For your representation of Jesus to the world, and to your friends and family, and to strangers, and to your enemies, do you think you’d earn an Academy Award or at least a nomination? Or is your performance more the kind that would receive a hail of rotten tomatoes and a hook to pull you off the stage? Are you known as a Zealot for doing good? Is that the way people think about you? And how about when you are treated unjustly, or when someone puts you down or tries to embarrass you because of your faith in Jesus? Do you get angry and defensive? Are you ashamed of your faith? Do you try to hide it so that you won’t have to be embarrassed? And what if something really serious came along: a time of persecution directed against Christians? Do you imagine that you’d try to fight back? Or do you see yourself angrily shaking your fist at the Lord and complaining about it:

“Why, O Lord, are you treating me this way? It’s so unfair!”—essentially telling the Lord that he doesn’t know what he’s doing and casting yourself in the role of far more wise and benevolent God than he is (which is nothing less than blasphemy and self worship)?

Who’s guilty? I know that I am. I mentioned before that none of us are actors. It’s a good thing too. If we were being paid for our representations of Christ, we’d all die of starvation.

And that means we really ought to be working on improving our performance. The question is: how do we do that? The most obvious answer is that we must make it our task to better know the Lord Jesus whom we are to be representing. That’s where we started this discussion: to get into character an actor must thoroughly research his or her subject. And that’s a good start; but it will only take you so far. Because if all you’re trying to do is to get into the character of Jesus like an actor might, then you will only be playing the part and imitating Jesus. You’ll still be a sinner pretending to represent the Lord who is perfect. Even your best acting will be a lie. There’s a much better way.

And that’s to get Jesus and his character into you. He’s not, after all, just some historical person long since dead whose role we are to be play-acting at. He is the living Savior and Lord whose Holy Spirit dwells within us. And that Spirit first came to you in your Baptism – which is exactly where Peter goes in this discussion: to your Baptism – to when Jesus saved you by water and the Word, putting to death your old sinful nature in his death for sin on the cross just like the ancient world was put to death by the Flood, and then making you alive again together with Christ in his resurrection, just like Noah and his family were given a new lease on life having been preserved safely through the water in the Ark – which is a picture of Christ: how those who are in him are saved and made part of the new creation.

But the Flood, the Old Testament shadow of Christian Baptism, was a one time thing. Your Baptism, infinitely more powerful than the Flood that drowned the world because by it you are saved eternally, is something that can be renewed each and every day – even multiple times each day. It happens whenever you see that sinful old nature in you acting badly, not being a Zealot for good, and not properly representing Jesus in unjust suffering; and you put it to death again. You do it by repenting of your sin and confessing it to the Lord – just like we did earlier in this service. Then the old nature, the bad actor, dies. It’s drowned again. And receiving again Christ’s sure Word of forgiveness your second nature, your new nature, the one made in the image of Jesus, who thinks as he does and trusts as he does, is renewed and restored so that you can, by the power of the Holy Spirit not just act like Christ; but actually enjoy Christ acting through you. Then you will by nature represent Jesus.

And this, my friends is our calling as Christians: to represent Jesus at all times. By daily dying to sin and to self and by rising again with Christ, he will give us the grace and power to do so. Let us therefore make it our goal to represent him well. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!