

## RECOGNIZING JESUS

Dr. Jim Gilchrist

January 11, 2008

*Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him (Luke 24:13-16).*

Somebody sent me a story this week, which claims to be a true story about a minister. You can't always believe what you hear about ministers, and I have no idea whether this is true or not, but it fits what I wanted to say this morning anyway, so I'll tell you the story.

It seems that a minister had a kitten that climbed up a tree in his backyard, and then it was afraid to come down. The minister tried to coax the kitten down with milk, but that didn't work, and the tree was not sturdy enough for him to climb, so he came up with a bright idea. He figured he'd tie a rope to his car, throw the other end over the tree, and pull the tree down until he could reach the kitten and rescue it.

Slowly he moved the car forward and the tree bent over, and everything was going fine, until he tried to bend the tree just a little more. All of a sudden the rope broke, and the tree snapped up, and the kitten went sailing through the air, out of sight.

The minister felt terrible. He walked all over the neighborhood, but nobody said they had seen a stray kitten. So he prayed, "Lord, I just commit this kitten to your keeping," and he went about his business.

A few days later he met one of his church members in the grocery store. The woman hated cats, so the minister was surprised to see cat food in her shopping cart. "Why are you buying cat food?" he asked. The woman said, "You won't believe this," and went on to tell him how her little girl had been begging for a cat, but she kept refusing, until finally she told the child, "If God gives you a cat, I'll let you keep it." A few days ago she watched the child go out in the yard and get down on her knees and ask God for a cat. "Really, Pastor, you won't believe this, but I saw it with my own eyes. A kitten suddenly came flying out of the sky with its paws outspread, and landed right in front of her!"

I have no idea whether that's true, but stranger things have happened. Around the church we hear stories all the time, and in fact some of us have the sort of experience almost routinely, where somebody shows up at just the right moment, or offers exactly the thing someone else needs, or says just what needs to be said, right after somebody's been praying.

Yesterday I happened upon a true story about Mother Teresa. One of her nuns called and said she urgently needed 50,000 rupees to start a home for children in the city of Agra. Mother Teresa said she didn't have any extra money, but she would call back. Shortly afterward, the phone rang again. It was a press agency, telling Mother Teresa she had just won a prize from the Philippine government. "What do you plan to do with the 50,000 rupees?" the editor asked. "50,000 rupees," Mother Teresa said. "I think the Lord wants us to build a home for children in Agra."

That sort of thing happens so often that some of us take it almost for granted. We believe in the power of prayer, and in the providence of God, not because it's an article of faith, but because we see it all the time.

Now the interesting thing about the kitten story is that it has a perfectly natural explanation. Imagine two pictures side by side. You see the minister's rope breaking and the kitten flying out of one frame, and then the little girl praying and the kitten falling out of the sky in the next frame, and you say it's all just a funny

coincidence. The little girl prays, the cat lands in front of her, and the minister is the one who flings the cat through the air. You don't need God to explain any of that. It just happens, for purely human reasons, and the little girl interprets it as an answer to prayer, and her mother is convinced enough to run out and buy some kitten chow.

Explaining away answers to prayer is a favorite pastime of skeptics. They assume that if you can point to purely human explanations, then you've shown that there's no need for God, and so you can leave God out of the picture. But that's a false assumption. Just because you could explain something without God, that doesn't mean God is not involved. And if God *is* involved, then to leave God out of your understanding is to miss the most important thing. That's a bit like opening a Christmas present and forgetting the person who gave it to you. Maybe the love behind the gift is more important than the gift itself; if you focus only on the present you miss the point.

One of the great tasks of life is to recognize the presence of God in our midst. We tend to see the things around us, and interpret our experiences, in purely material terms. But what if every good thing in this world is not just a material reality but also a spiritual gift? What if every time we opened a present, as it were, we thought of the one who gave it to us? How rich would life be then, if every good thing that came our way was an occasion for gratitude, a reminder that the power behind all creation loves us and showers us with blessings?

Spiritual explanations and material explanations are not mutually exclusive. In fact, if God is real, how else would God show up in our lives, except through some material means? If a kitten falls out of the sky for a little girl because a minister's rope broke, or Mother Teresa receives a prize in just the amount a sister needs, who's to say that God doesn't bring those things together precisely to show that God is in on the surprise? If somebody shows up at your door just when you need her, who's to say that God didn't steer that person to you? If a check turns up in the mail or somebody offers you a job, just when you're almost broke, how do you know that God hasn't heard your prayers, even if they're only half-formed, and sent you what you need?

And by the way, all the brain research going on these days, where they map out what neurons are firing and what chemicals are secreted when people experience various mental states – that's fascinating stuff about how the brain works, but it proves nothing about whether or not there's something outside us causing the reaction. If you see the woman of your dreams, or the man of your dreams, walking toward you, and somebody measures the quickening of your pulse and the pleasure centers of your brain lighting up, that doesn't mean you're not really seeing someone. Why should anyone assume that if prayers or other spiritual experiences cause parts of the brain to light up, that proves that spirituality is just neurophysiology and God is a figment of the imagination? If God communicates with us at all, within our minds or by arranging things in the world, wouldn't we expect that to happen in some physical way? How else could God get through to us?

In the book of Genesis, Jacob has a dream. He sees a ladder stretching all the way to heaven, and then the voice of God comes to him and promises that all the land around him will belong to his descendants, and all the families of the earth will be blessed through them. Today, thousands of years later, that same land is called by Jacob's other name, Israel, and Jews and Christians and Muslims are blessed by things that happened there.

When Jacob wakes from his dream he says, "Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it!" That's it. That's what people of faith have always found: The Lord is in this place, and we did not know it. That's the perennial discovery of those who seek to know God.

The challenge is to recognize God when he comes. Christians believe that God has come most clearly in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who is the very Word of God made flesh. And yet, as the story of Emmaus reminds us, even those who have seen Jesus might not recognize him, even when he walks by their side.

Why don't they recognize him, that Easter afternoon? Maybe it's because the resurrected Lord looks different somehow. Even under normal circumstances, if we haven't seen someone for a while and the person looks a little different – she's lost weight or changed her hair – sometimes we have trouble recognizing that person. But it also has to do with their expectations. Cleopas and his friend on the road to Emmaus don't expect to see Jesus. They know he was dead, and though there were stories about an empty tomb, Jesus is the last person they expect to see. And besides, they have their ideas of who Jesus is and what he's supposed to do. "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel," they say, explaining the Jesus they think they know to the Jesus they don't recognize.

They don't recognize Jesus because their expectations blind them to the truth, even while the truth is staring them in the face. Finally Jesus reveals himself in the breaking of the bread, and afterwards their experience is the same as Jacob's: The Lord was in this place, and we did not know it!

How often is that true of us? How often is Jesus – or the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of Christ and the Spirit of God – how often is the Lord in this place, and we do not know it?

The answer is: almost all the time. Every time some good thing happens to us, the Lord is in that place, giving us a gift, but if we focus on the gift and not the giver, we do not know it. Every time it occurs to us to do some good thing – visit someone who is alone, or make up with someone who is estranged, or contribute to an important cause – the Lord is in that place, though we may not know it. Even when life is hard, when we dig deep in our souls to find courage or hope or strength to go on, the Lord is in that place, though we may not recognize him.

"Where can I go from your spirit?" the psalmist asks, "Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. ... I come to the end – I am still with you." The truth is, there is no place we can go that the Lord will not be there. The thing is to recognize him, and call on him, and let the Spirit of Christ dwell richly in our hearts.

In order to recognize Jesus and his Spirit in our lives, we have to know the Lord well. But we only get to know him by studying his word in the scriptures, and talking and listening to him in prayer, and sharing with others who know him so that we recognize what he does in this world. After a while, we learn to recognize Jesus, to know the sorts of things he does, and then we see his presence among us.

So often our minds are factories of idols. We don't read the scriptures, we don't pray in a contemplative way, we don't share in small groups with others, and so we don't know who Jesus really is. Instead we make up some Jesus of our imagination. Like Cleopas and his friend on the road to Emmaus, we're so full of what we think Jesus should be that we miss who he actually is. We don't recognize him when he walks right beside us.

But if we really want to know Jesus, he will reveal himself to us. Even if it takes a while to recognize him, we'll look back on things, encounters we've had, and we'll say, "Didn't our hearts burn within us while he was talking to us?" And then we'll know that Jesus is near, no matter where our road may lead.