

The Mystery of Christ

Ephesians 3:1-12

As the nation stumbles into a new year with a daunting and volatile mix of perplexing problems (e.g., a federal government shutdown, the roller-coaster stock markets roiling in convulsion, a possible trade war with China and a Cold War reprise with Russia, not to mention the chaos continuing along the southern border), I've decided to ignore these annoying earthly traumas for something more inspiring and intriguing, and literally out of this world. This past week I've been following all the developments in outer space!

In case you haven't, this has been an extraordinary week in space exploration, especially for those of us who marvel at it from a distance. The other day, the Chinese lunar module, Chang'e-4, triumphantly touched down on the dark side of the moon. Similarly, on New Year's Eve, NASA's OSIRIS-REx successfully orbited the tiniest inter-planetary object that humans themselves didn't put up there, i.e., the asteroid, Bennu, which has a diameter of a little over 1500 feet, making this engineering effort akin to someone scoring a hole-in-one at Shennecossett after driving it from a tee-box in Watch Hill.

Then if this wasn't amazing enough, less than 24 hours later, the New Horizons spacecraft accomplished a speedy fly-by (at 32,000 mph) and sent back digital pics of Ultimate Thule—the distant-most object ever visited by human exploration (roughly a billion miles beyond the schizoid planetary dwarf, known as Pluto). It took over ten hours for New Horizons to send images back to John Hopkins Applied Physics Laboratory of this celestial "snowman" in the Kuiper Belt beyond our solar system, four billion miles from the sun (a distance over 43 times that of earth to the sun). That,

my friends, is mind-boggling! (However, since NASA is currently shutdown and unfunded, Elon Musk stepped in to take credit!)

The question in my own feeble mind all week has been, how in the world (or out of the world) did they do this? How is it even possible to calculate the precise metrics for spacecraft launched years ago to meet even tiny interplanetary objects racing along at thousands of miles per hour and then scheduling them over a holiday weekend and during a government shutdown! Who could have figured that out? Only the incalculable genius of government!

I'm fascinated by all this, obviously, but not particularly well informed, as you can tell. Don't ask me to explain the science, the engineering, the mathematical algorithms, and the computer technology that makes it happen. I can't grasp it. I've read a bit on quantum mechanics and astrophysics, but I'm lost trying to explain the details. I can't even tell you how computers do what they do; I still can't figure out how to work my TV remote! So, I view this past week's scientific achievements as a marvelous mystery, having as I do a mind not properly trained to interpret or explain them (that goes for government as well).

Living with a mystery, however, doesn't reduce its effect. I, like many, will take advantage of someone else's genius to use my smartphone, do my writing or bill-paying on a laptop computer, to push a button and do just about anything in our high-tech world, or to merely marvel and ponder the reality space pioneers are unraveling from the secrets of the skies. The point is, we live with mysteries all the time—we, in fact, depend on them. We may never know how the human brain works—how synapses fire or why certain areas when stimulated produce corresponding responses, but that doesn't mean we stop using our brains. We might not be able to grasp

the nature of human consciousness or why emotions or genes lead us to be attracted to and love certain people and not others, but we live our lives as if these things are natural and normal—not much different than previous generations and past eras.

That said, there is a compulsion within us to either unravel a mystery to figure it out or to impute meaning and purpose to it so that we can come to terms with it and make sense. This is what advances science in its discoveries and it's also what gives birth to theology, in its various forms and expressions. Human progress has been an obvious outgrowth of this. But not all things are meant to be solved, especially if they lie beyond the human ability to know.

The Indian mystic of a generation ago, Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (later known as Osho) provides some perspective on this:

Tao mystics never talk about God, reincarnation, heaven, hell. No, they don't talk about these things. These are all creations of human mind: explanations for something which can never be explained, explanations for the mystery. In fact, all explanations are against God because explanation de-mystifies existence. Existence is a mystery, and one should accept it as a mystery and not pretend to have any explanation. No, explanation is not needed — only exclamation, a wondering heart, awakened, surprised, feeling the mystery of life each moment. Then, and only then, you know what truth is. And truth liberates. ¹

On the surface, this appears contradictory, but at the same time, truth is often discovered in mystery. You won't wonder about things you know.

One way to sense this is in the normal experience of life. Mystery is inherent to life and to belief. We don't know and can't grasp everything that has relevance and meaning to us—we make choices and the options we leave behind remain to us a mystery. How would life be had we taken

¹ Osho, *Never Born, Never Died* (2002), Full Circle, paperback ed., 2005.

another path? Would it have been better or worse? We don't know. We can only wonder.

Likewise, we don't know what lies ahead when we turn the calendar, or as we move from one stage and age to another. We're not certain of what will occur or how long we'll live. It's a mystery inherent to daily life. We can imagine another day; we grapple with our apprehensions about the future; we may make educated guesses of what could transpire. But the core truth is, we won't know it until we experience it in the fullness of time. The mystery is resolved by living into the experience that reveals what was not yet known.

I think this holds particularly true in matters of faith; namely, we make sense of the meaning of Christ in our lives by resolving it almost entirely through experience, not through creedal concepts or theological conjecture. We grasp a sense of the divine through encounters that mystify us—perhaps change our direction or which shape our lives—that tell our story.

Likewise, we derive the ability to trust God through various moments where we experience ourselves doing it, and then holding onto those memories. We might not be able to adequately explain to others what this innermost sense of trust is, but it becomes very real to us by living through it. It often occurs when we take that proverbial step into the Red Sea, not knowing how it will turn out until we sense that waters can part. None of this may make sense to a rational mind seeking explanations for strange, yet meaningful, coincidences that occur in life, or unexpected changes in our outlook, disposition, or character, but that is what we all experience living into the mystery of life, believer and agnostic alike. The mysteries of faith and of life itself (e.g., why is this happening to me? How will things

play out if I make this choice? When will I die? etc.) are only resolved by moving forward into the unknown and toward what yet awaits us. Mystery surrounds us, but it doesn't need to confound us.

It's in this light that I interpret what the writer of Ephesians calls "the mystery of Christ" in our text for today:

...for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

The "mystery," as the writer saw it, was that their world had changed unexpectedly; there was a breaking down of the walls of hostility that divided Jews and non-Jews culturally, socially, and religiously from the previously exclusive benefits and blessing of God. The mystery of Christ was in how it began to unfold in their lifetimes, not in some promised age in eternity. They were living the experience. It was discovered in the power of Christ's Spirit to change common thinking about how people of various cultures, races, social classes, and backgrounds could relate well to each other in kindred spirit. That was extraordinary in the context of the endless tribal divisions of the Roman world, as it still is in many ways in our time.

The evidence for this change was in the new, but daily, experience of the building of trust, of overcoming implicit or open hostility, of shared conversation and finding common values, of mutual caring and sacrificial giving—of a new identity in Christ that bridged or broke down the natural walls of division—all of this helping to form a new reality—a new community—a common bond symbolized by the breaking of bread and sharing the cup of the new covenant of reconciliation between Jew and

Gentile, rich and poor, male and female, slave and free, uneducated and elite, and between the human races (in all their distinctions) and God.

Why this dramatic change came about was part of the mystery of Christ. The writer couldn't explain very well why things unfolded as they did. If this letter was based on previous writings of the Apostle, we certainly know Paul couldn't seem to fully grasp his own change of heart, beginning on the Damascus Road. He couldn't explain how he—a religious zealot feverishly protective of conservative Jewish traditions and beliefs, and scornful of those who would misrepresent them (enough that he became a militant persecutor of the Jesus movement)—would be utterly transformed into one of their most inspired and innovative leaders. It was a mystery. Nor could he easily justify to his rivals why he once was racially exclusive and bigoted as an outgrowth of his piety, only to radically alter his worldview, behavior, and moral sensibilities toward a largely unseen world around him where his new insights were leading him. None of this made sense, at least at first. It was all a mystery.

This change in Paul would have been unfathomable to his former self—certainly to his birth family and friends, as well as many of the early church leaders, who had to learn how to trust him over time. There was no clear explanation for this spiritual transformation, other than where his personal journey and experience convinced him. Paul ultimately resolved this spiritual disconnect by referring to it as “divine grace”—divine love and grace which were enough for his own soul's security to propel him forward in his life and mission without ever looking back. His life became a mystery in Christ.

It could well be, the mystery of Christ we experience is similar, but one more tailored to our life circumstances and personal stories and

experiences. We become the mystery of Christ as we live into the mystery of where life leads us, compelled by God's Spirit. It's a mystery to us—not only in the way the Spirit moves in our lives, but in simply accepting that God's yearnings are greater than our own, certainly universal in expanse and often beyond our imagination, i.e., the divine presence isn't limited to one place, one people, one race, one religion, or any single interpretation or experience. The mystery of Christ—what Paul discovered in his own experience is not unlike what we're still wrestling with, i.e., that the divine Spirit continues to surprise even the most knowledgeable minds with upsetting truth, startling turns, and incomprehensible changes and consequences.

What isn't a mystery, though, is the means through which the Spirit changes any of us, i.e., through an experience of redemptive and sustaining love—a spirit sensed deeply within or generated through unexpected encounters with others and the grace that comes with it—divine love, as it often is, revealed through its human expression. Divinely-inspired love in its most liberal nature is universal, not doled out exclusively to certain tribes who are favored or times when it's convenient and called for. Love's Spirit is what binds human lives together in unexpected relationship. Should we be surprised this is what Jesus taught and practiced, as love is the experience that helps us through every mystery we encounter in life?

Perhaps, for this reason, our faith in Christ leads us to places and circumstances of both certainty and mystery. We don't know all the ways God speaks to the human soul or the religious symbolism or language employed, but we know wherever love is expressed in its bountiful spirit, it's from a love beyond us that will not let us go. In our faith tradition, we

see such divine love embodied and revealed in Jesus Christ, the anointed one, and in all who give evidence of this Spirit.

Like the unfathomable expanse of the universe, the limits of this love are unknown, yet as bright as the stars that guided ancient Magi. It is a spirit of human courage matched by divine love that intends to lead the entire expanse of our human family to a place of extraordinary peace we have not yet discovered.

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