

**“The Essence of Easter”
Sermon by the Rev. Bill Phillips**

Sunday, April 4, 2010

Preface:

All over the world today millions of Christians are celebrating Easter.

I have an interest in the study of religious origins and evolution.

Recently, I had a personal experience of a kind of “resurrection.”

Today I want to have a go at talking about the “Essence of Easter.”

Essence comes from the Latin word “Esse”-to be, to exist.”

Essence is “the fundamental nature of something”-the core of the thing.

Philosophy—“that which constitutes the inward nature of anything.”

Essence is the distillation of a thing-down to its core-no bells or whistles.

Introduction:

To begin our exploration for the Essence we must start with the history.

The ancient pagan people of the world all had some celebration at the time of the spring equinox; usually it was honoring a god of fertility and new life of plants, animals and humans. Estra is one of the oldest pagan gods of fertility worshiped by ancient Germanic peasants 2000 years before Jesus. The Greeks and Romans both had myths, stories, and celebrations around the time of spring equinox celebrating new life of nature. Also the Jewish people

had long before established the spring equinox as the time for Passover to celebrate their God's freeing them from the slavery. It was easy for the first Christian Council of Bishops to pick the first Sunday, following the first full moon after the spring equinox for the weekend of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. A central part of the story is that the Roman Empire ruled the entire known world that Jesus knew. There were Roman soldiers in every town, a Roman Governor and roman court system. Nazareth, Jerusalem, Galilee, and all of Judea were under the complete control of an occupying army.

With this political reality and culture in mind, let's examine the essential elements of the story.

There are three basic elements to the Easter Story. The story is essentially about the Man, the Message and the Myth.

The Man is Jesus of Nazareth, The Message is the Good News, and the Myth is the Resurrection story.

1. The Man, is Jesus of Nazareth.

He was born a Jew, lived about 33 years, and died a Jew. There were no written historical sources for over 50 years.

Born in Nazareth, a small Jewish community of no consequence other than being known as a gathering place for radical Jewish peasants wanting freedom from Rome. Modern archeology has proven that Nazareth was not just a farming village, but also a suburb of Sepherus, a thriving economic community, and a small city with merchants, artisans and farmers.

Education—we do know that Jesus probably attended a Jewish synagogue school, he was tri-lingual. He spoke Aramaic and read both Greek and Hebrew. Very little is known about his early childhood and nothing about his adolescence.

He was a lifelong subject of the Roman Empire. The Emperor, Caesar Augustus, had all Roman coins printed with a picture of Apollo, the sun god on one side and a picture of himself on the other with the words, “son of god.” At approximately 30 years of age he was baptized by John the Baptist and became an itinerant preacher and an apocalyptic prophet. He roamed around a very small area of Judea for several years as a teacher, a healer, and a prophet. A small band of folk followed him and became his students.

Occasionally he drew a larger crowd but predominantly started a few house groups. At this time no one referred to him as Jesus the Christ and there was no such word as Christian. During the week of Passover and Pagan celebrations, Jesus and his followers went to Jerusalem and he encountered

what he considered corrupt and dishonest priests in the Holy Temple of the Jews. He preached against them and in a fit of anger turned over some tables of “money changers.” The priests and the local Roman Mayor, Pilate, held a trial and found him guilty of fostering and promoting disruption and revolt against the Roman Empire. He was found guilty, sentenced to death by crucifixion, which was common in that day, and then was crucified and died. His followers buried him in a borrowed tomb, and left sad and afraid they too might be crucified.

The Message of Good News:

God is Love and God is not angry, mad or going to torture and kill us.

Inclusion was a basic principle of his faith : ”There is neither Jew nor Gentile, Male nor Female, Rich nor Poor, Greek nor Roman, educated on uneducated. All are equal in the sight of God. Think of what this meant in a world where three fourths of the people were slaves and servants. Think of what this meant to the Roman rulers. It was considered blasphemy and inciting a revolution.

Listen to His sermon called the Beatitudes # 640/

- [• Blessed [are] the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven**
- Blessed [are] they that mourn: for they shall be comforted**
- Blessed [are] the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.**
- Blessed [are] they who hunger and thirst for righteousness: for they shall be filled.**

- Blessed [are] the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy
- Blessed [are] the pure in heart: for they shall see God.
- Blessed [are] the peacemakers: for they shall be called children of God.
- Blessed [are] they who are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven].

The two propositions: God is Love and All Are Equal were the primary messages of Jesus. God is not an angry God who demands sacrifice and guilt. God is Love. Human beings are all one family and every person is of worth. Sounds like the first Unitarian and the first Universalist.

3. The Myth of Resurrection:

The first gospel, the gospel of Mark written about 60 A.D. ends with the death and burial of Jesus. After his followers found the empty tomb the gospel ends with these words “they fled from the tomb because they were trembling and astonished, and they said nothing to any one, because they were afraid.” A very different ending from Luke and Mathew, both of which end with story of Jesus visiting with his followers and friends, and then ascending into heaven as the resurrected son of God. Luke was the second gospel written around 70 A. D. and the author was probably a converted Jewish follower. Luke ends the story with a declaration of the resurrection and a reminder of the Seder meal they ate and the risen Jesus stating that he was the fulfillment of the Law of Moses and the fulfillment of the Hebrew prophets. His followers return to

Jerusalem and the Temple blessing Yahweh for the coming of the messiah.

Mathew was the last gospel written around 90 A. D., probably by a converted Gentile. It ends with a command to “go to all nations in the name of the trinity---Father, Son and Holy Ghost. His followers are to go to Gentile nations proclaiming the “good news.” All three of these synoptic versions of the death and resurrection were written approximately 60 to 90 years after the death of Jesus. The writers have three different endings to the story. All three were meant to fit the cause of the group they were championing. These end stories were told to prove that our “Guy”, our leader, our god is the true messiah and the true Son of God. This is one of the later added myths about Jesus. The story of virgin birth and many of the miracles are other examples of this later editing by the new Christian writers.

I maintain that the essence the Jesus movement is found in the character of the man and the uniqueness of the message that God as Love and all people are loved is the Essence of Easter, not the myth of resurrection from the dead nor the birth of a baby fathered not by man but by God. Most Christians, protestant and Roman Catholic alike, claim that the essence is the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus to save us from death and from punishment. After much study of Biblical texts and years of personal thought, I truly believe the man and the message stand alone as the Essence of Easter with no

need for magic or myth. We UUs can sing our own Hallelujah for this kind and loving Jewish man who had the courage to declare that Love is God and that all human beings are included in this Love, regardless of race, creed, age, color, gender, sexual orientation, or social class. Happy Easter!