

Who Is Welcome Here?

Mark 9:30-37

September 20, 2009

Perhaps one of the most challenging books I've read since seminary was Juan Arias' The God I Don't Believe In. It was both challenging because of the theological way in which it was written but also because of the tension and challenge his perspective offered my own theology. The reading of it was one of those life-altering and especially theology-altering experiences.

Arias got the idea for the title of his book from a phrase attributed to Cardinal Maximos IV: "The God that many atheists don't believe in is a God I don't believe in either."¹ Basically, in his book Arias presents a biblical view of God as young, disconcerting, different, poor, jealous, a poet, weak. Throughout the book he summarizes his biblical and theological thoughts in a poem. They are what opened my heart and mind. I want to begin today by sharing a portion of his poem *My God Is Weak*: "My God is not a God who is hard, unreachable, insensible, stoical, incapable of suffering. My God is weak. Love makes my God weak. My God experienced human joy, friendship, the delights of earth and everything in it. My God was hungry and tired and sleepy. My God felt things. My God became irritated and felt anger. And He was as gentle as a child. ... My God was weak with the weak and severe with the proud. He died young because He was sincere. They killed Him because, in their eyes, He was betraying the truth. But my God died without hating anyone. He died excusing His killers, which is even greater than forgiving them. My God is weak. My God broke the old morality of 'a tooth for a tooth,' of small-minded vengeance in order to begin the era of a love and a violence that were completely new. ... It is difficult to accept my weak God, the friend of life, my God who suffered the sting of temptation, my God who sweated blood before accepting His Father's will. This God, this weak God of mine is difficult to accept for those who believe that one triumphs only by conquering, for those who believe that one can defend oneself only by killing, for those for whom salvation is synonymous with force and is not a sheer gift, for those for whom what is human is sin, for those who think that to be a saint one must be a stoic. My weak God is difficult to accept for those who go on dreaming about a God who doesn't seem like us."²

So, how did a theologically astute priest like Juan Arias, a cleric with a degree in dogmatic theology, come to such an understanding of God? Where did he get such ideas? What is the source of his theology?

I think it happened as a result of his reading this book. That's right, the Bible. When read seriously and taken seriously, the stories in this book can cause some really radical perspectives about who God is and who we are and what we are to do as a result of who God is and who we are. Today's account is one of those.

The disciples and Jesus had been traveling for awhile. Last week we heard about the exchange between Peter and Jesus at Caesarea Philippi – Peter announcing that he believed him to be the messiah, Jesus doing a little educating about the way things were going to be played from then on, Peter trying to silence such talk, and as a result Jesus aligning him with Satan and instructing him to get behind him.

Then James, John and Peter went with Jesus up on this mountain and there was this happening – this impressive vision of Jesus meeting with Elijah and Moses. Following that high moment were some unsuccessful healings by the disciples and then they were off to Jerusalem with some more talk about arrests and being killed and even some talk about one of them betraying him. And the disciples continue their confused status but are afraid to ask too many questions.

The next stop on their journey was in Capernaum. Not much is recorded about the walk but we can almost picture the tension that must have been in the air. Jesus must have been walking somewhat apart from the rest of the group – perhaps reflecting to himself about what else he might need to do or say to get them to understand.

Meanwhile, while they were walking, the disciples had this discussion about who was the greatest among them. Some have suggested that perhaps they were starting to get it – starting to understand what the future held and thus started to contemplate who the leader would be once Jesus was no longer with them. Although we aren't sure what they said to one another, we can imagine how the conversation might have gone.

Simon Peter surely would have been the first one to speak. He might have said something like: “Well, it's obvious that I am his right hand man. I am part of the inner circle. I am the spokesman of the group. After all, I was the first one to call him the Christ! I'm obviously more perceptive than the rest of you and thus am the greatest.”

James could have said: “Oh, come off it, Peter! John and I were invited to the transfiguration along with you.”

And Philip could have commented: “Swell. You guys go off for a mystical experience and leave the rest of us to cope with the crowds. I think the people who do the work are the greatest.”

We can easily imagine Andrew chiming in: “Well, dear big brother, let me remind you of something which you have conveniently forgotten. I was called into discipleship first. Indeed, I was the one who invited you to come to Jesus. I got you here. Therefore, I am the greatest.”

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, could have spoken up and offered: “You all miss the point. Greatness is measured by the amount that you have sacrificed. We stood to inherit our father Zebedee's lucrative fishing business. We gave all of that up.”

And at this point Matthew could have chimed in: “Well, if you want to talk about giving up money, I can play that game. I was a tax collector. None of you had as much money as I did. Therefore, I am the greatest.”³

When Jesus called them on their conversation – a conversation they thought they were having among themselves – things got very quiet. They had to have been embarrassed to be caught by their master having an argument about who was the greatest while he was facing going to the cross.

Knowing that they still believed it was all about an earthly government takeover and them ruling over others, Jesus again assumed the position of a rabbi. He sat down and called them to him. The first words he shared with them were: “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” He turned all their arguments about “who is greatest” into meaninglessness. It's not that he didn't want them to be ambitious but that their ambition needed to be about serving and not ruling. It had to do with doing things for others rather than having things done for them.

And Jesus knew, from past experiences with this group of dumbkaufen disciples, that telling them something wasn't enough. And so, Jesus, the master teacher, looked around and saw a young child playing nearby and he positioned the child in the center of the group. Then he picked up the child and said: “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

Boy, did he get their attention with that one. In order to fully understand how radical what Jesus did was we have to remember what the attitude toward children was in Jesus' day. Children were not nearly as important as they are today. In Jesus' day children were considered more like women and lepers and the chronically ill. They had no status - no power. They were the lowest of the low. Children and servants were of no consequence in that world.⁴

John Dominic Crossan reports in his book The Historical Jesus that on fragments of papyrus from that day infanticide was prevalent – that children were often left at the dump and if rescued it was to be raised to be a slave. Crossan's comments on this text include this one: "...to be a child was to be a nobody, with the possibility of becoming somebody absolutely dependent on parental discretion and parental standing in the community."⁵ Beginning to get the picture of just how radical Jesus' words were?

The child in Jesus' visual parable represented the powerless, the poor, the outsiders, the lame, the weak, the nobodies of life. The child represented those who were dependent – who needed things done for them. When Jesus placed that child in the midst of that circle of adult men he crossed all social and cultural boundaries of his day. When he wrapped his arms around the child – when he embraced the child – he proclaimed that whoever "received" – whoever "welcomed" – whoever "accepted" such a child – and the people of insignificance the child represented – received himself.

Who is welcome here? The little ones – the vulnerable ones – the needy ones – the guilty ones – the lonely ones – the sick and depressed ones.

A little boy was riding a bus from one side of the city to the other. He was sitting very close to a well-dressed lady and swinging his legs back and forth in the middle of the aisle like children like to do. And, every once in awhile, his leg would brush the dress of the lady sitting across the aisle from him.

Finally, the woman felt she had to say something. "Pardon me – ma'm, but would you please tell your little boy to keep his feet to himself?" The well-dressed woman looked at the boy as if she hadn't been aware at all that he was there. She shoved him away saying: "He's not my boy. I've never seen him before."

The little boy embarrassingly moved to another seat and sank down as if he was trying to hide. He was fighting back tears as he turned to the lady whose dress he had been kicking and said, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to."

When the woman saw what the reprimand had done to the boy, she felt bad about how she had responded and decided to engage the little boy in conversation. "That's all right," she offered. "Are you going somewhere alone?"

The boy lowered his head and answered, "I always travel alone. My mommy and daddy are both dead so I live with my aunt Maggie. But, when she gets tired of me, she sends me to aunt Elizabeth."

Then the woman asked, "Are you on your way to visit aunt Elizabeth now?"

The boy answered, "Yes, but aunt Elizabeth is hardly ever home. I hope she's home today, though. It sure is cold."

The woman looked at the boy again and said, “You sure are awfully young to be riding on the bus alone.” The boy piped up, “Oh, it’s OK. I never get lost but sometimes I get awful lonesome. So, when I see someone I’d like to belong to like that lady over there I was sitting next to, I sit real close to them and pretend they’re my family. That’s what I was doing when I got your dress dirty. I forgot about my feet.”

Upon hearing that, the woman moved over to where the boy was and she put her arm around him. Then she hugged him in real close.

Jesus took a little child in his arms and he said to (his disciples): “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me.”

There’s a story about a tribe of Indians who at one time lived in the state of Mississippi. They lived next to a dangerous river. The current was so strong that if a person fell in they usually were unsuccessful fighting the current and were swept downstream.

The tribe was attacked by a hostile group of settlers one day. Their backs were to the river and they were greatly outnumbered. Their only chance of survival was to cross the dangerous river. They huddled together and the strong ones put the weak ones – the children, sick and elderly – on their shoulders and started into the river. What they discovered was that the extra weight helped them keep their footing and travel safely across the river to the other side.⁵

“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Who is welcome here? Servants and those who are in need of being served. Being the church isn’t about doing what makes us comfortable. It’s not a social club we’re trying to create here. It’s about being weak for those who are weak – it’s about being vulnerable for those who are vulnerable – it’s about offering forgiveness and grace to those who are guilty. Those who are welcome here are those who are lost, those who are depressed, those who feel worthless, those who are in need of being loved, in need of being accepted, in need of being known, in need of feeling valued.

Let us pray.

Closing prayer: “Oh, Lord, you know the knots tightening up in our stomachs – the hesitancy we feel to respond to such a totally different view of the world. Lord, work within us now – warm our hearts in such a way that we know it is you that speaks in us - it is you that urges. Enable us to sense your forgiveness – your love – your power. Move us forward – open our eyes and ears and minds that we might see the defenseless we have been overlooking or intentionally ignoring and that you want us to help. Hear our desire to be in your presence – strengthen our commitment to you and to one another. For it’s in Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

1. Juan Arias, The God I Don’t Believe In (St. Meinrad, Indiana: Abbey Press, 1974), p. 195.
2. Ibid., pp.111-113.
3. Brent Blair and Staff, “The Measure of Greatness,” www.esermons.com, ChristianGlobe Network, 0-0000-0000-01.
4. Mary Austin, “Being More Childlike,” The Immediate Word (Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing Company, Inc., 2009), September 20, 2009 issue.
5. King Duncan, “Carry Someone with You,” Collected Sermons, www.Sermons.com.