

Living Jesus: The Inward Centre

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In every age, powers press upon and diminish the worth and dignity of people. These systemic injustices are physical, economic, psychological, and spiritual. Jesus was no stranger to these forces and the weight of their impact in the human soul.

When Jesus encountered lives on the margins, he was masterful at observing the multiple sources of suffering and addressing them creatively and compassionately.

The stories of healing in the Gospels have personal and communal implication. His willingness to touch the untouchable, restoring belonging and worth, is an act of resistance against dehumanizing attitudes, cultural norms, and systems. But just as he addressed the physical, social, and economic circumstances of the oppressed, he spoke to the inward condition that oppressed persons experience. Even more powerfully, he spoke as one who was fully human amid these oppressive forces.

Howard Thurman was a spiritual leader in the American civil-rights movement. His highly influential book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, was published in 1949. It is said that Martin Luther King Jr. carried a copy everywhere he went. Thurman describes the heart of Jesus' message as one who was poor and oppressed speaking to the poor and oppressed. Thurman was a mystic who, as a black man growing up in a racially divided country, knew that his dignity and worth came from a deeper inward center. He saw that this was also the primary message of Jesus:

His message focused on the urgency of a radical change in the inner attitude of the people. He recognized fully that out of the heart are the issues of life and that no external force, however great and overwhelming, can at long last destroy a people if it does not first win the victory of the spirit against them.... Jesus saw this with almighty clarity. Again, and again he came back to the inner life of the individual. With increasing insight and startling accuracy, he placed his finger on the "inward center" as the crucial arena where the issues would determine the destiny of his people.

Gospel proclamations like Luke 4:16–18 make it clear that the good news is for the poor, but I sometimes forget that it is from the poor, as well. Thurman wrote that Jesus knew what it was to be a person with his "back against the wall." What does it mean for us, as Christians who come from all varieties of socio-economic circumstances in our world today? Are we listening to the voices crying out who have their "backs against the wall"? As we try to reclaim the soul of our faith amid all the complex, pressing challenges today, are we listening to the Jesus who had no place to lay his head? What does this look like in our spiritual lives?

First, it is a reminder that we each have an inward center that is the source of our true worth and dignity—no matter what any external voice, force, or system might say to us. This is distinctly different from individualism, which prioritizes the false, or surface-level, self above others. This inward center is the place of our deepest connection with God and one another, where our truest belonging and belovedness can be experienced no matter the conditions of our lives.

In *A Testament of Devotion*, Quaker mystic Thomas Kelly wrote:

...deep within us all there is an amazing inner sanctuary of soul, a holy place, a Divine Center, a speaking Voice, to which we may continuously return.

Our identity, our integrity, comes from a place deeper than the shifting opinions and projections of others on the surface of our lives and interactions. Grounding our sense of selfhood in this place liberates us to live more freely and courageously, even if that involves more risk, as it did for the One we claim to follow.

Second, we, too, are called to creatively and compassionately address the whole reality of the lives of people experiencing poverty and oppression.

In the model of Jesus, we work to alleviate physical and spiritual suffering, knowing the two are linked inseparably. Part of alleviating spiritual suffering is making space to hear voices that have been silenced. For those with privilege, this means discernment about the appropriate times to speak out and the right times to use our voices to amplify the voices that need to be heard.

Truly listening to others is a sacred act that requires humility, a willingness to examine our own attitudes and behaviors in light of what we hear. It's a capacity to stay with what is uncomfortable or unsettling to our own assumptions and perceptions. Many stories in our world need to be shared so a greater sense of understanding, solidarity, empathy, and connection can be experienced.

As we do this, we actually gain clarity of that inward center, which is the source not just of my life, but of all our lives. It is the place deep within us where the seed of transformation is always ready to take root.

Third, it is helpful and humbling to remember that Jesus ministered in a politically, religiously, and culturally complex time as One who would have known firsthand the weight of bias and oppression. Listening to Jesus and taking seriously his own context opens us to listen to others on the margins in our own cultures. Jesus knew that the peaceful reign of God was a holistic vision that could not occur without a "radical change in the inner attitude of his people" that would result in radical outward actions of justice and peace.

What is the inner attitude of our hearts? Are we moving toward Jesus, the peaceful One? Are we open to hearing the stories of others and amplifying the voices that need to be heard? Do we trust that deep within us all is an inward sanctuary where our true worth and dignity reside, empowering us to risk on behalf a deeper vision?

