

Jesus: lunatic, liar or Lord?

by Bishop Victor Galeone

"In the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, it's quite obvious that Jesus nowhere claims divine prerogatives." The words were those of a presenter at a workshop that I attended some time ago. She did admit that Jesus claims divinity in John's gospel - but added that this gospel was a late composition of the early Christian community.

What would like to do in this month's message is to walk us through a few verses from the Synoptic (the first three gospels) to show that evening these earliest records, Jesus does claim to be on a par with the one true God, worshipped by all devout Jews from the days of Abraham.

>>Jesus' claim to be on par with God is weighed with Old Testament verses. Which way will the scale tip?

As you read the following couplets, imagine an old-fashioned scale, the balance type with a pan on each end. On one side, mentally place the verse from the Old Testament; and on the other, the saying from Jesus. Then you are the judge.

OT: "The grass withers, the flowers fade, but the word of God lasts forever." (Is. 40:8)

Jesus: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away." (Mk 13:31)

OT: "Remember to keep the Sabbath day holy...the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord, your God." (Ex. 20:8-9)

Jesus: "The Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath." (Mk 2:28)

OT: God commands "Honor your father and your mother." (Ex 20:12)

Jesus: "Whoever loves father or mother more than me, is not worthy of me." (Mt 10:37)

Notice that Jesus places himself above the most basic human relationship we have on earth!

OT: God commands "You shall not kill." (Ex 20:13)

Jesus: "...it was said to your ancestors, you shall not kill. But I say to you, whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment." (Mt 5:21, 22)

OT: God commands "You shall not commit adultery." (Ex 20:14)

Jesus: "You have heard that it was also said you shall not commit adultery. But I say to you, anyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart." (Mt 5:27, 28)

Note that in the last two couplets there seems to be an imbalance in favor of Jesus! Right after quoting the commandment from God, he adds, "But I say to you..."seemingly to give more weight to his words than to God's prophet of the Old Testament ever spoke that way! Finally, let's consider Jesus' trial before the Jewish High Court (Mark 14:55-65). His judges want him executed; but their witnesses fail to supply a capital offense. So Jesus is put under solemn oath and asked by the High

Priest, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of God?" To which he replies: "Yes, I am! And one day, you will see me, the Son of Man, seated on the right side of Almighty God and coming on the clouds of heaven."

At this, the High Priest tore his robe open, shouting: "We don't need anymore witnesses! You heard his blasphemy (=claiming to be God). What is your verdict?" They all voted that he was guilty and should be put to death. Two items in Jesus' reply produced that reaction. First, the right side is the place of honor. It's reserved only for one superior or one's equal. So in saying that he was to be seated on God's right, Jesus was implying, "I am God's equal." And the second divine prerogative Jesus claimed was that he'd return at the end of time on the clouds of heaven. To the Jewish mind, clouds indicate the presence of God - they are his chariot and his alone (Psalm 104:3). Recall the cloud that covered Mt. Sinai and the meeting tent whenever God spoke to Moses.

Some folks still deny that Jesus claimed to be God in the flesh - insisting that he was only a great moral teacher. They fail to realize that a great moral teacher would never claim to be God - unless of course he was really was. In his book, *Mere Christianity* C.S. Lewis explains why:

"A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said wouldn't be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic...or else he would be the devil of hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was and is the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool. You can spit at him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He hasn't left that open to us. He didn't intend to."