

## **Socrates: God's Prophet to a Pagan World**

People who like reading ancient history have often remarked on the many similarities between the Greek philosopher Socrates and the Jewish rabbi Jesus — similarities in what they taught and how they taught it, in their shared faith in the potential of every person they met, and how both died noble deaths as victims of a wounded System which they had hoped to heal. One of my friends who is a deeply committed Christian minister likes to say that God was in Socrates preparing the Greek mind for the coming of Christ — that Socrates was, in his words, “God’s prophet to a pagan world.” I would like this morning to give Wichita’s most thoughtful church a chance to consider that intriguing idea. If you are one of our welcome visitors, I invite you to listen as carefully and creatively as this congregation does every week.

In spite of the fact that Socrates lived four centuries before Christ, we know much more about his daily routine and how he looked. Without even a shred of evidence, Christian artists have almost invariably imagined a Jesus with matinee-idol good looks, but the law of averages would strongly suggest that he looked quite ordinary. We like to think that handsome faces and noble character belong together, but history says otherwise: that a Lincoln may be homely, and a serial killer dangerously goodlooking. Socrates, if we can believe tradition, was not at all handsome: great round face, protruding eyes, thick lips and a snub nose. But anyone who came under the influence of his remarkable mind soon forgot his ungainly appearance. No one in Athens, the great intellectual capital of the western world, seems to have been more popular than Socrates, and during

the 400 years between his death and that of Christ, the Greek and Roman world repeatedly turned to his philosophy to learn how to live.

Like Christ, Socrates had no official headquarters. Both men taught wherever they found an audience: on country walks, in city streets one-on-one or in formal places like the Symposium or the synagogue.

Philosophy was as important to the Greeks as religion was to the Jews, and they liked few things better than debating ideas. Centuries later, when Luke tells us about the Apostle Paul's visit to Athens, he describes her citizens in these words: "For all the Athenians, and even foreign visitors to Athens, had an obsession for any novelty and would spend their whole time talking about or listening to anything new." Socrates liked all kinds of people and his way of teaching them was gently persuasive rather than harsh and accusative. He had, like Christ, a sense of humor; one day while looking around in the market where every-thing an Athenian wanted lay piled up, he said: "Bless me, what a lot of things there are that a man can do without" — words echoed four centuries later when Christ said: *Your life is not a matter of how many things you can own.*" (Lk. 12:15)

Like Jesus, Socrates was immensely popular until people in power found him no longer safe. He was welcomed everywhere — people joking with him, making fun of him, with an undertone of loving delight in the man. He was never pretentious; he never for a moment claimed to have a monopoly on truth. The Greeks had no sacred book, no creed, no Ten Commandments, no formal church. The whole idea of orthodoxy was unknown to them, and they would have laughed at anybody who tried to bind them by some rigid dogma or take

away their dearest right, which was to think for themselves. Socrates wanted true happiness for his fellow citizens, and he knew the formula. “God has sent me to attack this great city,” he said, “as if it were a great horse sluggish from its size, which needs to be aroused by a gadfly. I think I am that gadfly. I will never cease from exhorting you. Are you not ashamed of caring so much for money and for reputation and for [fame]. Will you not think about wisdom and truth and what is good for your souls?” You can hear the echo 400 years later when Christ says that happiness belongs to those who are hungry and thirsty for goodness”? Both men saw themselves as physicians divinely ordained to heal sick souls. They knew the secret of rich and fulfilling life, and for both of them it was a painful puzzle that so many were unwilling to hear it.

Socrates had no interest in being exclusive. He would have applauded that moment when the students of Christ complained that someone was doing a good work who did not belong to their little group, and were told in no uncertain terms that when good is being done we are all on the same side. Both Socrates and Christ felt a strong sense of divine mission. Christ expressed it by saying, “I seek not my own will but the will of him that sent me.” Socrates, at his trial, spoke of “a divine agency which comes to me, a sign, a kind of voice, which I was first conscious of as a child.....” One great difference between the two, of course, was that Socrates had a full lifetime for developing and passing on his thoughts to others, while Christ had less than three years, and perhaps only one year, depending on which gospel account you read. I think most people would agree, whether

Christian or not, that the impression Christ made in such an incredibly short time is without parallel in the history of moral and religious thought.

It's hardly possible to talk about Socrates without mentioning what may be his most famous utterance, one totally shared by Christ though perhaps never so explicitly or so pungently expressed in the Gospels. What Socrates said defined his whole approach to finding the life we were meant to live. Many of you are already ahead of me, hearing the celebrated words even before I say them: "The unexamined life is not worth living." Not somebody else's verdict, but what you learn by caring enough to ask questions and to challenge convention when evidence and honesty compel you to do it. Second-hand truth, accepted on the word of someone else, was unreal to Socrates. The one way to help people was to make them ask, "How much that I have heard all my life is correct? What do I actually believe, as opposed to what I profess to believe? And how much correspondence is there between the image I project of myself, and what I truly am?" Socrates had no wish simply to transfer his ideas into other people's heads. His way was to persuade them, through searching dialogue, to begin a journey of discovery for themselves.

He knew how much of life is shaped by words and the meanings they have for us, so if someone spoke of courage or honor or love he would start asking searching questions, one after another, until you realized you had thought you knew but didn't at all and that it was time for you to find out. Then he would walk away and leave you to do it, believing that only the truth we apprehend for ourselves will be reliable when we need it.

The most brilliant young man in that brilliant city of Athens was probably Alcibiades, who once told a group at dinner in the Symposium, “I have heard Pericles and other great orators, but they never troubled me or made me angry at living a life no more worth living than a slave’s life. But this man has often brought me to such a pass that I could hardly endure to go on as I was, neglecting what my soul needs. I have sometimes wished that he was dead.”

Socrates, of course, would have replied: “It is not I that have done this to you. You have found within yourself a light, and in that new light you see the darkness you have been living in.” Because he believed so profoundly that if we once see the highest, we cannot help but love it, he deliberately tried to make people realize the darkness of their ignorance and evil, and to make them long for light until they caught a glimpse of eternal truth and goodness. One hears the echo again when Jesus promises that those who believe have the power to become sons and daughters of God. The great Greek scholar Edith Hamilton, to whom I have been so deeply indebted through the whole of my teaching life, calls what Socrates created “a new religion, with the soul at its center.”

But as she reminds us, it was a religion without the supernatural apparatus which is a part of so much of religion. No magical doings were ever related of Socrates, no marvels, no miracles. No one has ever been drawn to him because he walked on water or fed multitudes with magically multiplying loaves of bread. What has lived on for nearly 2500 years has been the power of his life, and the indelible impression made by the last

few days of his life. Arrested for heresy, just as Christ would be later, he met his accusers in a spirit of kindly good will. He absolutely refused to save his life by promising to quit teaching, but he did so with great courtesy. He called himself “an instrument in the hands of God,” and explained to his judges that to stop teaching would mean leaving the post where God had placed him. “Strange indeed would be my conduct, O men of Athens, if... when God orders me, I were to desert through fear of death. Men of Athens, I honor you and love you, but I shall obey God rather than you. And to you, and to God, I commit my cause....” 400 years later, another echo: “Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit.”

When the death sentence was pronounced, Socrates comforted his judges for condemning him. “Be of good cheer,” he told them, “and know for a certainty that no evil can happen to a good man either in life or after death. I see clearly that the time has come when it is better for me to die, and so my accusers have done me no harm.” Perhaps he paused for a moment before he said, “Still — they did not mean to do me good, and for this I may gently blame them. And now we go our ways, you to live and I to die. Which is better, only God knows.”

In prison he was serene and thoughtful of those who loved him and were now suffering on his behalf. A friend who was often with him said later to another friend who had been away from Athens at the time, “I could not pity him. He seemed to me beyond that. I thought of him as blessed. I thought that he would be happy in the other world. What I felt was a strange mixture of pleasure and pain.” One of Socrates’ devoted friends offered to bribe the jailers, help him escape. “No, that cannot be,” Socrates told him. No one may do wrong

intentionally. I will not break the law to save my life. I shall die, but I shall die innocent of wrong. This, dear Crito, is what a voice I seem to hear says to me and it prevents me from hearing any other.....Leave me.....to fulfill the will of God and to follow where he leads.” You are hearing still another echo, this time from a garden: “If it be thy will, let this cup pass from me, but thy will, not mine, be done.”

As we would expect, on the last day of Socrates’ life much of the talk in prison was about immortality. Socrates, as usual, had no dogmatic answer for his friends. Earlier on that day he had told them that he “had reason to be of good cheer when he was about to die, and that after death he might hope to obtain the greatest good in the other world — that if the soul is dressed in justice, courage, nobility and truth she is ready to go on her journey when her time comes.” But as that debate went on, as he tried with all his powers to think through whether the soul was in actual, literal truth immortal, he felt within himself a doubt. Looking into the darkness, he faltered. In Edith Hamilton’s words: “All that he had striven for: to see the clear light of the truth, to arouse in others the longing to see it, to lift men up to find the reality of the good, the reality of God, upon which all that there is depends — was this to end in blank nothingness? This was what he faced and the darkness rolled over him as it did when Christ faced it upon the cross.”

He had pointed out to his friends as they held that last, strange discussion that they must be sure to consider his prejudices. *Naturally*, he told them, *I want to believe in immortality. Think how much I have to gain if I can do this. If the soul is immortal, then it is well for me to believe it. If there is nothing after death,*

*then during the short time still left me [if I am mistaken about immortality] my mistake cannot lead me into any harm. Now, let's talk about it....and oppose me if I seem wrong* — insisting to the last moment that they arrive at their own truth.

But even in the midst of so poignant a debate he remembers something: “I really must go [now] and bathe so that the women may not have the trouble of washing my body when I am dead.” When his friend Crito wonders, “How shall we bury you?” Socrates smilingly says, “In any way you like. Only be sure that you get hold of me and see that I do not run away.” And then, turning to the others: “I cannot make this fellow realize that the dead body will not be me. Don't let him talk about burying Socrates, for false words infect the soul. Dear Crito, say only that you are burying my body.”

When the time came for him to drink the hemlock, he had a kind word for the jailer who brought the cup and — according to a witness — “quite readily and cheerfully drank off the poison. “ He was 70 and the temper of Athens, frustrated by defeat in war, had turned against him; he knew his time had passed. There is no question, I think, that he helped prepare the Greek mind for the coming of Christ. Once Socrates was dead, one of his disciples described him as “the wisest, the justest, and best of men whom I have ever known.” Jesus of Nazareth was still four hundred years in the future. Isn't it amazing how often those who morally impact their age are martyred by the very ones they wanted to liberate? In that vein, one writer cautions us never to forget two men who sought to change our world: one we poisoned, the other we crucified. The first was a



fountainhead of philosophy, the second was a miracle of grace we honor each time we come into this room. It is a mark of nobility to be grateful for both of them.

God's prophet to the pagan world spoke a quiet prayer

once which is in perfect harmony with the spirit of Christ:

“Give me beauty in the inward soul; and may the inward

and the outer man be at one.” To which we say, Amen.