

“Christ at the Center”

Week 6: Nalini Jayasuriya, *Christ Mandala*

This week’s image of Christ is a work by Nalini Marcia Jayasuriya (1927-2014), titled *Christ Mandala*. Jayasuriya was a third generation Christian from Sri Lanka whose work integrated her Christian faith with the culture of Sri Lanka, a predominantly Buddhist nation. Her work has been exhibited in London, Paris, Jerusalem, Bangkok, Manila, Tokyo, Toronto, New Haven, and New York. Jayasuriya studied art in London with a grant from the British Council for three years, and later earned a Master of Arts in Religion from Yale University (1984). She lectured



at the University of Tokyo, and taught Art History at Yale Divinity School. She was the Paul T. Lauby Artist in Residence at the Overseas Ministries Study Center at Princeton Theological Seminary (2002-2003), and was given the highest award for the arts by the president of Sri Lanka. Her works are featured in *The Christian Story Today: Five Asian Artists* (2007), and *A Time for My Singing: Witness of a Life* (2004).

Describing her faith and work, Jayasuriya wrote, “Coming as I do from an ancient, diverse and abundant Asian culture...my expression is that of a Christian believer, a Hindu observer, and a student of Buddhism. I have tried to understand the symbolism of these teachings and the many patterned ways in which it was used for visual teaching and visual meditation.” Like Paul who quoted

from the Greek classics to explain the gospel to Athenians (Acts 17:28), Jayasuriya expressed her Christian faith within a Buddhist context, thereby opening non-Christians to the reality of Christ, and giving Christian viewers from differing contexts a new vision of the mystery of the gospel as revealed by Christ.

Iconographically, *Christ Mandala* makes use of the mandala form to express Christ’s self-revelation of the Trinity, and of Christ as Word and Sacrament. *Mandala* (literally “circle”) is a Sanskrit word used in Asian religions to reveal religious truths through image. Jayasuriya has used this form to express the truth of the universal power and presence of Christ.

In this image, Christ is seated at the center of the created order, the cosmos, holding the Eucharistic host, while at the four corners are symbols of the Four Evangelists (counter clockwise from top left), Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The three red circles around the head

of Christ symbolize the Trinity, while the Four Evangelists are seated on either side of Christ. *Christ Mandala* is a vision of Christ, Word and Sacrament, as the truth and center of reality.

Jayasuriya's painting is monotheistic, Trinitarian and Christocentric. Christ, who reveals the Father and the Holy Spirit, is seated at the center reminding the viewer it is only by Christ's self-revelation that one has access to and knowledge of the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Christ, the Word (*Logos*) at the center of creation, is the foundational theological statement of John's gospel. John 1:1 reads, "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*" John affirms "all things were made through him" (1:3). In Colossians, Paul writes, "*He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created*" (1:15-16).

In this painting, Christ is the content of the paschal mystery expressed in 1 Timothy 3:16: "*The mystery of our religion is great: He was revealed in flesh, vindicated in spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory.*" Based upon this verse, Martin Luther wrote, "Yet if I were to speak according to the usage of the scriptures, I should have only one single sacrament, but with three sacramental signs" (*The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, 1520). For Luther, the sacraments were signs of the single sacrament that is Christ (in 1520 Luther still counted confession as a sacrament, thus his use of three signs).

However, a further dimension of Jayasuriya's painting needs to be considered as it gives Christian witness within her own Buddhist context. When the Lord spoke to Moses (Exodus 3:14), saying "*I am who I am*" or "*I will be who I will be,*" God was saying something absolute and central to God's own being. God is a self-revealing God who we know only through God's own self-revelation. Christ, the Word become flesh, reveals the God who exists beyond human limitations of time and space.

What Jayasuriya has done is to remind us of the biblical truth that Christ is at the center of everything. Living in a Buddhist context, she evokes the Buddhist concept of "thusness" (*tathagata* in Sanskrit and *nyorai* 「如来」 in Japanese) pointing to the one who is beyond all coming and going, the one who is the center and source of all reality and life. John 1 and Colossians 1 point us to the paschal mystery of our faith, whom Luther called the "one sacrament" – *Christ who is Word and Sacrament* – Christ at the center of our lives.

Lutherans talk about the "ministry of word and sacrament" like it was an easy to grasp organizational statement rather than the way in which we are called by God to live as the body of Christ visible in the world. Jayasuriya helps those of us who are steeped in the Enlightenment tradition of rational thought and its approaches to life to realize once again "*God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth*" (John 4:24). God is beyond us, and yet "*the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen its glory*" (John 1:14).

As people living in the twenty-first century, aided by technologies beyond the wildest imagination of people of the past, we remain profoundly limited in knowledge and absolutely tied to this planet. We can leave the ground for brief periods, but must always return to the earth. Only by God's grace through faith do our souls finally experience true freedom and access to the eternity of God's Word, through whom all things were made. Christ, at the center of all that is, became human *for us*, so that the Word and Sacrament might dwell within us. In the holy supper we receive "the bread of life," whose word of grace forgives the sins of the world.

Christ Mandala leads us into the heart of faith, Christ Jesus, the living Word of God. Amen.