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Romans 1:1-7
*Jesse's Truth**

David Worley

By now everyone has heard Jesse Ventura's (former wrestler and governor of Minnesota) comments that "organized religion is a sham and a crutch for weak-minded people who need strength in numbers."

Jesse is partly right.

While we were "weak" Christ died for us. He died for the ungodly. Together, "in numbers," we do find ourselves enduring the failings of the weak, including ourselves. We are not ashamed of the power we have experienced in the gospel of God, a power needed for the weak.

But . . . shame on us, at least some of us.

Where Jesse Ventura gets it wrong he gets it from many spokespersons for "organized religion," spokespersons for Christianity. Jesse understands Christianity as a grand medication scheme for human ills. God is the great pharmacist in the sky who dispenses relief . . . the Christian religion, a kind of medicine cabinet for the weak.

Jesse was not the first to detect this as a public face of Christianity.

*This homily was delivered in chapel at the Institute for Christian Studies, Austin, Texas on October 7, 1999. President Worley graciously consented to the faculty's request that it be included in this issue of *Christian Studies*.—*Editor*

Many others, not the least Marx and Lenin, have described religion as an opiate, or less severely, an Excedrin for the masses.

Such criticisms may be closer to the truth than we would like to admit. Too often the gospel is construed primarily as individual rescue from personal troubles and unease. The only news proclaimed is news affecting my immediate situation. It must be relevant to me.

Jesse is on target in perceiving much Christian talk to be talk about protecting me now or keeping me happy now or comforting me now. Certainly the gospel effects salvation, certainly the gospel is relevant to our real needs, but that is not the gospel.

The gospel is God's righteousness. It is first and foremost the gospel of God. It is talk about God and His name and not first about me. It is not first about Jesus as my personal savior. It is first and last about God, His glory, His honor, His name.

We announce, or at least we should announce, and repeatedly, that the most remarkable human event ever was actually a God event. The body of an executed man disappeared from his tomb even though police were posted and guarding the area. But such disappearance paled in comparison to what happened next. The dead man was clearly seen to be alive three days after his death by many, many witnesses.

Jesse Ventura has probably not been confronted with this message. Jesse's "minister" told him that he knew Jesse would come to church (to religion) when he needed to. After all, that is what Christianity is about. Coming to the medicine cabinet when we don't seem to be able to heal ourselves.

But again that is not the gospel.

The gospel is that this man who came back to life did not die again, that this man became the real King, the only one worthy of honor in politics, the King God had promised long ago through the prophets to the people of Israel, a King through the very lineage of King David of Israel, a son of Jesse.

Another Jesse, at another time, had a son named David. And the only true and living God had promised that the kingdom and reign of this son of Jesse would be an eternal one. The man who had come back to life was the one who inherited the throne of this David. He was now the ruler. He is now the King of Kings and Governor of Governors.

The gospel is God's way of making things right through the gracious reign of King Jesus. Such language and logic may not be altogether intelligible or, even less so, relevant to many. Paradoxically, it takes one asking and seeking for *terra firma* to understand language and logic of an eternal weight.

Jesse Ventura would like to be King but it seems nobody has confronted him with the only one worthy of being King, the one slaughtered like a silent lamb, the one who is now King, whose Kingdom spreads without assault or coercion, during the night, growing . . . outside the lights and noise of the political or wrestling arena.

Woe be unto us who have imaged Christianity in the image of Adam, seeking to go our own way, to be our own gods, seeking what looks good, tastes good and feels good. That is not the gospel. Jesse Ventura thinks it is. Who can blame him? Better blame and shame ourselves.

The gospel is God desiring to create, to create out of nothing, to create a people for Himself, a holy people, calling a people, calling them beloved, calling them saints, making things right in the image of His son, sharing His glory, with His children, by degrees.

The gospel is God honoring His name, preserving His name, protecting His name, extending His name. The gospel is God's righteousness, God doing the right thing, righting the wrong, unifying the universe, healing cosmic divisions, keeping His promises, sacrificing His own life within, without, absorbing hostility, seeking no revenge, permitting, intending, designing the sacrifice of life itself to define love, to define the heart of God.

Yes. As long as Jesse Ventura sees billboards announcing Christian classes designed to assuage my every conceived and conceivable weakness, Jesse has got it right . . . organized religion is (ironically) a crutch for the

weak minded.

But that . . . that is not the true gospel of God. And that is not the people God has called His own . . . whom he set apart, whom he foreknew . . . whom he justified, whom he is, now, by degrees, glorifying.

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