

Marines and the Son of David

Gas station in San Diego, 1975 when a Drill Instructor

A man saw my bumper sticker indicating I was a Christian. And noticed my Marine Corps sticker and he asked me how I could be both a Marine and a Christian.

The obvious throw away is that he apparently wanted only atheists and heathens serving in the military.

But, he asked a pertinent and, for some people, difficult question, especially given the popular notion that paints Christianity as a wimpy, limp wristed, flower child endeavor (it was the 70s!) that knows only a skewed definition of love with no thought to righteousness or justice. This version is held by those, I am convinced, who never bothered to open the text of Scripture.

When I read the Bible here is what I find –

The entire focus is the relationship of the LORD God of the universe and the epitome of his creation-man. It is about the close relationship they enjoyed when man was first created, the severing of that relationship through disobedience and God's plan to reforge that relationship. That reforging is a matter of love, of justice, and of righteousness. To separate any of these from the others weakens or even negates the true definition.

The definition of those three words finds their greatest expression in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the anointed of God, his Messiah, his Christ.

So, who then is this Jesus, what did he say, and what does he happen to do with Devil Dogs?

First, his name. It means Savior. The first person who bore that name in the Bible is Joshua (the Hebrew pronunciation of Jesus), the son of Nun, the successor to Moses. He is the one who led the children of Israel in their conquering of and occupation of the land of Promise, the land God promised to Abraham and his seed. To read his book is to read Israel's Landing Party Manual. It is a series of battles after battles. The book ends with Joshua telling the people of God, after they had settled into the land that he and his family was going to served the LORD. It is no accident that the Savior born in Bethlehem bears the same name as the son of Nun.

Of the same Abrahamic line comes the shepherd David, the one anointed King after the failure of Saul. It is he who penned the great Shepherd's Song that has comforted so many Marines through so many trials, tribulations, and treks through the valley of the shadow of death. A quick note, no matter what kind of bad ass you think that you might be, his rod and his staff is what sustains you on that long journey, not your own misconstrued concept of you feeble abilities. I know that it is true of the trek my wife and I made with our two sons and I highly suspect that there are several here that can attest to the same thing.

Remember also that this shepherd who wrote so well was also a warrior. As a youth he took out Goliath, and, I would argue, was about to take out four more of the kin of the giant if they hadn't beat such a hasty retreat. He was also known for killing his tens of thousands against Saul's mere thousands. So too, Psalm 144 is attributed to David, wherein we find written, 'Blessed be the LORD my rock, who trains my hands for war and my fingers for battle.'

But, my good major, you might say, what of Jesus and his message? First, one of the primary ways of referring to Jesus was as the son of David—this title is throughout the New Testament. Second, his kinsman, John the Baptist, as he was baptizing folks he was asked by some soldiers what they should do, and he, obviously very familiar with soldiers tells them not to take anyone's money by force, do not falsely accuse someone, and, and here is how I know he knew soldiers, not to complain about their pay! Notice, however, that he did not tell them to quit soldiering. Jesus himself, noted that the one person who showed the greatest insight concerning the ways of God was a Roman Centurion, saying, 'I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such great faith.' And in the book of Revelation, we see this same Jesus returning to the earth riding a horse and wielding a sword to execute judgment and his is followed by the hosts of heaven. He is returning as a warrior to execute justice and begin his rule.

This same Jesus, in one of his most famous and pointed comments, a comment that flies directly to the heart of a soldier, said that the greatest love that a man can display is demonstrated by his willingness to lay down his life for his brother. This was picked up by Julia Ward Howe in that most famous of all American hymns, the Battle Hymn of the Republic, where she wrote, 'as he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free.'

This has ever been the greatest dedication of the American fighting man, the willingness and utter lack of hesitation to lay their lives on the line in order to preserve the lives of others and their freedom. This is the connection we have to what that young man who confronted me in that parking lot completely missed and failed to understand. Love is found throughout the words of Scripture but that love is never without a cost and is always in the pursuit of justice.

Marines, in the greatest sense we serve and have served as an expression of love, love for our country and our fellow Americans. And we have presented ourselves ready to pay the highest price to preserve them and to preserve others who find themselves oppressed and denied their basic, God given rights as men. As we gather here together, celebrating the young men that we were so long ago, just setting out on our journey to do as our Corps and our Country asked us, let us now in particular remember those of our Company who have crossed over the Jordan, who have laid their packs down and have reported in to Marine Barracks Heavenside, some of whom have with their blood paid the highest price of love.