

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO NORMAN MAILER
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REV. RICHARD M. FEWKES
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More than a decade ago Norman Mailer published a fictional autobiographical Gospel of Jesus, called, **The Gospel According to the Son**. I was intrigued to see what one of our great American writers would come up in such an attempt, so I got the book, read it with great interest, and did a sermon on it. Well, it turns out that a year or so before he died, Norman Mailer published another religious book, this one, **On God: An Uncommon Conversation** with Michael Lennon, an emeritus professor of English at Wilkes University. Again, I was intrigued to see what Norman Mailer had to say about God the Creator some ten years after his account about the Son. So, I got that book, which I also read with great interest. And then he died. I thought, maybe, since he resided in Provincetown, here on old Cape Cod, where he lived a good part of the year, that perhaps it was time to do another sermon on Norman Mailer's religious views. So, here I am and here you are. Let's see what we can come up with.

Norman Mailer achieved celebrity status at age 25 in 1948 with the publication of his first book, a novel, **THE NAKED AND THE DEAD**. He went on to author some 30 plus books over a period of 60 years, two of which won him Pulitzer Prizes, one for his study of the American psyche during the Vietnam War, **ARMIES OF THE NIGHT**, in 1968, the other for his masterful portrayal of the life and death of convicted murderer, Gary Gilmore, **THE EXECUTIONER'S SONG**, in 1980.

This was not the first time Norman Mailer attempted to write about famous people. He tried his hand at Mohammed Ali, Pablo Picasso, Marilyn Monroe, and more recently, Adolf Hitler in **The Castle in the Forest**. Being a celebrity of sorts himself he confessed he enjoyed writing about larger than life figures. "I have always been fascinated by worthy protagonists," he said. Mailer's version of Jesus' Gospel was the first time he had written extensively about a renowned and revered religious figure, and one certainly more famous than himself, Jesus of Nazareth, and now, of course, we have God, the Creator of the Universe. Worthy protagonists indeed! In writing about Jesus, Mailer noted that "there was the added challenge, the artful difficulty, of writing about someone who is nicer than yourself. That is very hard to do." At least he was honest about the attempt. The Jesus bit was fictional. The God piece was his own personal religious and theological views.

Mailer, who was of Russian-Jewish descent, said of himself, "Ultimately, for better or worse, I am a religious writer. I have my own religion, and by that I mean a private religion with personal beliefs." Mailer described himself as an existentialist who long had an "obsession with how God exists." He viewed the world as a field of struggle between forces of good and evil, God and the Devil, and God was by no means the guaranteed victor. His God is a finite infinite God, meaning that though He is indeed powerful, He is less than all powerful. He could lose the game and his experiment in creation could end in failure. His God is the Great Artist, and like all artists, He has successes and failures, his characters, animals and humans, are constantly surprising Him with their own successes and failures, which he failed to anticipate, and so the evolutionary experiment continues, with changes both divine and demonic, and God not knowing what the final outcome will be.

Back in 1958 Mailer declared, "God is in danger of dying....He exists as a warring element in a divided universe, and we are...perhaps the most important part of His great experience." In his Jesus Gospel Mailer takes this notion "of God's vulnerability" and grafts it "onto the Christian story of a God who does indeed die" (Paul Baumann, BOSTON GLOBE), and then is resurrected into a world that 2,000 years later is still far from the Kingdom of Heaven.

Norman Mailer is not the first writer to attempt a novelistic portrayal of the life of Jesus. Charles Dickens and Leo Tolstoy tried it as did D.H. Lawrence and Nikos Kazantzakis. D.H. Lawrence, in his little novella, **THE MAN WHO DIED**, tells the story of a Jesus who survives his ordeal on the cross, taken down and presumed dead, and then later revives in the tomb from his unconscious stupor. He then escapes and wanders through the countryside seeking the meaning of human existence which he discovers in a temple of the goddess Isis by the waters of Lebanon through a sexual encounter with a young woman whom he impregnates. This is, of course, far from what the Gospels relate and is pure Lawrencian fantasy.

Nikos Kazantzakis' novel, **THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST**, was made into a highly controversial movie, controversial because it portrayed a very human Jesus who experienced temptation and thoughts of sexual passion. The so-called "last temptation" was one that came to him during his dying moments on the cross. He has a dream that instead of following his divine destiny as a martyr and a savior he chooses instead to fall in love with Mary Magdalene, to sire children with her and raise a family, in other words, to be a normal human being and fulfill his natural desire to love and be loved as a human being, a husband, and a father. He is tempted, but in the end he embraces his destiny as a suffering servant and son of God.

The last temptation of Norman Mailer's Jesus is not love or sex as with Kazantzakis or Lawrence, but revenge. When one of the Roman soldiers torments him while he is hanging on the cross the voice of the Devil speaks in his ear: "Join me," he says, and "I will introduce this Roman to a few humiliations I can lay upon men. There is no pleasure greater than revenge itself. And I will bring you down from the cross." Though tempted he chooses not to yield. The last thing he wants is to die with a curse in his heart. He realizes how blind and self-deluded his tormentors are and he prays for their forgiveness. His last thoughts, in Mailer's Gospel, were "of the faces of the poor" and how beautiful they were to him. Mailer's Jesus has a very strong social conscience.

Other myths and legends about Jesus surmise that he traveled wide and studied in India and the far east before assuming his prophetic role. Mormans believe that after his resurrection he came to America and preached to native tribes on these shores all of which is recorded in the Book of Mormon.

Norman Mailer's Jesus does none of these things. His days on earth are confined to the locale of Palestine and its environs. In fact Mailer's Jesus follows pretty closely the accounts already recorded in the four Gospels. He rearranges the narrative stories a bit, fills in and elaborates upon them, but he does not wander too far afield of the Gospel accounts. Mailer takes his readers into the world-view of the Gospel writers, a world in which God's voice still speaks to his prophets, the devil or Satan is a personal being who contends with God for control of the creation, demons are cast out of possessed souls, miraculous healings take place, the blind are made to see, the dead are raised, water is changed into wine, crowds of people are fed with only a few loaves and fishes. We experience this

strange world through the eyes and consciousness of the main protagonist of the story, Jesus, the Son of God.

It is a fact that Jesus left behind no writings of his teachings or his life. What would happen if by some miraculous means we found a first-hand account of Jesus' life and teachings from the Master himself? That is what Mailer attempted to give us in his first-person narrative **The Gospel According to the Son.** Mailer's attempt reminds me of a course I once took when still a theological student at Andover Newton. It was called, "The Psychological Use of the Gospels." What we were asked to do each week was to read one of the healing incidents from the Gospels and to reflect upon it by taking ourselves inside the consciousness of the characters in the story, including Jesus himself, to imagine what he was thinking and feeling as he was asked to heal those in need. It was an interesting exercise. It helped me appreciate the power of the Biblical stories regardless of whether I thought they were historical fact or religious fantasy. What Mailer has done is to extend this exercise in religious imagination to the entirety of the four Gospels and to do it solely through the consciousness of Jesus himself.

It is interesting that Mailer begins his Gospel by having Jesus say that there is much exaggeration in the four New Testament Gospels, that they put words in his mouth that he never uttered, that they described him as gentle when he was in fact pale with rage. Jesus says, "Their words were written many years after I was gone and only repeat what old men told them." And then he says, "So I will give my own account." But his account sticks pretty close to what the Gospels have already told us.

The most interesting part of Mailer's GOSPEL is his account of the encounter between Jesus and Satan in the wilderness following his baptism by his cousin, John the Baptist, and his extended period of fasting. Mailer is at his most creative here as he describes Satan "dressed in robes of velvet that were as purple as the late evening," and wearing "a crown as golden as the sun." Jesus says to himself, "The Devil is the most beautiful creature God ever made." After refusing to accept the offer of wine and roast lamb from the Devil's hand Jesus is amazed to hear Satan say that he has a better understanding of God's creation than the Lord Himself who has lost touch with the creatures and spirits he has created. Moreover, he tells Jesus that God is not really in control of his creation, that he is less than all powerful, that he is but one god among many, that the breadth of His rages are unseemly for a great god, that He issues too many threats, and that He is not even in command of Himself. What amazed Jesus was that Satan did not inspire fear but comfort, that he could talk to him like a companion drinking wine in a tavern.

Though he manages to resist the Devil's enticing offerings and temptations he does not escape from the encounter unscathed. As Satan made ready to take leave of him he says to Jesus, "Having high regard for you, I would like to touch your hand." Jesus reports, "because I had wanted him to leave, I touched my right hand to his, and knew in the same instant that I had surrendered a share of the Lord's protection." I suppose the lesson here is that if we touch evil, even if we do not consent to it or practice it, we are nonetheless tainted by it.

The other interesting character in Mailer's GOSPEL is the figure of Judas. Mailer has Jesus utterly intrigued by Judas, so much so that he tells us that he loved Judas even more than he loved Peter whose faith was "blind as a stone" in contrast to Judas whose faith hinged on how Jesus would respond to the poor and oppressed. Jesus says he truly admired Judas whose "beliefs were as powerful

to him as were mine to me." Mailer gives us nearly ten pages in developing Judas' character and relationship to Jesus, more space than any other disciple. Even when Judas betrays Jesus with a kiss he does not condemn him, for he feels in his heart of hearts that Judas still loved him more than he knew. And when he learns from the Roman guards that Judas had returned the 30 pieces of silver paid to him by the elders and then hanged himself Jesus has all he can do to prevent himself from weeping from one side of his heart to the other.

Near the end of his GOSPEL Mailer's Jesus tells us that "God and Mammon still grapple for the hearts of all men and women", and that "since the contest remains so equal, neither the Lord nor Satan can triumph." Nonetheless, he tells us, "the Lord sends what love He can muster down to that creature who is man and woman."

Mailer does indeed have some unorthodox views about God and Humanity. Reincarnation and karma are part of the scheme of things and work their way into the evolutionary process of change and development, but not everybody gets reborn, some are dropped by the wayside of the road of life and cease to exist. God decides who gets to be reborn and who does not. It was God's intent that human beings would learn to communicate telepathically, which sometimes we do, but technology, which he considers more a work of the Devil than of God, fouls up the divine intent and human beings are in danger of losing their potential for higher powers of mind and spirit. There is a basic dualism to Mailer's religious and theological thought: the struggle between forces of good and evil exist in the human heart, but also in the divine being and within the creation itself. Will goodness eventually triumph? Not even God knows what will happen and how it will end.

What Mailer offers us is neither a God who is all powerful nor a Son who is perfect love, but a creative divine power that is caught up in the struggle and passion of life and whose will for love and justice is still trying to make itself known in the human heart. This is not a rational Unitarian Gospel, nor an irrational fundamentalist reading of Scripture. It is instead an exercise in literary imagination taking us inside the consciousness of one who struggles to make sense of both his full humanity and his divine identity, a struggle, I would contend, that every human being must come to terms with as we choose the values that give our lives meaning and which bind ourselves irrevocably to one another and to the power of being that gave us life.

As Unitarian Universalists we are free to choose--guided by our own reason, experience and conscience--what beliefs about Jesus and God are most meaningful and sensible to us. What Norman Mailer does for us is to invite us to use our imagination as well as our reason in that endeavor, and that we just might learn something about ourselves in the process.