

What can Christians give? Pertinent visions

by [Garret Keizer](#) in the [February 16, 2000](#) issue

In this new century, any credible answer to that question needs to be prefaced by what we cannot give. “I have no silver or gold,” says the apostle Peter, “but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.” Perhaps one of the things we Christians no longer have to give, and probably never had to give, is a neat solution to every human dilemma. But we can give something more precious than solutions. We can offer visions of abundant life.

- We can offer a vision of charity in controversy. All the divisions that exist in society at large also exist in the church. Often we take that as an affliction; often it is. But it has the potential to be our glory as well. If we can embrace the kingdom of God—that is, an awareness of God as the only real absolute—we can show the world something beyond the tentative peace that grows from “understanding our differences,” namely, the peace that passes all understanding.

This will take more than negotiating a temporary ceasefire at the altar. It will require us to remember the meaning of the altar. Our ancestor Abraham was willing to sacrifice to God the living embodiment of nearly everything he had come to know about God. What theological or political position does any of us hold that is more “nonnegotiable” than an only child conceived in old age as the fulfillment of a divine promise? If we can gather as people prepared to sacrifice our most dearly held positions for the sake of God, we shall be able to hold those positions even more dearly in the name of God, and in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

- We can offer a vision of indivisible human nature. The preceding century has witnessed the image of God cloven in every conceivable way. We have seen human welfare considered apart from nature’s welfare. We have seen men and women defined as virtually separate species, with a “feminine consciousness” and a “masculine consciousness”—which can begin to sound eerily reminiscent of an “Aryan science” and a “Semitic science.” We have seen love detached from sex, and sex from pro-creation (by which I mean something inclusive of but much larger than making babies) to become a sort of con-creation of ritualized abuse and rationalized abandonment.

We have seen private morality separated from public morality, based on the dubious premise that a man who cannot keep his word to the woman who gave him a child can nevertheless keep his word to me, who only gave him a vote. We have seen social justice held aloof from economic justice—so that the current ideal of fairness is one in which people of every race, creed, gender and sexual orientation eat their breakfasts out of a garbage dumpster while people of every race, creed, gender and sexual orientation get to look on and laugh.

We take apart until we come apart; with the help of our more sophisticated drugs and gismos, we separate our own minds and bodies. We have come to exist in life the way Egyptian pharaohs existed in death, with our hearts in one little box and our guts in another, with our sanitized flesh swaddled in infantile comforts and our disembodied souls distracted by extravagant caches of junk. (“Whoever dies with the most toys wins.”)

Against this fragmentation, Christianity offers its vision of a fully resurrected Christ: an image of human nature grievously wounded but gloriously whole, an image of divinity that opens our eyes by spitting onto the ground. I am talking about an earthy faith, wholly spirit and wholly flesh, that allows for no tyranny in the one because it allows for no contradiction between the two. It may sound precious, but I wonder if a first step is to begin making, literally making, the bread and wine of communion. We might begin by digging up the church lawn to plant the grain and the grape.

- We can offer a vision of faithfulness in the rearing of children. The preceding century has also been witness to one of the greatest nondebates of all time, the debate over so-called family values, which conservatives have used as a thinly veiled pretext to denigrate single parents, working women, gays and lesbians, and poor folk in general; and liberals have used as an opportunity to brush up on their famous ostrich impersonation: “What family breakup? I don’t see any family breakup, and anyway, you don’t want to go back to Ozzie and Harriet days, do you?”

No, what we want is to move ahead to a place where children are the chief beneficiaries of human eros rather than its worst casualties. If we can find the courage—I do not believe it would be difficult to find the scripture—we can bear witness to a community in which the form of family life is secondary to its function, where a Christian family is known not by its conformity to certain “norms” but by its fruit. We need to be as zealous, though, in defining the fruit as in defying the norms. It would not be hard to do. In fact, a child could do it.

- We can offer a vision of shared property. “All who believed were together and had all things in common.” All right—what about one thing in common? What about a shared dental plan? Shared ownership of a camcorder? A shovel? We need to move, however meekly, beyond the model of having no common property except a church building where the bathroom faucet never stops dripping until the faucets in every member’s home and second home and RV and tree house have been made to stop dripping. We strive in vain to come together across a landscape walled and moated with our own private kingdoms. We shall never meet as Christians, as equals and as friends unless we gather first in the kingdom of God. In other words, we paint the church first, and then we help one another paint our houses—*after* we guarantee that all have houses. Who was it that said, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also”? The name is on the tip of our tongues.

We can also offer a vision of martyrdom. Tertullian said that “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church,” and the church in Europe and North America will not survive without reseeded. Yes, it is unlikely that any of us will find the opportunity to be thrown to the lions, even if we find the nerve. As far back as the 19th century, Carlyle wrote: “If Jesus Christ were to come today, people would not even crucify him. They would ask him to dinner, and hear what he had to say, and make fun of it.”

But we make a mistake if we assume that martyrdom is no longer an option for us—or never a duty. We have a phrase that we probably speak with the same hushed horror as people once spoke of Golgotha or the arena: “a ruined life.” To ruin one’s life, in current parlance, is to make misguided decisions, be they moral, immoral or amoral, that result in the loss of any privilege guaranteed by a middle-class “lifestyle.” I predict that the Christian martyrs of the 21st century will be men and women who elect to “ruin their lives” for the sake of justice, sanity and love. As the Christian martyrs of the first three centuries were accused of impiety, cannibalism and incest—i.e., the worst crimes that the Romans could imagine—the martyrs of the 21st century will be accused of hating progress and lacking self-worth, of *not belonging to the 21st century*—in short, of the worst crimes that our own empire can imagine.

Like their predecessors, these martyrs will be known by the joyful abandon with which they embrace their course. They will remind us of Cyprian leaving a generous tip for his executioner. A man will take upon himself the status of a single mother, and adopt an extra child besides. A woman will downgrade her computer system until there is nothing left but the clicking of a cricket on her windowsill. She will sing along. Children will care for their aging parents and, facing down a disgust once reserved for cannibals and ghouls, they will dare to do things that are *not fun*.

Will the world be changed by such a witness? Probably not all of it, though perhaps a part. Does the result matter that much? I once heard Elie Wiesel tell the story of a prophet who came to a city and delivered his message

every day in the marketplace. After a time his ranting became a fixture of the city's life and people regarded him with amusement when they regarded him at all. Finally, a small boy, pitying the old man, approached him and said, "Sir, why do you keep crying aloud like this every day, year after year? The people here will never listen to you."

"I gave up hope that they would listen to me a long time ago," said the prophet. "I go on crying lest I begin listening to them."