



The Messiah, Ray Bradbury

The Messiah

“We all have that special dream when we are young,” said Bishop Kelly. The others at the table murmured, nodded.

“There is no Christian boy,” the Bishop continued, “who does not some night wonder: am I Him? Is this the Second Coming at long last, and am I It? What, what, oh, what, dear God, if I were Jesus? How grand!”

The Priests, the Ministers, and the one lonely Rabbi laughed gently, remembering things from their own childhoods, their own wild dreams, and being great fools.

“I suppose,” said the young priest, Father Niven, “that Jewish boys imagine themselves Moses?”

“No, no, my dear friend,” said Rabbi Nittler. “The Messiah! The Messiah!”

More quiet laughter, from all.

“Of course,” said Father Niven out of his fresh pink-and-cream face, “how stupid of me. Christ wasn’t the Messiah, was he? And your people are still waiting for Him to arrive. Strange. Oh, the ambiguities.”

“And nothing more ambiguous than this.” Bishop Kelly rose to escort them all out onto a terrace which had a view of the Martian hills, the ancient Martian towns, the old highways, the rivers of dust, and Earth, sixty million miles away, shining with a clear light in this alien sky.

“Did we ever in our wildest dreams,” said the Reverend Smith, “imagine that one day each of us would have a Baptist Church, a St. Mary’s Chapel, a Mount Sinai Synagogue here, here on Mars?”

The answer was no, no, softly, from them all.

Their quiet was interrupted by another voice which moved among them. Father Niven, as they stood at the balustrade, had tuned his transistor radio to check the hour. News was being broadcast from the small new American-Martian wilderness colony below. They listened: “—rumored near the town. This is the first Martian reported in our community this year. Citizens are urged to respect any such visitor. If—”

Father Niven shut the news off.

“Our elusive congregation,” sighed the Reverend Smith. “I must confess, I came to Mars not only to work with Christians, but hoping to invite one Martian to Sunday supper, to learn of his theologies, his needs.”

“We are still too new to them,” said Father Lipscomb. “In another year or so I think they will understand we’re not buffalo hunters in search of pelts. Still, it is hard to keep one’s curiosity in hand. After all, our Mariner photographs indicated no life whatsoever here. Yet life there is, very mysterious and half-resembling the human.”

“Half, Your Eminence?” The Rabbi mused over his coffee. “I feel they are even more human than ourselves. They have let us come in. They have hidden in the hills, coming among us only on occasion, we guess, disguised as Earthmen—”

“Do you really believe they have telepathic powers, then, and hypnotic abilities which allow them to walk in our towns, fooling us with masks and visions, and none of us the wiser?”

“I do so believe.”

“Then this,” said the Bishop, handing around brandies and crème-dementes, “is a true evening of frustrations. Martians who will not reveal themselves so as to be Saved by Us the Enlightened—”
Many smiles at this.

“—and Second Comings of Christ delayed for several thousand years. How long must we wait, O Lord?”

“As for myself,” said young Father Niven, “I never wished to be Christ, the Second Coming. I just always wanted, with all my heart, to meet Him. Ever since I was eight I have thought on that. It might well be the first reason I became a priest.”

“To have the inside track just in case He ever did arrive again?” suggested the Rabbi, kindly.

The young Priest grinned and nodded. The others felt the urge to reach and touch him, for he had touched some vague small sweet nerve in each. They felt immensely gentle.

“With your permission, Rabbi, gentlemen,” said Bishop Kelly, raising his glass. “To the First Coming of the Messiah, or the Second Coming of Christ. May they be more than some ancient, some foolish dreams.”

They drank and were quiet.

The Bishop blew his nose and wiped his eyes.

The rest of the evening was like many another for the Priests, the Reverends, and the Rabbi. They fell to playing cards and arguing St. Thomas Aquinas, but failed under the onslaught of Rabbi Nittler’s educated logic. They named him Jesuit, drank nightcaps, and listened to the late radio news:

“—it is feared this Martian may feel trapped in our community. Anyone meeting him should turn away, so as to let the Martian pass. Curiosity seems his motive. No cause for alarm. That concludes our—”

While heading for the door, the Priests, Ministers, and Rabbi discussed translations they had made into various tongues from Old and New Testaments. It was then that young Father Niven surprised them:

“Did you know I was once asked to write a screenplay on the Gospels? They needed an ending for their film!”

“Surely,” protested the Bishop, “there’s only one ending to Christ’s life?”

“But, Your Holiness, the Four Gospels tell it with four variations. I compared. I grew excited. Why? Because I rediscovered something I had almost forgotten. The Last Supper isn’t really the Last Supper!”

“Dear me, what is it then?”

“Why, Your Holiness, the first of several, sir. The first of several! After the Crucifixion and Burial of Christ, did not Simon-called-Peter, with the Disciples, fish the Sea of Galilee?”

“They did.”

“And their nets were filled with a miracle of fish?”

“They were.”

“And seeing on the shore of Galilee a pale light, did they not land and approach what seemed a bed of white-hot coals on which fresh-caught fish were baking?”

“Yes, ah, yes,” said the Reverend Smith.

“And there beyond the glow of the soft charcoal fire, did they not sense a Spirit Presence and call out to it?”

“They did.”

“Getting no answer, did not Simon-called-Peter whisper again, ‘Who is there?’ And the unrecognized Ghost upon the shore of Galilee put out its hand into the firelight, and in the palm of that hand, did they not see the mark where the nail had gone in, the stigmata that would never heal?”

“They would have fled, but the Ghost spoke and said, ‘Take of these fish and feed thy brethren.’ And Simon-called-Peter took the fish that baked upon the white-hot coals and fed the Disciples. And Christ’s frail Ghost then said, ‘Take of my word and tell it among the nations of all the world and preach therein forgiveness of sin.’”

“And then Christ left them. And, in my screenplay, I had Him walk along the shore of Galilee toward the horizon. And when anyone walks toward the horizon, he seems to ascend, yes? For all land rises at a distance. And He walked on along the shore until He was just a small mote, far away. And then they could see Him no more.”

“And as the sun rose upon the ancient world, all His thousand footprints that lay along the shore blew away in the dawn winds and were as nothing.

“And the Disciples left the ashes of that bed of coals to scatter in sparks, and with the taste of Real and Final and True Last Supper upon their mouths, went away. And in my screenplay, I had my CAMERA drift high above to watch the Disciples move some north, some south, some to the east, to tell the world what Needed to Be Told about One Man. And their footprints, circling in all directions, like the spokes of an immense wheel, blew away out of the sand in the winds of morn. And it was a new day. THE END.”

The young Priest stood in the center of his friends, cheeks fired with color, eyes shut. Suddenly he opened his eyes, as if remembering where he was:

“Sorry.”

“For what?” cried the Bishop, brushing his eyelids with the back of his hand, blinking rapidly. “For making me weep twice in one night? What, self-conscious in the presence of your own love for Christ? Why, you have given the Word back to me, me! who has known the Word for what seems a thousand years! You have freshened my soul, oh good young man with the heart of a boy. The eating of fish on Galilee’s shore is the True Last Supper. Bravo. You deserve to meet Him. The Second Coming, it’s only fair, must be for you!”

“I am unworthy!” said Father Niven.

“So are we all! But if a trade of souls were possible, I’d loan mine out on this instant to borrow yours fresh from the laundry. Another toast, gentlemen? To Father Niven! And then, good night, it’s late, good night.”

The toast was drunk and all departed; the Rabbi and the Ministers down the hill to their holy places, leaving the Priests to stand a last moment at their door looking out at Mars, this strange world, and a cold wind blowing.

Midnight came and then one and two, and at three in the cold deep morning of Mars, Father Niven stirred. Candles flickered in soft whispers. Leaves fluttered against his window. Suddenly he sat up in bed, half-startled by a dream of mob-cries and pursuits. He listened.

Far away, below, he heard the shutting of an outside door. Throwing on a robe, Father Niven went down the dim rectory stairs and through the church where a dozen candles here or there kept their own pools of light.

He made the rounds of all the doors, thinking: Silly, why lock churches? What is there to steal? But still he prowled the sleeping night and found the front door of the church unlocked, and softly being pushed in by the wind. Shivering, he shut the door. Soft running footsteps.

He spun about. The church lay empty. The candle flames leaned now this way, now that in their shrines. There was only the ancient smell of wax and incense burning, stuffs left over from all the market-places of time and history; other suns, and other noons. In the midst of glancing at the crucifix above the main altar, he froze.

There was a sound of a single drop of water falling in the night. Slowly he turned to look at the baptistery in the back of the church. There were no candles there, yet—

A pale light shone from that small recess where stood the baptismal font.

“Bishop Kelly?” he called, softly.

Walking slowly up the aisle, he grew very cold, and stopped because— Another drop of water had fallen, hit, dissolved away.

It was like a faucet dripping somewhere. But there were no faucets. Only the baptismal font itself, into which, drop by drop, a slow liquid was falling, with three heartbeats between each sound.

At some secret level, Father Niven's heart told itself something and raced, then slowed and almost stopped. He broke into a wild perspiration. He found himself unable to move, but move he must, one foot after the other, until he reached the arched doorway of the baptistery.

There was indeed a pale light within the darkness of the small place. No, not a light. A shape. A figure.

The figure stood behind and beyond the baptismal font. The sound of falling water had stopped.

His tongue locked in his mouth, his eyes flexed wide in a kind of madness, Father Niven felt himself struck blind. Then vision returned, and he dared cry out:

"Who!"

A single word, which echoed back from all around the church, which made candle flames flutter in reverberation, which stirred the dust of incense, which frightened his own heart with its swift return in saying: Who!

The only light within the baptistery came from the pale garments of the figure that stood there facing him. And this light was enough to show him an incredible thing.

As Father Niven watched, the figure moved. It put a pale hand out upon the baptistery air.

The hand hung there as if not wanting to, a separate thing from the Ghost beyond, as if it were seized and pulled forward, resisting, by Father Niven's dreadful and fascinated stare to reveal what lay in the center of its open white palm.

There was fixed a jagged hole, a cincture from which, slowly, one by one, blood was dripping, falling away down and slowly down, into the baptismal font.

The drops of blood struck the holy water, colored it, and dissolved in slow ripples.

The hand remained for a stunned moment there before the Priest's now-blind, now-seeing eyes.

As if struck a terrible blow, the Priest collapsed to his knees with an out-gasped cry, half of despair, half of revelation, one hand over his eyes, the other fending off the vision.

"No, no, no, no, no, no, no, it can't!"

It was as if some dreadful physician of dentistry had come upon him without narcotic and with one seizure entire-extracted his soul, bloodied raw, out of his body. He felt himself prized, his life yanked forth, and the roots, O God, were . . . deep!

"No, no, no, no!"

But, yes.

Between the lacings of his fingers, he looked again.

And the Man was there.

And the dreadful bleeding palm quivered dripping upon the baptistery air.

"Enough!"

The palm pulled back, vanished. The Ghost stood waiting.

And the face of the Spirit was good and familiar. Those strange beautiful deep and incisive eyes were as he knew they always must be. There was the gentleness of the mouth, and the paleness framed by the flowing locks of hair and beard. The Man was robed in the simplicity of garments worn upon the shores and in the wilderness near Galilee.

The Priest, by a great effort of will, prevented his tears from spilling over, stopped up his agony of surprise, doubt, shock, these clumsy things which rioted within and threatened to break forth. He trembled.

And then saw that the Figure, the Spirit, the Man, the Ghost, Whatever, was trembling, too.

No, thought the Priest, He can't be! Afraid? Afraid of . . . me?

And now the Spirit shook itself with an immense agony not unlike his own, like a mirror image of his own concussion, gaped wide its mouth, shut up its own eyes, and mourned:

"Oh, please, let me go."

At this the young Priest opened his eyes wider and gasped. He thought: But you're free. No one keeps you here!

And in that instant: "Yes!" cried the Vision. "You keep me! Please! Avert your gaze! The more you look the more I become this! I am not what I seem!"

But, thought the Priest, I did not speak! My lips did not move! How does this Ghost know my mind?

"I know all you think," said the Vision, trembling, pale, pulling back in baptistery gloom. "Every sentence, every word. I did not mean to come. I ventured into town. Suddenly I was many things to many people. I ran. They followed. I escaped here. The door was open. I entered. And then and then—oh, and then was trapped."

No, thought the Priest.

"Yes," mourned the Ghost. "By you."

Slowly now, groaning under an even more terrible weight of revelation, the Priest grasped the edge of the font and pulled himself, swaying, to his feet. At last he dared force the question out:

"You are not . . . what you seem?"

"I am not," said the other. "Forgive me."

I, thought the Priest, shall go mad.

"Do not," said the Ghost, "or I shall go down to madness with you."

"I can't give you up, oh, dear God, now that you're here, after all these years, all my dreams, don't you see, it's asking too much. Two thousand years, a whole race of people have waited for your return! And I, I am the one who meets you, sees you—"

“You meet only your own dream. You see only your own need. Behind all this—” the figure touched its own robes and breast, “I am another thing.”

“What must I do!” the Priest burst out, looking now at the heavens, now at the Ghost which shuddered at his cry. “What?”

“Avert your gaze. In that moment I will be out the door and gone.”

“Just—just like that?”

“Please,” said the Man.

The Priest drew a series of breaths, shivering.

“Oh, if this moment could last for just an hour.”

“Would you kill me?”

“No!”

“If you keep me, force me into this shape some little while longer, my death will be on your hands.”

The Priest bit his knuckles, and felt a convulsion of sorrow rack his bones.

“You—you are a Martian, then?”

“No more. No less.”

“And I have done this to you with my thoughts?”

“You did not mean. When you came downstairs, your old dream seized and made me over. My palms still bleed from the wounds you gave out of your secret mind.”

The Priest shook his head, dazed.

“Just a moment more . . . wait . . .”

He gazed steadily, hungrily, at the darkness where the Ghost stood out of the light. That face was beautiful. And, oh, those hands were loving and beyond all description.

The Priest nodded, a sadness in him now as if he had within the hour come back from the true Calvary. And the hour was gone. And the coals strewn dying on the sand near Galilee.

“If—if I let you go—”

“You must, oh you must!”

“If I let you go, will you promise—”

“What?”

“Will you promise to come back?”

“Come back?” cried the figure in the darkness.

“Once a year, that’s all I ask, come back once a year, here to this place, this font, at the same time of night—”

“Come back . . .?”

“Promise! Oh, I must know this moment again. You don’t know how important it is! Promise, or I won’t let you go!”

“I—”

“Say it! Swear it!”

“I promise,” said the pale Ghost in the dark. “I swear.”

“Thank you, oh thanks.”

“On what day a year from now must I return?”

The tears had begun to roll down the young Priest’s face now. He could hardly remember what he wanted to say and when he said it he could hardly hear:

“Easter, oh, God, yes, Easter, a year from now!”

“Please, don’t weep,” said the figure. “I will come. Easter, you say? I know your calendar. Yes. Now—” The pale wounded hand moved in the air, softly pleading. “May I go?”

The Priest ground his teeth to keep the cries of woe from exploding forth. “Bless me, and go.”

“Like this?” said the voice.

And the hand came out to touch him ever so quietly.

“Quick!” cried the Priest, eyes shut, clenching his fists hard against his ribs to prevent his reaching out to seize. “Go before I keep you forever. Run. Run!”

The pale hand touched him a last time upon his brow. There was a soft run of naked feet.

A door opened upon stars; the door slammed.

There was a long moment when the echo of the slam made its way through the church, to every altar, into every alcove and up like a blind flight of some single bird seeking and finding release in the apse. The church stopped trembling at last, and the Priest laid his hands on himself as if to tell himself how to behave, how to breathe again; be still, be calm, stand tall. . . .

Finally, he stumbled to the door and held to it, wanting to throw it wide, look out at the road which must be empty now, with perhaps a figure in white, far fleeing. He did not open the door.

He went about the church, glad for things to do, finishing out the ritual of locking up. It was a long way around to all the doors. It was a long way to next Easter.

He paused at the font and saw the clear water with no trace of red. He dipped his hand and cooled his brow and temples and cheeks and eyelids.

Then he went slowly up the aisle and laid himself out before the altar and let himself burst forth and really weep. He heard the sound of his sadness go up and come back in agonies from the tower where the bell hung silent.

And he wept for many reasons.

For himself.

For the Man who had been here a moment ago.

For the long time until the rock was rolled back and the tomb found empty again.

Until Simon-called-Peter once more saw the Ghost upon the Martian shore, and himself Simon-Peter.

And most of all he wept because, oh, because, because . . . never in his life could he speak of this night to anyone. . . .

The End