



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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SUNDAY OF THE PASSION, APRIL 14, 2019

ISAIAH 50:4-9a; PSALM 118:1-2, 19-29; PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11; LUKE 19:28-40

WHO IS THIS JESUS?

Luke 19:28-40 *[After telling a parable to the crowd at Jericho, Jesus went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" They said, "The Lord needs it." Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!"*

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."]

In the beginning of my ordination process, I was told that I had to meet the Bishop for a personal interview. I was terrified. I had never been alone with a Bishop in my life. My terror increased exponentially when the Bishop cheerfully asked me, as his first question, "Who is Jesus Christ to you?" I froze. The little man in my head started screaming, "Danger, danger, trick question, trick question," all the while smashing the alarm button marked "Run for your Life."

Then in the silence that seemed to stretch for days, I heard a small sad voice remark, "Well, this will be the shortest ordination process on record." Of course, it was not; I managed to say something marginally acceptable that day for here I am, decades later, serving as a priest.

But that question still lingers in my mind. Who is this Jesus? Moreover, I think this question lies at the heart of our Palm

Sunday/Sunday of the Passion liturgy. Indeed, I would argue that the question, “Who is this Jesus” is at the core of Holy Week itself. The church argued for about 500 years about who Jesus was and is. People still argue about this question to this very day. “Who is this Jesus?”

We cover so much theological and historical ground in this one service today. We start so high and end so low. At every turn, characters interact with Jesus as they struggle to understand who he is, what he claims, how he perceives himself, his followers, and the world around him. So many people then as now ask, “Who is this Jesus?”

As protest marches go, that procession into Jerusalem was pretty minor. I doubt many people realized what was happening and the few that watched it likely dismissed it all as a bunch of hicks from the sticks trying to make an impression on the jaded citizens of Jerusalem who had seen it all and believed little of the claims of all those Messianic figures. “Who is this Jesus?”

Jesus seems strangely muted once he is in Jerusalem. He does only one healing act – and that was to correct an act of violence done by an overly ardent supporter and that healing took place after he was arrested. He does no great deeds in front of the powerful and barely speaks to them at all. He upsets

his disciples with his predictions of betrayal and death; he spends time at that long supper together trying to re-teach all that he has said before but this time with mystical over-tones. “Who is this Jesus?”

The Jewish leaders seem uncertain about this Jesus. Reports of his teaching and healing must have come in from Galilee but what does it add up to? The leaders know that Passover is a volatile moment in Jewish religious life. They struggle to maintain some religious independence and respect in the face of Roman rule. Jesus clearly knows his Torah but his teachings are unsettling to the established order; he tears up the outer court of the Temple but then leaves; he seems indifferent to the power around him; untouched by the anxieties of a conquered people surviving at the whims of the Romans. “Who is this Jesus?”

The Romans appear mildly concerned about another claimant to kingship, nattering on about obscure Jewish theological arguments. They have faced such movements before and will have no tolerance for insurrections or statements that suggest over-turning Roman rule. The Romans know the population is even stranger at Passover than usual and are ready to stamp out any hint of resistance. In the end, they act, but only to punish the one leader. This revolution is so tiny and weak that executing the one leader is deemed an

efficient solution. While the one centurion is deeply moved by the state execution, most of the soldiers wandered back to their barracks idly wondering “Who was this Jesus?” But they quickly go back to drinking and playing dice.

The disciples, who throughout the Gospels wonder and puzzle over their leader and his teachings and healings and transgressive actions are left still wondering about that whole mad, crazy, intense journey throughout Galilee and beyond. What was real, what was imagined, what does it mean now? Bereft in Jerusalem, they retreat to grieve, to wonder, to ponder again all that was said to them and shown to them. “Who is this Jesus?”

This is our question now. As we begin our recreation of that Last Week of earthly ministry, as we remember the ending of the Gospel story one more time, we must ask ourselves, all over again, “Who is this Jesus?” And we must do the inner work of pondering that question if we ever hope to tackle the larger questions yet to come. This is our question; this is our work of Holy Week, “Who is this Jesus?” Turns out my Bishop was right to ask me that question.

I think I have a better answer now than I did then. But I still find this question powerful to ponder for, as my life has changed, so has my

answer. I won’t share that answer with you all today. I would prefer that we all pondered that question today and every day this week. I invite all of us to spend at least 15 minutes each day in Holy Week, turning over and over the question, “Who is this Jesus to me?” To help you do that work, I also invite you to read the wonderful book, “The Last Week” by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan. Read the chapter for each day of Holy Week on the correct day and see where your thoughts take you.

Some think of Jesus as a failed peasant leader whose life was turned into a religion. Some think of him as an original thinker preaching a radical doctrine of social transformation and economic justice. Some think of him as a divine apparition who acted like a human being but who was beyond human feeling and human knowing. Some people think of him as everyone’s best friend – a boon companion, someone to hang out with. Some think of him as a muscular, manly man, a warrior for God, and others think of him as a sensitive New Age androgynous hipster. Some people think there is one historical Jesus and then a post-Easter Christ who is both like Jesus but unlike Jesus all at the same time. Some people think all of the above while others waver in their understanding of who Jesus is. Who is this Jesus?

Jesus was never just what other people wanted or expected. Jesus dodged many of the expectations people had for him. But Jesus was always more than hoped for, Jesus was always less than expected, and Jesus

always surprised and puzzled and challenged and upset and intrigued everyone who met him. “Who is this Jesus?” Amen.



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