

Who Is Your Jesus?

In the name of him who at the right time died for the ungodly, dear friends in Christ: Some of the words of Jesus are easy. When he says to the leper, “I am willing, be healed” or to the raging storm “Be still”, or to the dead daughter of Jairus, “Little girl, I say to you arise”, or to the paralyzed man, “Your sins are forgiven”, or to people at large, “Come to me you who are weak and heavily burdened, and I will give you rest” – such words of Jesus land softly on the ear. We very much like to hear his easy words.

But other words of Jesus are hard. They confuse and upset us. We recoil at them. Just when you think you have Jesus figured out, he throws you a hard and fast ball. And when he does, you say to yourself, “Ouch. I didn’t see that coming.” Today’s Gospel is a showcase example of some hard words of Jesus.

The Lord has led his disciples into the region of Caesarea Philippi. This is largely Gentile country where no large crowds of Jews will follow them. Jesus wants some time for private instruction with the men who will later be charged with taking his Gospel of salvation to the ends of the earth.

The session begins with him asking a loaded question: “Who do people say that I am?” He’s maybe two years into his ministry at this point. He’s been preaching and teaching throughout Galilee all this time, and performing many miracles. And people have been speculating and forming opinions about Jesus based on the evidence they’ve seen and heard. Surely they’re discussing these opinions among themselves, and the disciples have been in position to hear some of what they’re saying.

They reply, “Some say you’re John the Baptist.” That one’s hard to figure. John’s headless body has been buried for over a year by now. In his ministry he performed no miraculous signs. Jesus and John are very different characters, their personalities’ poles apart. It’s odd that people would confuse the two. “Others say Elijah”. That’s a bit more reasonable. Elijah had been a faithful prophet of the one true God in his day. He performed several miracles. And he never died. He was translated into heaven by a whirlwind. Maybe he came back? “And others think you are one of the other prophets.” These folks seem to be hedging their bets. Their Jesus is a man of God, but like the other guesses, only a man; and they can’t say which one.

To me it’s even more striking that none of them are saying that Jesus might be the Christ. Remember that back in John’s day people were openly speculating that he might be the One. John emphatically denied it. He told them the Christ was *here* even now; but I’m not him. And here’s Jesus performing all kinds of signs and wonders. We’ve even got the demons he’s casting out yelling, “We know who you are: the Holy One of God.” The demons get it; but no one else does.

That’s except for the disciples. Jesus puts the question to them: “But who do *you* say that I am?” They are in the best position to answer. They have the testimony of John. They have the evidence of what their own eyes have seen and ears have heard. And they’ve had front row seats to witness all or most of it for the past couple of years unlike the folks in crowd who only get little snippets now and then. Most importantly, the disciples have the testimony of

Holy Scripture that foretells of the things the Christ will do when he comes. Jesus is hard to figure out, but he fits at least part of their expectations.

So it is that Peter acting as the group spokesman says what they're all thinking: "You are the Christ." They've got the title right, and Jesus tells them so. But he also forcefully charges them to keep it under wraps for the time being. He's got more work to do before that truth is to be made public.

And one of the jobs he has is to teach his disciples what, as the Christ, *he* must do. You see, they've got his title right, but they don't understand what the title means. They hold the popular view of the Jews of their day, that the Christ, when he comes, will restore the fortunes of an earthly kingdom of Israel. It will be like the glory days under King Solomon, only better. He'll raise an army, defeat our enemies in great battles, throw off all foreign oppression, and usher in a golden age of peace and prosperity with us, God's chosen, on top, and all the other nations subservient. That's the Christ they're looking for. And they've come to believe that's who their Jesus is.

They need to be better informed. They need the hard words. And Jesus gives them to them. "He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again."

What? Did we hear that right? No, no, Jesus; you've got it all wrong. That's not who you are. That's not *our* Jesus. It's Peter who has the tact to pull Jesus aside privately and set him straight. He doesn't want to embarrass the boss in front of the entire group. What a guy. But he's only telling Jesus what they're all thinking.

Jesus is a lot less tactful. He lights Peter up in front of the whole group. "Get behind me, Satan!" *Hard words.* But Jesus has heard this temptation before when Satan offered him all the kingdoms of the world and all their authority without having to suffer, die, and rise again. Now the same enticement comes from the mouth of Peter. Jesus recognizes the source of that sort of thinking. "You are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."

The things of man: earthly honor, earthly glory, earthly power and riches, earthly authority – the ability to control others and make them serve you and do your bidding against their will. That what Satan wants. That's what we want.

But Jesus seeks something else. The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many. Jesus is on the path of self-denial, to take shame instead of honor, humility instead of glory, weakness instead of strength, painful death instead of life – all to serve the good of others in what we need the most: a Savior from our sin. Hard words that describe an infinitely hard job to do; and yet he accomplished it for our sakes out of love.

And Jesus has hard words for us as well. "He called the crowd with his disciples and said to them, 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.'" The real Jesus is hard. He takes the hard path. And he calls us to follow him on it: to seek not the things of man, but the things of God.

Who is your Jesus? Ever since the real Jesus came, people have been coming up with their own versions of him. Some say he was merely a great moral teacher. For some he was a social justice warrior working to elevate the poor and downtrodden, and to ensure equal rights

for all – most especially society’s outcasts. Others see him as the giver of health and prosperity. For others he’s little more than an invisible friend. For most of these, Jesus is a lot of things, but he is not their Savior from sin.

We are fortunate to be in a Church that emphasizes his role as our Redeemer. We Lutherans rather like Jesus the Savior from sin. I’m concerned that’s as far as we’d like to go, however. The Jesus with the hard words, “Take up your cross and follow me” we balk at. “Wait. Why do I have to carry a cross? Isn’t that what you did for me? Didn’t you suffer so that I won’t have to?”

In an eternal sense, yes; in the present tense, no. A servant is not above his master. The world rejected and reviled him. It will do the same to those who faithfully follow him. We have a cross to bear. And here Luther is helpful. I quote, “The Cross of Christ [we are to carry] does not mean, of course, the wood that Christ carried on his shoulders and to which he then was nailed. No, it refers in general to all the afflictions of all the faithful, whose sufferings are the sufferings of Christ. [As Paul says in] 2 Corinthians 1:5: ‘We share abundantly in Christ’s suffering.’ In the same way Christ, our Head, makes our afflictions His own, so that when we, who are his body, suffer, He is affected as though the evils were his own.”

Crosses aren’t easy. They are hard. What are yours? To bless one who insults you; to forgive one who sins against you – sins against you repeatedly; to love and care for one who is hard to get along with and doesn’t appreciate your help; to speak well of one who is being attacked verbally; to stand for the truth when lies are more comfortable; to call a sin what it is and urge the guilty to turn from evil and repent – even if that leads to anger and resentment? These are not above the call of duty. They are basic Christian behavior. They are part of what it means to follow Jesus.

Who is your Jesus? The real Jesus has hard words for us: “For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

May we be given the grace to take up our crosses without shame and faithfully follow the true Jesus. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!