

Palm Sunday - Fr John Spring 28 March 2010

Readings: Isaiah 50. 4-9, Ps 31. 9-18, Philippians 2. 5-11, Luke 19. 28-40

We came into church today singing “Fling wide the gates and welcome him into your lives”. So who is it that you are welcoming into your life today? Which Jesus do you believe in?

This may sound like a silly question. It may sound to you as if I am suggesting that there is more than one Jesus. Of course there is not. Yet people do have many different ideas about Jesus (some informed, some not; many based on the bible, some with little if any connection to the bible at all).

There is also **more than one way Jesus is portrayed** in the New Testament, and there are in the Old Testament many prophecies about Jesus which provide even more pictures of him, and which lay the ground for some New Testament portraits. For example, in the Book of Isaiah, we meet “The Suffering Servant”. This figure is taken by Christians as a prophecy that the Messiah would not be all-conquering but would be scorned and rejected, and would suffer and die to save Israel.

But that is not all. The reading from Isaiah Chapter 50 this morning is from one of these “Suffering Servant” passages, but it also depicts the Messiah as a prophetic *teacher*. The passage begins with the words:

**The Lord God has given me the tongue of a *teacher*,
that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.**

(Some translations say “the tongue of *one who is taught*”.

A teacher is one who learns so as to teach.)

According to the Suffering Servant prophecies, then, the Messiah is also to be a person who speaks the wisdom of God, who utters the Truth (with a capital T). To use a Hebrew concept, these prophecies place the Messiah in the *wisdom* stream. To use a more Greek concept, they place the Messiah in the *philosophical* stream. As a result, Isaiah’s prophetic portrait of the Messiah lays the ground for one of the New Testament portraits of Jesus as **the teacher of the wisdom of God, the philosopher-prophet who speaks the Divine Truth.**

So where in the New Testament does this portrait of Jesus as the spokes-person of divine truth appear? In The Gospel according to John, Jesus is “the Logos”, the Word of God. He is also “the way, the truth and the life”, and John records him expounding points of divine wisdom, ethics and mystical theology. We think of his exchange with Nicodemus about being born again; his conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well; his dialogue with Pontius Pilate.

In dialogues to seek out truth, ancient philosophers of the Greek kind were given to playing a kind of mental chess with the people they conversed with. For example, in his dialogue with Pilate, when asked by Pilate why the Jewish authorities are trying to kill him, Jesus does not answer the question. Instead, he makes a statement, and on a subject that has not yet been raised. It is as if Jesus is simply ignoring Pilate’s question. However doing this had its purpose. Philosophical dialogues were like a cat-and-mouse game, with moves designed to draw the other person into saying something which then enabled the philosopher to make a telling point in reply.

So, in John’s account, Jesus deliberately ignores Pilate’s question and makes a statement about “his kingdom”. Pilate has his attention seized by those two words in what Jesus says -- “my kingdom” -- and he jumps on them. “So,” he says, “you are a king!” Jesus, the philosopher, now

has Pilate where he wants him. The words “you are a king” have come out of Pilate’s mouth. So Jesus swiftly seizes on that and replies, “You say that I am a king.”

In other words, Jesus says, “The words have come out of your mouth and you cannot take them back.” Then Jesus goes on to explain who he is, what kind of king he is, and what he means by the kingdom. He says, “**For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.**” He also says, “**Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.**” Jesus is the voice of Truth. (Notice that phrase “belongs to the truth” – not knows the truth or believes the truth but *belongs to* the truth. If Jesus is the Truth, then he is speaking about those “who belong to me”.)

Now, for some people, Jesus is no more one of many people who have spoken for the truth. To them, Jesus is a great moral philosopher, a great teacher of wisdom, a teacher who exemplified in his life the truth he taught, and was prepared to die for it. And that is all he is. Consequently, in their minds, **Jesus is not God. He did not rise bodily from the dead nor did he ascend into heaven.** Rather, it is his ideas which could not be killed. It is his values, which, in a sense, “rose again”. It is his example which lives on. Jesus died, but what he stood for lives on forever.

Yet there is a real problem with this picture of Jesus as a great moral teacher and moral example. The bible plainly shows that Jesus claimed to be God. He was accused of calling God his father, and himself the Son of God, and of “making himself equal with God”. On at least one occasion he said “Before Abraham was, I AM”, applying to himself the meaning of the most sacred and unutterable Hebrew name of God. That name means I AM WHO I AM, and I SHALL BE WHO I SHALL BE. Jesus applied this to himself. Jesus also allowed people to refer to him as God (Thomas said to him “My Lord and my God”). In none of these cases did he correct people and say, “No, that’s not what I mean” or “No, you mustn’t say that”. In every case he allowed it to be said and to stand.

Now, if a human being actually believes and says he is God, or if he pretends to be God, he cannot be a great moral teacher. He cannot be a great teacher of wisdom. He cannot be a teacher who exemplified in his life the very truth he taught. If a human being says or even allows people to believe he is God, he is either profoundly evil, or deeply deluded, or both.

So that is why I am asking you, on this Palm Sunday, which Jesus YOU believe in? I wonder who and what it is whom you welcome into your life? Is it an idea? A set of values? Or a living person? Is it a dead hero, or the Living God?

Are you able to grasp the truth that Paul declares when he says of Jesus that “**though he was in the form of God**” and enjoyed “**equality with God**”, he “**emptied himself, taking the form of a slave**” and was “**born in human likeness**” and was “**found in human form**”. And in human form he “**humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death--even death on a cross**”?

Jesus is, as Paul says, “**the man from heaven**” (or “the heavenly man”). The bible presses this vision of Jesus upon us as the God who came down from heaven and took the form of a human being, and he does so, I suggest, for one simple reason: **if you want to be saved from death eternal, and if you want us to be saved, this is the only Jesus worth believing in.**

For if we believe in Jesus, not just as a man who spoke and died for the truth, but as God the Son, the Eternal Word incarnate in human flesh, come down from heaven, knocking on your door and seeking entrance into your life, then it is for us to say as Paul says:

**“as is [Jesus,] the man of heaven, so are [we] who are of heaven. . . .
[and] we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.”**

You see, it's not **what** you know, but **who** you know!
That's what counts!! #

Fr John Spring