

September 20, 2015

TEXT: Mark 8:27–33

TITLE: Re-Confirmation Class – Lesson #2: Jesus

Our first session of Re-Confirmation Class is complete. Last week we spoke about looking for God—looking around at this world in all its wonder and beauty; looking at the amazing creatures we are and from that peering out into the universe to ask about the nature of our Creator. Our conclusion was this: The nature of life is best understood when we consider it as the expression of a loving God, who is the source and sustainer of life. But we can't spend all our time staring up into the heavens; our necks will grow stiff and our minds will tire of trying to comprehend the entire universe. We want to think about God and look for God down here—right here at our human level. How can we do that? That is the subject of Re-Confirmation Lesson #2: Jesus Christ. Let us begin.

Conversations on the subject of Jesus can be boiled down to three questions: Who was he? Did he have to die? Was he really resurrected? Who Jesus was is both easy and hard to answer. Jesus was a Jewish male born somewhere in the region of Judea during the last years of Herod the Great—which, by our modern reckoning of time was roughly around 6 BCE (Before Common Era). He was raised in a simple pious family before setting out on an itinerant ministry, one which attracted disciples, produced miraculous acts and memorable sermons. He was arrested and tried by both civil and religious authorities on charges ranging from blasphemy to treason. He was crucified during the reign of Herod the Great's son, Herod Antipas, sometime between 30 and 36 CE. That is a basic description based largely on material recorded in the letters of the apostle Paul (written between 50-60 CE) and the four gospels (written between 65 and 90 CE). So written evidence about Jesus exists that can be dated back to within 20 years of his life and death. If you want to extend the timeline of source material a bit further into the second century CE, we have other writings that mention Jesus by authors such as Tacitus, Josephus, Lucian of Samosata, Pliny the Younger and others. In summary, there is pretty good evidence from a wide range of sources that Jesus actually lived 2000 years ago.

To be honest, people don't have trouble with the fact that Jesus lived. Nor do they have trouble with much of what he said and did. In fact, people are quick to point out how much they like Jesus, which is very sweet and I'm sure Jesus appreciates their affection. But there is scandal associated with Jesus, something we call the "scandal of particularity." Christians believe that Jesus of Nazareth was both a real human being and God incarnate, that the Creator God was incarnate in a specific Palestinian Jew roughly 2000 years ago. The formal language the church uses on this subject is to say that Jesus Christ was fully human and fully divine.

That's a stumbling block for many people—that Jesus of Nazareth is also the divine Christ. How are we able to understand this theological concept logically?

Well, to begin with, faith includes many things that are mysterious and wondrous just as science contains things just as mysterious and wondrous. We accept the latter without hesitation because a white-robed scientist tells us about mysterious things. But we object if a white-robed pastor suggests there are mysterious things in life and faith. But just as Hamlet wisely said long ago, *“there are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”* For example: Science tells us that a single thing can possess two natures. Light can only be understood if we think of it as both a wave and a particle. The church offers a similar model for Jesus Christ, saying that you can only understand who he was if you accept that his core being contained natures associated with earth and heaven, humanity and divinity.

At this point, I want to pull in the bible story from Mark 8, in which Jesus asked his disciples a question similar to that which we’re considering: “Who do people say I am?” They gave several answers, calling him a prophet like Elijah, a radical preacher like John the Baptist, and a Messiah, the Son of God. All of which were true. But he told them not to talk about him in this way just yet. Why? Because to understand Jesus—fully human, fully divine—you need to know the whole story.

So let’s move on to question #2: Did Jesus have to die? Officially, no, he didn’t have to die. Jesus had free will and there were lots of ways he could have lived out his earthly life. However, Jesus did die and knew he would die for the simple reason that what he brought into the world was an antidote to what ailed the world—and no antidote is ever effective without a mortal fight. The world around us would convince us that it is basically a closed system, one in which power and wealth are the currency of life, disease and death are unavoidable liabilities, and everyone’s fate is inexorably shaped by where and to whom you happen to be born. But into this closed reality Christ broke in—doing so as one pointing to another reality (“The Kingdom of God is in your midst”); doing so as one exposing the lies behind worldly power and social prejudices (“In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free”). Most importantly doing so as one who breaks into this world of darkness, oppression and death and offers instead light, freedom and life. (More on the category of eternal life in a moment.)

There’s another reason why Jesus had to suffer and die, just as he described to his disciples on that day long ago. Jesus broke into our world’s dominant reality, and lived in such a way that his life was filled with the highs and lows, the joys and the sorrows similar to our lives. He wept at Lazarus’ funeral even as he turned water into wine at the wedding at Cana. He shared simple meals with friends; he multiplied loaves of bread with thousands of strangers; he laughed at the rich man Zacchaeus’ banquet. Jesus heard crowds cheer him on Palm Sunday; yet he also knew loneliness and defeat on Good Friday and knew the pain of being whipped and scorned, up to and including death on a cross. The whole range of human life Jesus knew and experienced. So within him was a powerful, condensed version of what all our lives are like.

The fourth century Christian teacher named Gregory of Nazianzus made this important theological point: “That which Christ has not assumed has not been healed.”¹ In Christ, God has entered into and redeemed the entirety of human existence, which necessarily includes death as well. The good news is that all of you, every secret, every scar, every sadness, every joy, has been part of Christ’s experience and thus has been redeemed by God in Christ as well.

Finally we turn to the last question: Was Jesus really resurrected from the dead? People that have no trouble with Jesus the man of Nazareth have trouble with Jesus Christ the risen Lord. And sadly there is no knockdown argument I can offer today that will absolutely convince you of the resurrection of Christ. It is a faith profession not a scientifically-verifiable conclusion. However, consider these two things. First, something happened between that crucifixion event outside Jerusalem on Good Friday and the ecstatic, spirit-led birth of the church on Pentecost less than two months later. If the reactions of the first disciples of Jesus were half as exuberant as described in the gospels and the book of Acts, it’s clear something major happened to them. A hallucination of a ghost of Jesus wouldn’t evoke this reaction. A psychological bout of wishful thinking wouldn’t provoke the witness of the early church. And a mere resuscitation of a broken, crucified body would never lead to the Pentecostal professions about one who was dead that is now alive, one who appears in upper rooms and along city roads embodying a whole new way of living. All the other leaders of world religions—Moses, Buddha, Mohammed—died a peaceful death at a ripe old age, surrounded by adoring disciples. But Jesus was abandoned, crucified, and buried as a criminal; yet shortly thereafter his followers are telling his story and proclaiming he is alive! Something happened to make all this possible.

Second, the stories of Jesus’ resurrection are told with a counter-intuitive degree of particularity. We’re told about Joseph of Arimathea and a borrowed tomb; we’re told about Mary Magdalene and other women who travel before sunrise with spices for a dead body; we’re told about two disciples on a specific road heading to Emmaus who encounter the risen Lord. These details—converging as they do around the persistent detail of an empty tomb—point to an actual event and not some stylized, religious story. These details point to a surprising, literal resurrection, as opposed to a religious parable about life somehow defeating death. There is too much in the Easter story and how it has been told and re-told for centuries to discard all of it as having no basis in fact.

Something happened on that Easter day and resurrection is the best way to talk about it, because resurrection simply means that the Jesus of then is the Christ of now and the living Lord of tomorrow. The One who broke into this closed reality, bringing an antidote to our oppression and pain and brokenness is truly, wondrously alive. Saying more about what this means for us today is the subject of next week’s lesson on the Holy Spirit. But for now, I’ll close with some of my favorite words from the preacher Barbara Brown Taylor: *If we cannot say who Jesus is in 25 words or less, it is because he is our window on the undefinable,*

*unfathomable I AM, and we cannot sum Jesus up any easier than we can sum up the one who sent him... We cannot nail him down. We tried once, but he got loose, and ever since then he has been the walking, talking presence of God in our midst, the living presence of God in our lives.*² So for that, thanks be to God.

AMEN

¹ Quoted in Feasting on the Word, Proper 19, Year B, Mark 8:27-38, *Theological Perspective*, Martha Moore-Keish, p. 72.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, The Preaching Life, p. 106.