

Sermon for Sunday, April 9, 2017

## WHO IS THIS?

Today, we enter into the final week of Jesus' life. It was an important week. From the very beginning of the Christian church, those who experienced the resurrection of Jesus sat down to record the events of this one week. Only much later would they record what took place during the three years of his ministry. This week, they knew, was decisive.

Decisive how? It was decisive for revealing the truth about Jesus, and the truth about us. By week's end those two truths would crash headlong into each other, like two runaway trains on the same track heading in opposite directions. The lone survivor was the one who died. And those who believe, know that if they die with him, they too will survive the cataclysm.

From Matthew's perspective, the whole of Jesus' ministry culminating in this decisive week asks and demands an answer to one question: "Who is this?" Who is this guy really? Is he a teacher, whose wisdom is worth learning? Is he a prophet who speaks for God? Is he the son of David, the king who will restore the nation to its glory days, or is he the son of God who will restore the nation to glorifying God? Who is this, really? Any serious reading of the Gospels demands an answer to this question. Who do you say this man is?

The world is still asking. Ken Woodward of Watergate fame, and later the religion editor for *Newsweek*, wrote an article about the impact Jesus has had on the modern world. Woodward's opening words were these:

Historians did not record his birth. Nor, for 30 years did anyone pay him much heed. A Jew from the Galilean hill country with a reputation for teaching and healing, he showed up at the age of 33 in Jerusalem during Passover. In three days, he was arrested, tried and convicted of treason, then executed like the commonest of criminals. His followers said that God raised him from the dead. Except among those who believed in him, the event passed without notice.

[More than] two thousand years later, the centuries themselves are measured from the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. ...Calendars in India and China, like those in

Europe, America and the Middle East [all agree]. It is a convention, of course: a fiction and function of Western cultural hegemony that allows the birth of Jesus to number the days for Christians and non-Christians alike. For Christians, Jesus is the hinge on which the door of history swings, the point at which eternity intersects with time, the Savior who redeems time by drawing all things to himself. [Now], nearly a third of the world's population claims to be his followers.

Yes, the world is still asking who this man is.

Matthew, however, is not very concerned about how the world answers this question, but about how you and I answer it. One of the revolutionary features of Christianity is that it is not a national religion, but a personal faith. The important question is not who people say Jesus is, but who you say Jesus is. To help us answer that question, in full view of the unvarnished truth about Jesus, Matthew leads us, beginning on Palm Sunday, up the down staircase. He wants us to see, clearly, that the more Jesus suffers, the more his true identity becomes known to us; that the further Jesus descends the stairway to oblivion, the higher he ascends the stairway to heaven.

Who is this? The first answer comes from the crowd who hails him as the one who comes in the name of the Lord. "He is," they say, "the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee." Are they wrong? No. They are right. Jesus *is* the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee. It's important that we are able to say this. From the very beginning of the Christian faith, there were those who wanted to claim that Jesus wasn't really human, that he was simply God in human disguise. Matthew wants to make sure we understand, and confess, that to begin with, Jesus was a man, a genuine figure in human history who lived, who came from an identifiable town in a

known region of the world, who was acknowledged by almost everyone to be a prophet. To this day, in fact, the Jews and the Muslims recognize Jesus as a prophet, as one who spoke for God, who pointed to God, and who invited us to renewed faithfulness.

Who is this? The second answer comes from the placard affixed to the cross upon which Jesus was crucified. “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.” It was the quintessential moment of eternal irony in which divine truth and human truth collided. Jesus was executed because he was mockingly proclaimed the king of the Jews. The people killed him for turning out to be what they thought was a messianic pretender. In front of Pontius Pilate they were invited to choose the son of god who was most to their liking; Barabbas, whose name means “son of the father,” or Jesus, the “son of David.” They chose badly, because they couldn’t imagine that this humble, loving, compassionate, forgiving prophet could possibly liberate them from anything. Yet, though he was mocked as the king of the Jews, he, of course, was the king of the Jews. Matthew wants to make sure we understand, and confess, that this Jesus of Nazareth, who was executed on a cross, was indeed the king of the Jews, the true son of David, the liberator we had long hoped for, and the Messiah sent from God for whom we had most fervently prayed.

Who is this? The third answer comes from the centurions standing at the foot of the cross who witnessed Jesus suffering, his agony, and his death. The resurrection had not happened yet, but the centurions—Romans, gentiles, not steeped in Jewish tradition or the Jewish faith—recognized by means of Jesus’ suffering, that he was none other than the son of God. “Truly,” they declared in amazement, “this man was God’s Son!” Matthew wants to make sure we understand, and confess, that the true son of God is the one who suffers, and is the one whom the faithful rejected and killed. It was and it remains the most outrageous declaration in the history of humankind. That the son of God could be the victim of human injustice, suffer, and die, was absolute folly to the Jews and utter foolishness to the Greeks, but to those who believe, it demonstrated the power and wisdom of God.

As Disciples of Christ, Matthew invites us to confess that Jesus is all of these and more. He is a man from Nazareth, a teacher, a healer, and a prophet of God. He is the King of the Jews, and the King of kings, whose kingdom is not of this world. And he is the High Priest who makes himself an atoning sacrifice for the forgiveness of human sin. But he is even more. Wrote Billy Graham in the same article:

The Bible says that Jesus Christ was God in human flesh that [over] 2000 years ago God deliberately came down and took human form upon himself in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus was not just another great religious teacher, nor was he only another in a long line of individuals seeking after spiritual truth. He was, instead, truth itself. He was God incarnate.

And Matthew closes his Gospel with the stunning declaration that the God incarnate, Jesus who is the Christ, is still with us, even to the close of the age.

Matthew doesn’t really care what the world thinks about Jesus. He is not naïve. He knows what the world thinks about Jesus, and what they will always think. All Matthew cares about is what you and I think. He knows that individual confession of Jesus as the Christ, as the Messiah of God, as the Savior of the world, is the manner in which God is transforming the world into a new creation. And he also knows that if we confess Jesus aright, and believe in him with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind, we will be a people who live against the grain, who climb to the heights of heaven by going up the down staircase, as Jesus did. We will tell the truth in a world that lies, give in a world that takes, love in a world that ignores, make peace in a world that fights, serve in a world that waits to be served, worship in a world that entertains, and carry a cross in a world that crucifies those who love.

Who is this who entered into Jerusalem on Passover to be crucified? In the end, only you can say.

PRAYER: Almighty God, we know who Jesus is. He is the Christ, our messiah and savior, and your beloved son. Help us live fully into that confession of faith, and follow him, unto our life’s end. In his most worthy name we pray. Amen.

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Matthew 21:1-11  
Palm Sunday