

## Is Jesus God? The Jesus We Worship and Follow

Matthew 4:1-10; Mark 10:17-18; John 15: 9-12

For some, the very title of this sermon might seem impertinent, if not blasphemous. “Of course he is! To suggest otherwise would be a renunciation of Christian faith.”

For others, to suggest that we worship Jesus is foolishness: “We worship *God*, not Jesus!”

Today’s sermon circles around such questions that we might experience the greening of our faith in Christ.

Prize-winning writer Annie Dillard, in her book on writing, *Write ‘Til You Drop* says: “You were made and set here to give voice to this, your own astonishment.” This may summarize my vocation as a preacher: to give voice to my astonishment over Jesus, who he was, and who he is in my experience.

### I

Is Jesus God? Let’s probe the question. We’ve heard the text about Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness, a text often read the first Sunday of Lent, as the 40 days of Lent correspond to the 40 days of Jesus’ wilderness temptation.

After his baptism, the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted, or tested. The testing was about who he was as the son of God. The devil offered three temptations, all three have to do with whether Jesus would pretend to be God. Not God's son, but God.

“If you are the son of God”, the devil said, “turn these stones into bread.” And Jesus answered with scripture: “Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” Jesus pointed beyond himself to God and God's Word.

In the second temptation, the devil took Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem and quoting scripture—as Shakespeare wrote, “The devil can cite scripture for his purpose” (*Merchant of Venice*)—quoted the beloved Psalm, “God will cause his angels to watch over you and you will not cast your foot upon a stone.” “If you are the son of God”, the devil said, “take a swan dive off the top of the temple and the angels will parachute you gently to the ground!” (That's *Steve's New Modern Translation of the Bible*.)

It was a temptation aimed to make Jesus deny his full humanity and make himself impervious to harm. Some of us someday are tempted to that! Jesus answered, quoting scripture again: “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

In the third temptation the devil took Jesus up to a very high mountain where he could see all the kingdoms of the world and said, “All these I will give you, if you but fall down and worship me.” And Jesus answered, again with scripture: “Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.”

Jesus refused a crown in the wilderness, refused to rule over all the nations. He would serve, not rule. There are too many Christians today who are hustling to put on that crown and rule the nation in Jesus’ name. (One version is called “Seven Mountain Dominionism.”)

In all three temptations Jesus said, “I am not God. I am the servant of God.”

In our text from Mark’s gospel, a man runs to Jesus and says, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” And before he answers the man, Jesus wants to clear something up: “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone!” Jesus refused to be seen as God-like, with God-like perfect goodness.

Again, Jesus was clear to differentiate himself from the God he worshipped.

## II

Since the second century the church has debated whether Jesus was human or divine, or both, and if both, how much one and how much the other? Half and half?

Some said Jesus was all human, not divine, others said he was all divine and not human. Those who held the one position or the other were viewed as heretics. As one has defined it, “a heretic has a complete grasp of a half-truth.” At the Council of Chalcedon in the middle 400’s, early church leaders set a parameter on who Jesus was: “fully God and fully man”, they said. They did not “solve” the mystery of who Jesus was, but said that true faith in Christ lies within that mystery: “fully human and fully divine.”

The debate has never ceased. Some still deny Jesus’ humanity, others Jesus’ divinity. How do we define our faith in Christ? Beware the “Doctrinally Correct Police.” Is there only one correct way to think about Jesus? Roman Catholic theologian Roger Height states the mystery this way:

Jesus was a person in whom people encountered God. The basis of Jesus’ central place in Christian faith rests in the fact that he continues to be one in whom people encounter God.

Is that true for you? Is he the human face of God? Anabaptist theologian, John Howard Yoder, expresses it this way: he was “genuine humanity and genuine divine presence.” That helps me some.

### III

But *when, how*, we ask, did Jesus become someone we worship? Or, as some scholars ask: When did Jesus become Christ?

Harry Emerson Fosdick, the founding pastor of the Riverside Church in New York City, talked about “The Christ of History” and the “Christ of Experience.” Jesus scholar Marcus Borg talked about the “pre-Easter Jesus” and the “post-Easter Jesus.”

I think we can know and experience Jesus in both realms. The historical Jesus was clear to differentiate himself from the God he worshipped. But at Easter, as he rose from death, he became part of the divine life of God, the church believes, and as such, one we worship.

What do you think about Jesus as one we worship? What might that mean? Jesus gave us a hint when he said, “It is not those who call me ‘Lord, Lord’, who shall enter the kingdom of God, but those who do the will of my Abba in heaven.”

We might say at this point that there is no one way of being Christian, of thinking about Jesus, of being a follower of Jesus. Orthodoxy means “right praise” or “straight praise”. Praise can take many forms.

## V

I like to talk about Jesus in two ways: the historical Jesus and the “more-than-historical Jesus.” The historical Jesus was the first century Jesus of

Nazareth who taught, healed, loved in ways we'd never seen before and brought the kingdom of God near in his life.

Today the historical Jesus has been virtually eclipsed in large swaths of the American church, where Paul is preached more than the gospels; the religion *about* Jesus preached more than the religion *of* Jesus.

This “American Jesus” is unmoored from the life and teachings of the historical Jesus—so far removed from the Jesus of history that one cannot believe in both. The Apostle Paul dealt with those who preached what he called a “different gospel” and “another Jesus” (II Cor. 11:4-5). They preached a religion of health, wealth and success that was based on ruling in Jesus’ name, not serving in Jesus’ name. Attacking them, Paul called them literally “super-apostles” and “pseudo-apostles.” They are among us today.

The magnificent Frederick Douglas, 19<sup>th</sup> century black leader and emancipator, wrote these words in his autobiography:

Between the Christianity of this land and the Christianity of Christ I recognize the widest possible difference—so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, holy is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked. I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ; I

therefore hate the corrupt, slave-holding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land.

We have similar challenges today, and many are abandoning the church and Christianity because of those who preach a “different gospel” and “another Jesus” from the one revealed in the gospels. And young people are staying away from church and Christianity because of such distortions. The cure: Read the gospels!

## V

But I want to go on to talk about the “more-than-historical” Jesus, the one alive to us in the Spirit, the one who guides and comforts us even today. The one who is God-with-us today, God-in-us today, God-for-us today. Who is still, to use George Buttrick’s words: “Surprise of Mercy, outgoing Gladness, Rescue, Healing and Life.”

This is the one we worship and follow. I have at times been criticized for praying to Jesus in worship. But my prayers, like many of our most beautiful hymns and anthems, are unabashedly offered to Jesus, prayers and hymns of love.

One might say that to worship Jesus *is* to follow him and to follow him is to worship him. In the wedding ceremony written in the old Anglican Book of

Common Prayer, the groom says “with my body, I thee worship.” We worship Jesus with our body, our mind, our heart.

For some the worship and love of Jesus with our minds is primary, for others the love and worship of Jesus with our hearts is first, for others the love and worship of Jesus with our bodies, our actions, our compassionate work for others is primary.

Our hymns and anthems today reflect all three ways of worship: When *Morning Gilds the Skies* (mind), *Jesus the Very Thought of Thee* (heart), *Jesus Calls Us O’er the Tumult* (body). Mind, heart, body. (Historical note: The hymn on which our anthem was based is attributed to the 12<sup>th</sup> century Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, known for his mystical love of Christ. The original hymn had 42 verses!)

In John 15 Jesus says to his disciples and to us:

As my Abba has loved me, so I love you; abide in my love.

Then,

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

It is just that clear and just that simple and just that every-day demanding.

Conclusion



For some Christians it is the humanity of Jesus that helps them follow Jesus: If he in his humanity can do this, perhaps I can too. For others it is the divinity of Jesus that is crucial to their faith and following: if he were not divine, how could I center my life around him?

So here's the truth: Jesus is more than I could ever say or preach, more than all the books in all the libraries can capture. There is always more and more to know, and in the knowing, follow. It is this "always more" that continues to astonish me and us.

Walt Whitman, in his 19<sup>th</sup> century poem, "A Song of Myself", writes that his readers may have missed who he is or what he had say. He closed:

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,

Missing me one place search another.

I stop somewhere waiting for you.

Jesus says the same to us this morning: "I stand somewhere waiting for you."

---