

This is a kind of special Sunday. But, then they all are special in a way.

This is the last Sunday of the lectionary year.

The lectionary is the way we divide and organize the Old and New Testament
for study and worship.

It is organized in such a way that over a three-year period
we have the opportunity to cover most of the text -
and from it select scripture for worship and teaching, and personal devotion.

For each Sunday, the lectionary gives readings from
the Old Testament, the Psalms, the Gospels, and the Writings.

The lectionary is also a way to organize the Christian year.

It begins with Advent, and then Christmas,
and then Epiphany, and then Transfiguration Sunday, Ash Wednesday,
the Lent, Easter, and then Pentecost.

We are completing the season of Pentecost today.

And this Sunday, which usually comes right after Thanksgiving,
is considered is Christ the King Sunday.

Why "Christ the King" Sunday?

Part of it would be that it is a transition and a shift
from the stories of Pentecost back around to the season of Advent -
when we begin again -
when we prepare our minds and hearts for the birth of Jesus as a baby.

But aside from that, I see it as a time to
consider why we might call Jesus "King."

At some point for us as hearers of the story, there is a shift from the
Jesus of history to the Christ of faith.

And to consider Christ as "King" signifies that place in our hearts
even though it is a language of a long time ago -
that place or that time when we hearers of the story decide
that he is something more than the Jesus of history.

It is a shift from knowing Jesus as a teacher, a healer,
prophetic voice for social and religious change
to something much more.

It is when we recognize him as
a window, if you will, or a pathway,
into the divine, into the very essence of God,
or the ground of all being, as Paul Tillich would tell us.

But even more personal, it is a time
that we consider and experience a relationship with the divine
because we know Jesus.

Christianity is a religion of relationship.
It is not necessarily a religion of belief in certain doctrines
but of a willingness to be in relationship with God
as Jesus knew God.

And, to take on the teachings as being
vastly more real and enduring than the teachings of any of
teacher, healer, activist that the world has ever seen.

So, we can think of this Sunday as an in-between place,
between the end of one Christian year, and the beginning of another.
Advent will be that time when we prepare ourselves to meet Jesus again as an infant,
and thus, get to know God as an infant, or even as that still small voice.

Because Advent is so different, I want to
invite you to look back at what we have read
during the year ending and reflect on who this man was.
Our readings each Sunday, and of course we had to choose,
as we could not read them all.

Some Sundays we read stories from the Old Testament
and the history of the Hebrew people.
On other Sundays we read stories of Jesus, his words and his actions.

Who was this man?

To address this I would like to go back to the work of Huston Smith
where he writes about Jesus' life.¹

He talks about how we move from the person Jesus
to the Christ whom his followers came to believe
was God in human form.

His disciples did not reach that conclusion until after his death,
but even in his lifetime we can see a momentum was building in that direction.

Smith tells us that even if the gospels do not give us much
in the way of historical fact,
they do give us a clear picture of the impact Jesus had on the disciples.

And that impact came from what Jesus did,
what he said, and who he was.

Let's look at these things for a moment.

Jesus actions: he went about doing good.

Peter was known to have said that,

Jesus went about doing good – went about doing good.

There were stories of miracles, and they were impressive.

But let's not place our emphasis there too much
because Jesus did not publicize his miracles.

He did not use them to strong-arm people into believing in him.

He was tempted, but he did not use them to convince people to believe him.

Almost all of his extraordinary deeds were performed quietly,
apart from crowds, and more as a demonstration of faith.

And he was not alone in doing these things.

Others were also credited with unusual powers,
but they did not attribute them to faith as Jesus did.

Jesus circulated easily and without affect among ordinary people
and social misfits, healing and counseling,
inviting people out of despair.

His attention went to whatever was before him –
it seemed that you could not interrupt him.

He healed physical afflictions, and he helped people understand
how they might live more fully.

Even psychiatrists will tell us that a fundamental craving
we have is for direction in life, and Jesus gave direction.

Another way Jesus went about doing good was to give companionship.

People felt bonded to Jesus by having been in his presence.

He seemed to bid a certain welcome.

We hear this about Socrates' disciples.

It was said that they lived for the times they could be together with him.

The phrase "bids them welcome" was also said of the Buddha.

To bid people welcome is to accept them, and this is what Jesus did.

These are some of the kinds of things Jesus did.

Let's look at what Jesus said.

There has been some controversy over how original his teachings were.

Most of them can be found in the Torah or its commentaries.

So they were not necessarily original.

However, it was the direct way, the urgency,
with which he spoke that engaged people.

His speech was vivid.

One New Testament scholar called Jesus' language as gigantic.

"If you hand offends you, cut it off.

If you eye stands between you and the best, gouge it out.

He talks of camels that squeeze their humps through needles' eyes.
His characters go around with timbers protruding from their eyes while they look for
tiny specks in the eyes of others.

It is more than rhetorical language –
it is language that is part of the message itself.

It is kind of like the southern Catholic writer, Flannery O'Connor.
She was asked why her characters were so often grotesque, she replied,
"To the hard of hearing you have to shout,
and to the nearly blind you have to draw large and startling figures."

Jesus was passionate for truth,
and he made startling analogies to convey what he was saying.
He was determined to say things in such a way as to cause his listeners
to realize they were settling for less
than God wanted for them.

Another feature of Jesus language was its invitation.
He didn't tell people what to do as much as he invited them to see things differently,
so that they might act differently.

It was more of a working with people's imaginations as their reason or will.

He started with particulars in their lives.
He spoke of mustard seeds and rocky soil,
of servants and masters, of weddings and wine.

We read about these just in the past months.
But the most important thing is that Jesus located the authority for his teachings
not in himself, but in his hearers own hearts.
In your deepest selves you know they are true.

It is not that he said so much.
Everything the New Testament quotes him as saying can be spoken in two hours.

Yet, they are as repeated as much as any statements in history.

Love your neighbor as yourself.

Love your enemies

Whatever you wish that men would do you, do to them.

Come unto me, all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.

Most of the time what Jesus said was in the form of parables:

Of buried treasure, of sowers who go out to sow, of a good Samaritan,

of a man who had two sons,

one of whom blew his inheritance and found himself willing to eat with the pigs.

And people said: "This man speaks with authority!"

People were astonished and with reason.

But are we?

Sometimes we have heard them so many times, they loose meaning.

Smith says that sometimes the edges of Jesus' words have worn smooth,

and that dulls their glaring subversiveness.

If we could recover their original impact we might also be startled.

They are hard sayings

and they present a scheme of values so very counter to the usual.

What would happen if we spend much time with them?

He tells us not to resist even but to turn the other cheek.

The world assumes that evil must be resisted by every means available.

He tells us to love our enemies and bless those who curse us.

The world assumes that friends are to be loved and enemies hated.

We are told that the sun rises on the just and the unjust alike.

The world considers this indiscriminating.

We are told that outcasts enter the kingdom of God before many who are righteous.

Unfair, we protest, respectable people should surely be first.

We are told that the gate to salvation is narrow.

But surely it is wide enough for us all.

We are told to be as carefree as birds and flowers.

The world counsels prudence.

We are told that it is more difficult

for the rich to enter the kingdom than for a camel to pass through a needle's eye.

The world honors wealth.

We are told that happy people are those who are meek,

who weep, who are merciful and pure in heart.

The world assumes that it is the rich,

the powerful, and the wellborn who should be happy.

Is there not a kind of abandon that blows through these teachings?
Am I alone in wanting to deflect their effect in whatever way we can -

pretend I do not hear them,

or excuse them as from a different age and culture?

Perhaps H. G. Wells said it right:

Either there was something mad about this man,

or our hearts are still too small for his message.

Perhaps our hearts are not too small for the message,

and that is why we always go back to the story.

We ask to hear it again, and again.

I invite us to hear the story again

As we enter the season of Advent next week.

For it is a story that bears telling over and over.

There are two very important things for us to get as hearers of the story:

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The first is God's overwhelming love of humanity,
and second is to accept that love and let it flow through us.
That's really all its about.

But hearing it once does not do it.

We are hearers of the story,
and we always come back to hear it again.

So here we are.

Advent is really my favorite of the seasons because
it gives me an opportunity to do some personal preparation -
as if I start all over again getting to know this infant
who becomes everything we Christians call God.

I think this Sunday is a good time to look at the man Jesus
and what we learned about him through the gospels -
this man who went from Jesus, the gifted healer and teacher from Nazareth,
and social prophet, student of John
to the Christ of Faith who we know through the traditions of the church
and from the writings of those who reflected on what they knew.
In doing this I return as I do often to Huston Smith,
especially in his book "The Soul of Christianity."

Smith tries to help us see into the first few years of the Jesus people, so to speak. They were also called people of “the way” which was another way to characterize those people who followed Jesus, and testified to something amazing in their relationship with him.

Why? What was so amazing?

I would like to highlight a few things.

¹ Huston Smith. The Soul of Christianity: Restoring the Great Tradition, p. 46 and following.