

The Jesus You Only Thought You Knew

In the name of him who sent his disciples to preach that people should repent and believe the Good News, dear friends in Christ: In the first chapter of his Gospel, St. John the Evangelist writes concerning Jesus, “He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.” And that’s precisely what we see in this morning’s Gospel: Jesus being rejected by the people of Nazareth, the village where he grew up and where he lived and worked as a carpenter and homebuilder until he was about thirty years old. The question is: why would they do that? What made them so hard hearted with respect to Jesus? Why when so many others from the towns and cities of Galilee and beyond were flocking to see and hear him were the people of his own hometown so resistant to Jesus and his message?

To answer the question, I suppose we ought to try to see things from their perspective. Imagine you are one of them. You’re a long time resident of the village of Nazareth. It’s not a particularly big place. The population in the first century was somewhere between two and four hundred; which means we’re talking about four or five clans of extended families. You know everyone in town and they know you. The chances are that you’re related to most of them. And you live close together too. In most ancient towns the houses were very small and all stuck together, sharing walls with one another. It would be more like living in an apartment complex. As a result, you don’t have a lot of privacy. You can’t help knowing your neighbor’s business almost as well as you know your own.

And all of this means that you know the family of Joseph and Mary quite well. You know that Jesus is the eldest of their offspring, and that he has four younger brothers and at least two sisters. In every respect they seem to be a normal family. Jesus works along with his brothers in their father’s homebuilding business, which, more often than not takes them to the nearby city of Sepphoris. That’s where most of the work is. It’s a big new city that’s expanding rapidly because King Herod is investing a lot of money there for construction. And that means a builder with five sons working alongside him ought to be doing quite well for himself. Mary and Joseph were fairly poor in the early days of their marriage; but now the family is at least comfortable – and maybe a bit beyond that. And now that Joseph has recently passed away, Jesus is the heir apparent to take over the family business. That’s the way it appears, anyway.

What else do you know about Jesus? He’s kind and friendly, extraordinarily thoughtful, works hard, very trustworthy; no one in town has anything bad to say about him. He’s deeply religious and committed to the faith handed down through the Patriarchs and Moses, he never misses a Sabbath service at the synagogue, and he’s very attentive to the Rabbis who teach – he asks them a lot of intriguing questions, many of which they can’t answer; but when this happens he’s always respectful and it’s clear that he’s not trying to embarrass them. He genuinely wants to know. What else? Well, my guess is that there are a few young ladies in town who secretly hope he might come courting one day, and a few of their parents who would be happy to have Jesus as their son-in-law. He’s a good man. And more importantly, perhaps, he’s one of us. Everyone in town thinks so. And we thought he did too.

But that seems to have changed. Four or five months back Jesus took a little trip down to the Jordan where John was baptizing. There was nothing unusual about that: practically everyone was doing it. If anything, Jesus was late to go; the really big waves of pilgrims who went to hear John and to be baptized by him had already come and gone by the time Jesus

went. It's almost like he was waiting to be one of the last. But this is where the story gets weird. After he was baptized, Jesus just disappeared for about a month and a half. Rumors are that he spent the time wandering in the desert without any food. It's said that he had some kind of spiritual awakening out there. We're not sure what happened. Maybe he got too much sun and it affected his mind, because we do know that when he reappeared he was different. Now he suddenly fancies himself an itinerant Rabbi. Imagine that: our Jesus now presents himself as a preacher and teacher of God's Word, even though he's never studied in Jerusalem under any of the great Rabbis. And you should hear the stories they're telling about him. They say he's been performing miracles of healing, driving out demons, and even raising the dead. He's become an overnight sensation. People are flocking to him by the thousands. Some are saying that he might be the long promised Christ of God. *Our Jesus*, the homebuilder, who was not too long ago the grubby-faced kid who played in our streets: *the Christ*. C'mon. Really? They couldn't possibly think that if they knew him like we do.

And that's the problem. They have preconceived notions about Jesus based on their experience – based on what they already know about him. And from that they have forecast certain expectations: *this* is what he is and ought to be. *This* is what his future looks like. We know it. And thus it is that when he comes to his hometown after having suddenly broken out of that mold they've created in their minds for him, they are prepared to shove him back into it.

It's with much curiosity and maybe a little resentment that they gather in the synagogue the day he's been invited to preach. They're not prepared for what they hear. Their expectations are low. They think he's going to embarrass himself by even pretending to be something other than what they know him to be. And they think his dismal performance will confirm their low expectations and prove that they were right about him. But that's not what they hear. He speaks simply yet eloquently. He illumines and explains God's Word in ways they've never thought possible. They are astonished at his understanding and the skillful ways in which he makes difficult theological concepts easy to assimilate. They like very much what they hear; but they have a lot of trouble with whom it is they are hearing it from. "Where did *he* get this stuff? How did *he* get such wisdom? And, assuming that at least some of the stories we've heard about him are true, how is *he* able to work miracles?"

They thought they knew Jesus, and he turned out to be someone quite different. But they don't like being surprised. They don't like their preconceptions being shattered. They don't like being proven wrong. And so they take offense. Actually the word in the Greek text is *scandalized*. They are scandalized by him. And it comes from a mixture of thoughts and emotions: envy, incredulity, anger, frustration ... *pride*, yes pride that resists being proven wrong – resists being proven wrong to the point of rejecting the one who dare to do it. Better, they think, to maintain the sense (or illusion) of being right than to admit that they were wrong. Better to continue to think of Jesus the way they imagined him to be than to accept the truth and reality of who and what he is.

And in this way they hardened their hearts against him. They refused to believe in him. And because of their disbelief, Jesus was unable to do many great works among them. Remember how he always says to those who are healed, "Your faith in me has made you well." The flip side of that is that those who do not believe in Jesus cannot be made well – and more importantly, neither can they be cleansed of their sins.

But this does not impede the spread of the Gospel. There are other people out there who *are* willing to hear Jesus, and by the power of the Spirit they are able to believe in him; so he goes to them. We're told that he went among the other towns and villages teaching. More than

that, he calls, commissions, and empowers his twelve disciples to spread the word, to call people to repentance and to faith in Jesus the Savior. Sending them out in pairs, he tells them to trust the Lord to see to all their needs. They're not to take any money or food or extra clothing. Instead, they're to live off the gifts and contributions of those who receive them as the bearers of God's Word, who answer their call to repent, and who place their trust in Jesus whom they proclaim. Among such people they are empowered to do what Jesus does: drive out demons and heal the sick. But just like Jesus, among those who reject the message, they can do little or nothing. And Jesus tells them not to waste their precious time with such people. Instead they are to shake off the dust of such places from their feet as a testimony against them. It was a way to say, "You have no part of God's kingdom. Even the dust of your ground is excluded. We don't want it sticking to our feet." And overall it appears that as the disciples went out they enjoyed much success, for we are told many were rescued. And thus the work and ministry of Jesus was multiplied several times; but only after he was first rejected by his own.

And in this sense today's Gospel lesson is a prophetic foreshadowing of how Jesus' greater mission to this fallen world would unfold. You see the pattern here: Jesus is first rejected by his own people, and then his saving message goes out to others who receive it with joy. That's precisely what will happen later when he goes to Jerusalem. Some in the crowd will rightly hail him as the promised Christ and Savior, great King David's greater son; but most will not. Why? Because he isn't the kind of king they're expecting. He isn't the kind of king they want. They think they know what the Christ should be: mostly a political leader who will lead them in a war of independence from the hated Romans and restore the glory of the nation of Israel. That's how they imagine it. But that isn't who Jesus is. That's not the kind of kingdom he comes to establish. So they reject him. They condemn him. They falsely accuse him. They hand him over to Pilate demanding that he be crucified and killed. And that's what happens.

But that does not impede the spread of the Gospel. Instead, it's what makes it possible, for Jesus does not remain in the grave. He rises. Having borne the sin of the world to the cross and having paid the frightful cost of our redemption by his suffering and death, he conquered sin and defanged death. And then he authorizes his disciples go forth as his apostles, calling people to repentance, and baptizing in Jesus' name those who respond to the call, declaring to them the forgiveness of their sins. That's what his kingdom is all about. It's about granting eternal life to those who hear and believe the good news about Jesus.

This saving message is largely rejected by God's own people, the Jewish nation. Why? In a word: pride. They don't want a savior from sin. They don't think that they're sinful enough to need a savior. They think they can work their own salvation through their obedience to the Law of God. So instead, the apostles take the message to others, to the Gentiles; and among them the Gospel is received with faith and joy by many, and the kingdom of God is multiplied many times over.

We see this same pattern working throughout history and even today. In the places where Christianity is strong, where Jesus has his own people, there is a tendency over time to reject him. Christians forget and obscure what the faith is really all about: sin and repentance and faith in Jesus the Savior; and they begin to recast Christ in another mold. In popular imagination the Christ becomes instead a helper who assists you in earning your own right standing before God. This is how the Roman Catholic Church portrays him. Or Jesus becomes a moral example who came to model for us how to do things right. This is the way Christ was seen by various legalists throughout history and how he is now seen in much of modern American Evangelicalism. Or Christ is thought to be an earthly savior who promises to cure all

of our physical ailments and make us rich and successful. This is how the health and wealth “gospel” preachers paint him – and what so many people are eager to believe about him. Or Christ becomes a social reformer who came to cure this present world of poverty, injustice, violence, racism, discrimination, and intolerance. This is how much of mainline liberal Protestantism understands Jesus. There are many other ways to do it; but the point is that where this happens, God’s people only think they know who Jesus is, and they are rejecting the real thing. And among such people, the power of Jesus to do what he came to do is limited. Eventually, as the false image of Christ overshadows the true person, the power fades completely. And the church dies.

Look at what were the great centers of the Christian faith in the first few centuries: places like Alexandria in Egypt, Ephesus in Turkey, and even Jerusalem after the Jews had been destroyed and the city rebuilt mostly by Christians. By the 8th century, Christianity was all but dead in those places. Or take the middle ages, when Western Europe was the center of Christendom. The faith is nearly dead there now. For the last couple centuries it’s here in the Americas that the faith has been the strongest; but I think it’s accurate to say that it’s in steady decline now. Believe it or not, Africa is where genuine Christian faith is expanding the most. If it hasn’t already, it will soon surpass the western hemisphere as the center of the Christian world. And that’s good news for them. I pray God blesses them and keeps adding multitudes to his kingdom there.

But it’s also a warning to us, for here in this place we are Christ’s own people. And we think we know Jesus pretty well, after all, most of us have known him our whole lives. But do we *really* know him? I study the Scripture a lot. It’s my job. And what I find amazing is how often Jesus surprises me. He is constantly saying and doing things that I do not expect. Even when I take a text that I think I know extremely well and from which I’ve extracted every possible insight—pow! Something new I’d never noticed about Jesus and his work will suddenly emerge.

My point is this: we are inherently sinful and so are our imaginations. Our minds are corrupted and we think dark, wrong thoughts. Like the people to whom Ezekiel was sent, we are by nature rebellious, impudent, and stubborn. And for these reasons, there is a real danger in thinking that we know Jesus. When we think we know him, we become resistant to actually learning anything from or about him. We stop listening to him who renews us and establishes our faith by his powerful, regenerating Word, and thus we begin sliding away from his truth. Before long, we’ll be left with only the Jesus of our imaginations – the Jesus we only think we know – who isn’t the real Jesus at all. That Jesus we will have rejected. And he will have moved on to speak to those who are willing to hear and receive him.

Therefore let it be clear that the Christian life can never be one of merely knowing Jesus. It is instead the life of continually learning to know him by listening to his Word, hearing his call to repent, and receiving his powerful, life giving grace and forgiveness. In our perfected state, when we are with him in glory, we will spend all eternity still learning to know him. And there will always be more to learn. How much more vital is it for us then to be constantly open to learning to know him now when we are weak, imperfect, and subject to straying?

Today we are called to repent of the sin of thinking we know Jesus as well as we need to and the prideful, unteachable, and hardhearted attitude that attends it. So let’s do that. Let’s cast from our minds the Jesus we only thought we knew. And receiving Christ’s blood-bought forgiveness, let’s open our hearts and minds to be surprised, astonished, and filled with joy at learning to know better our true Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!