

Who is He, anyway?

(John 6:35, 41-51)

A sermon for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

The last verse of the text from John 6 today, John 6:51 (35), states: "I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I give for the life of the world is my flesh."

That's dynamite. That changes everything. He is the living bread and this gives us life. You notice that the beginning of the text takes a different slant: Verse 41: "The Jews (the leaders of the Jews), murmured at him, because he said, 'I am the bread which came down from heaven.'"

It goes on: "They said, 'Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, 'I have come down from heaven.?'"

This isn't only that a prophet is not known in his own country.

You and I know people from this town (name one or two), who have become famous, and we say, "But I knew him when he was little. And he walked and talked and ran just like all the rest of us. His parents are so and so, and how can he be anything different?"

So, too, the leaders of the Jews think: "Is he not the son of Joseph? We know his father and mother. We've known him since he was a kid."

How much do we know about the life of Jesus? I am tempted to give a quiz about the life of Jesus. What we know? What the sequence is? It's a big problem. A good example of the problem is seen in a book written in 1904 by Albert Schweitzer. The title is, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. Schweitzer looked at the previous 105 years and analyzed eight books on the life of Jesus. He showed that they weren't lives of Jesus at all. They were simply reflections, like reflections in a mirror, of the one who wrote it.

But the real irony of the book is that Schweitzer did the same thing! He wrote what it was supposedly like, and, of course, it was really his view of what Jesus was really like.

In the last 250 years there have been thousands of lives of Jesus. People who said, "We'll describe how it really was."

For example, if you are a scholar in New Testament studies, there are many subdivisions. You concentrate on Paul, or you concentrate on Matthew, or John, or the history of interpretation, or there is even a specialty called the history of the lives of Jesus. In other words, you can spend your whole career not writing a life of Jesus, but analyzing and recording what has been done about this for the last 250 years. It becomes a real question

because since about 1770, we've adopted the modern way of thinking about history, which is expressed most easily in a phrase by a German named von Ranke, who said, "as it really was." We think we can find the historical, the biographical "as it really was."

If we look at the records: First of all, we need to remind ourselves that Jesus is unknown in world history until about the year 100. The first reference we know of is by a Roman historian named Suetonius, and he has it wrong. He said there was a certain Chrestos. Then probably about ten years later was someone named Pliny the Younger in the Roman world, or Josephus in the Jewish world, and, of course, there were more later.

Jesus is almost unknown except through what we call Gospels. If you look at the Gospels themselves, they don't match up, even with all their similarities. Every year at Lent when we read the Passion story, we use a compilation (the Diatessaron) by a Greek historian named Tatian, from about 180 A.D. The compilation doesn't work. It doesn't put the Gospel records together in any way that is satisfactory.

After that, we have those who have said: "There's a Jesus of history and a Christ of faith" (Martin Kahler, 1892). What we have to do is get back to the simple Jesus.

There are others who say: "The real problem is Paul." There was the simple Jesus, and then Paul complicated things.

Or we have the Jesus Seminar, a group of modern scholars who have analyzed all this and said: "Well, he was a wandering preacher and teacher, probably of a certain group called the Cynics, and that's who he really was." Of course, Islam makes him the last of the prophets before Mohammed.

What are we going to do? There are simply thousands of these lives, and they are all simply reflections of the person who writes them.

To be sure, this is also true of other historical figures. It's true of Napoleon, or Lincoln, or Luther, or the like. We are caught up by the idea that if we could just get to the historical Jesus, we would really know what to believe. It doesn't mean that there is not in some basic way a history here.

But what kind of material is this? Already in the Second Century they were aware of how to record this. About 140 A. D. a Christian leader in Rome named Papias wrote: "What's important is the oral, spoken preaching. But now that those first and second generation people are gone, we have had to write it down." It was also said in the middle of the Second Century that the Gospel of Mark was the preaching of Peter.

At the end of the Second Century Irenaeus defended the fact that we have four Gospels, even though there are at least 100 Gospels floating around.

What did Irenaeus give for the reason that there are these four and not the rest? It was because of **The Message: Jesus is Lord!**

- 1 Cor 12:3: "Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says 'Jesus be cursed!' and no one can say '**Jesus is Lord**' except by the Holy spirit."
- Romans 10:9: ". . . because if you confess with your lips that **Jesus is Lord** and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."
- 2 Cor 4:5: "For what we preach is not ourselves, but **Jesus as Lord**, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake."
- Philippians 2:8-11: "And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every name should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that **Jesus Christ is Lord**, to the glory of God the Father."
- 1 Cor 8:6: ". . . yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and **one Lord, Jesus Christ**, through whom are all things and through whom we exist," Notice that God the Father and God the Son are in exact parallel.

The Message you and I also know in the creeds: First, the Nicene Creed and then what comes later, the Apostles Creed, which say: "Born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. On the third day he arose again and he sits at the right hand of the Father." This is **The Message** that changes everything.

The Message is not that we can establish history. We could go forever arguing history, but it really comes down to **The Message**. As C.S. Lewis said about all of this: Either this is what it says it is, or it's crazy. There's no in between, no saying: We're going to sort it out; it was really this." Either it is what it says it is, or it's crazy.

What is this that changes everything? John 6:51: "I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I give for the life of the world is my flesh."

What is this amazing and great change? It says: "I shall give." That refers to two things. First of all, he shall give his life on the cross. In the second place, "I shall be the bread of life," which means of course that he comes to us in the bodily Word in Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Out of this are **three huge, necessary, life-changing consequences**. The **first** one is: "life forever." Not the kind of bread, as he says in the verses preceding, not the kind of bread which was manna. Manna was O.K. They had that in the Old Testament. But that bread came and went. This is the living bread which gives life forever.

Earlier in John 14:6a it states: "I am the way and the truth and the life." He is the life.

The **second** necessary, life-changing consequence is about other religions. Not only is it that it is not the kind of "life" that is described in the Old Testament, but it is "life" in him, and as it says in John 14:6b: "no one comes to the Father but by me." He is life, and it is not found elsewhere.

The **third** necessary, life-changing consequence is that we are given a perspective, a focus for how we live now and forever. You may wrongly think that this means you've got to be "spiritual," or "other-worldly." No. That's not what it means.

But it also doesn't mean that this life is all there is: That's it. No, it means we have a perspective. And that perspective is pointed out in the New Testament in two ways. On the one hand, and the King James translation is remarkable: "Here we have no abiding city" (Hebrews 13:14). Or as Paul writes: "We live as if not. . . because the form of this world is passing away" (1 Cor 7:29-31). Or as in Philippians 3:20: "Our commonwealth (our kingdom) is in heaven."

On the other hand, we are called to be here now, living in this new and different way. Søren Kierkegaard describes this new life this way: It is as if you were sitting at a window and looking out at the world and thinking and remembering to yourself: It's all taken away, but it's all given back in a different way. We are given this calling, and we are to live here now in him.

In the Small Catechism, in the explanation to the Second Article of the Creed, it says: "All this he has done that I may be his own, live under him in his kingdom (on the one hand now), and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. . . . This is most certainly true." Amen