

"Jesus Christ has come in the flesh."

I John 4:2

A sermon for the Sixth Sunday of Easter

Isn't it amazing all the things that people collect? Someone collects golf balls; another, tractors; another, one-cylinder engines; another, books by a certain author; another antique dolls; another, antique cars. You name it, and there's someone who collects it.

The Guinness Book of World Records can tell you where you can find the largest hamburger you can buy commercially and a million other things. It's a testament to the fascinating variety and inventiveness of human ingenuity.

It's fun to flip through the Guiness Book of World Records. It's "interesting." The Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, warned about the category of "the interesting." We have itching ears; we will run to see curiosities.

Then when we come to church it can seem "not interesting." Haven't we heard this all before? What again! Today we'll look at texts that at first may seem ho-hum but they are anything but ho-hum. To be sure, they are not curiosities that entertain and distract. They are about things that shape and last, about forever.

First, Acts 11 is telling about the early preaching and teaching that was going on in Antioch and 11:26 states: "In Antioch the disciples were for the first time called Christians." That's big. They had a certain identity.

And this matter of identity comes up also in John 15:16: "You did not choose me but I chose you." That not only tells us who we are but whose we are.

There's something here going on that's not about what's "interesting," but rather what is basic. The questions are: Who we are? Whose are we? And why?

This questions of identity come out also in 1 John 4:2 where it talks about testing the spirits. How do we know? After all, there are all kinds of spirits and it says:

"By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God."

What's so critical about this? Why is this the test? This small book called "The First Letter of John" is built like a fugue with theme and variations. There's a basic theme and then all kinds of things, variations on this theme, that spin off.

The theme is: "Jesus Christ came in the flesh." It's sounds like another "interesting thing." Or rather, not so interesting. Why is this important?

This confession has several parts to it. First, in Greek and Roman mythology there are all kinds of gods and goddesses who wandered out of Olympus, came to earth, did some things, and went back again. In Hindu mythology Krisna dies and rises again. It's all very interesting. Even in the Old Testament there are unusual events, for example in Genesis 18, these three angels came and that turns out to be the Lord himself appearing. Again and again in the Old Testament it says "the Lord spoke" or "he appeared."

But 1 John 4:2 states: "In the flesh." What is at stake here is that he truly became one of us. We wonder about that. Was he truly one of us? When he stubbed his toe, did it hurt? Or how could he say: "Who touched me?" If he was all-knowing, wouldn't he know? Or where it says he was tired and he slept. If he was all-powerful, how could he be tired? At the end at his crucifixion it says he was betrayed. How could that be if he knew what was in the hearts of everybody? Or a little later, he sweat blood and prayed: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" But he was God and knew that in a few hours he would be resurrected.

At the Council of Chalcedon in 451 the church made the very basic decision that in terms of God being human and divine, Jesus is "unmixed and undivided." Do not go speculating about how. Otherwise you are caught by such questions as when God died on the cross, who ran the universe during the hours he was dead? Don't go there.

Nevertheless, the basic point is made: God came in the flesh, including dying. Why is that important? In 1 John 4:10 he became the sacrifice, the one who took care of sin and death. As it says in 1 John 2:2: "He became the expiation." He became the one who changed everything. He became exactly like us so he could deal with this.

The Book of Hebrews says he was like us in every way except sin: "He had to be made like his brethren in every respect" (2:17) and 4:15: "For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with us in our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." He suffered, he died. He was sorrowful. He was involved in all the change and decay of life, and by doing that he

made all the difference. He came in the flesh and he died, and this is not just an interesting idea.

The third point is: What's different here is that when the Word is spoken, God acts. When the Lord says, "I forgive you," it's done.

It's true that we use words and ideas to talk about the things of life. What's different here is that God in Christ really forgives. It's not just "interesting." It's not just hearing a different drummer. We appreciate all the variety of the human situation, but when you come down to it, the one decisive event of all time is this test: "Jesus Christ came in the flesh." That means that everything is changed, and we have forgiveness and life in him forever. Amen