

Jesus

A sermon for Maunday Thursday

In 2005 a group of atheists produced a film titled, "The God Who Wasn't There." They claimed that religion is oppressive and should be eliminated. In their ad for the film, they say that the Jesus of the Gospels is a myth and bears a striking resemblance to mythical heroes.

A few years ago a report on the BBC said that in England over a billion Easter eggs would be sold to celebrate the birth of Jesus. There were complaints about the report: To celebrate the birth of Jesus? The BBC issued a correction: "To celebrate the rebirth of Jesus." Finally someone got to them and said: "How about the resurrection?"

There is an appalling ignorance among us about what the Gospel stories are about. (The people behind the film, "The God Who Wasn't There," these well-known figures, Dawson, Danet, Harris, and Christopher Hitchens, have a point.) We are unaware of origins and similarities. On the other hand, it is all really old hat. What they are saying today was said at the time of the French Revolution in 1790 where there was a school of thought that said Jesus did not even exist. It was all a myth. This occurred again between 1900 and 1910. This is old stuff. Nevertheless, we can easily be confused because we have not bothered to learn what the Gospel accounts are and how we sort it out.

One of the astounding things is that even though Christianity has become the leading religion of the world, at the time and for years following, it made no impression. In the culture of the time outside of Judaism, there is nothing in the First Century. In the beginning of the Second Century the Roman historian Suetonius (c.71—c.135) mentioned someone whom he called "Chrestos." He could be referring to Christ. A little later the Roman historian Tacitus mentions that Jesus existed and was crucified. Josephus, the Jewish historian, has something to say, but it was likely added later. The Book of Acts 5:36-37 mentions other messiahs. There are all kinds of messiahs then and now. Jesus was just another messiah, another uprising. Nobody paid any attention.

What about the Gospels themselves? The Gospels were written in the last part of the First Century. What are they? They are not books of history. We

call them Gospels, but that does not mean they are biographies. It does not mean they are like the "Lives of the Caesars" by Suetonius, which are sort of biographical. There are not like Plutarch's "Lives," which were really morality tales, using someone as an example. The Gospels are really theology. They had a different understanding in those days about what history is.

We think history means "as it actually was." We use this phrase from the Nineteenth Century German historian, von Ranke. That is not the way they thought of history in ancient times. When we go to the great Greek historians, Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon, that is not what they were about. This understanding of history is a modern invention from the time of the French Revolution. We think that we can find "facts" and facts are like what we find in the laboratory. But history is not the laboratory. You cannot repeat history. History is something very different.

But didn't Jesus write anything? That is a trick question. You may recall in the story about the woman taken in adultery that he wrote in the sand (John 8:1-11, a disputed text). Basically Jesus didn't write anything. We cannot depend on doctrines or theories of inspiration. People think that the Gospels are a kind of video tape or at least an audio tape of what happened. But that is not the case. These accounts were known and remembered orally. The early Christians understood that the end of the world was coming soon. They were not concerned to write documents for all time. What we have in the Gospels is very different.

In fact there are about one hundred gospels from that time. How did the early church sort them out? They did not do it arbitrarily. They looked for the things that told about Jesus in a way they depended upon, that was trustworthy. They finally settled on four.

In modern times, from the French Revolution to the present, many accounts of "the life of Jesus" have been written. They attempt to be biographies. There are now so many such accounts that "the lives of Jesus" is a full-time study itself.

In 1906 Albert Schweitzer wrote a book, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus. A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*. It went through what had happened in the previous hundred and twenty years and pointed out that everybody who wrote a life of Jesus was really just looking in a mirror. Every

writer created Jesus in his own image. Schweitzer wrote that this had to be considered a problem, and then he (unintentionally) did the same thing himself. He wrote a life of Jesus in the image created by his predecessor, Johannes Weiss. We have difficulty sorting out the lives of Jesus.

In 1926 a famous teacher named Bultmann said that all we really know for sure is that Jesus existed.

In 1952 there was a second round of people involved in the quest of the historical Jesus. And in about 1990 there was a third round. What can we really know? What can we know for sure about what it is all about?

The canon of Scripture and the creeds developed at the same and in the same way over several centuries, which raises the question: How do we sort it out? What those early Christians said was: "This is how we do it." The Apostles' Creed is not a long document. It says: "Born of the Virgin Mary. . . suffered under Pontius Pilate . . . was crucified, died, and was buried . . . and rose again on the third day." These are the basic things we need to know. This is basically what the Gospel accounts are about. It is not a matter of having vast amounts of material, or saying that this is historically accurate in the modern sense of history.

We Lutherans use the phrase "the Word of God" in three ways in their order of importance, which is also the way in which they appear chronologically. First, we say Jesus is "the Word of God." Second, preaching about Jesus as Lord is the "Word of God." Third, there is the written record, "the Book," which we call "the Word of God."

The same is true of the term "the Gospel." First of all, Jesus is "the Gospel," the Savior. Second, the saving message proclaimed about him is "the Gospel." And third, there are these books called "the Gospels." We need to be sure we do not confuse what this is about.

It is really important to remember that when we say the Gospel, the saving message, that we do not say this is defined and determined by the books called Gospels, but rather the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ is what defines what the books mean, rather than the other way around. Otherwise we would lose the basic message.

Why is this true? The basic message can be defined in two ways. First, the enormous facticity of particularity, that the Lord who created everything that is, the whole cosmos and beyond, became one of us, became a particular man with a particular mother at a particular time and place. The finite took on the infinite. But this is not the most important point of what it is about.

Second, and most important, is that the one who is holy took on sin. This is not something that can be determined and defined by the written account. Rather, it is this message about holiness and sin that is key to what is in "the Book."

There are three things that come out of this. First, we are not to unravel and understand the Gospels, these books, psychologically. We live in an age of psychology and the question is always posed: "How did it feel? How did he react?" Recall the movie from a few years ago, "The Passion of the Christ," which was all about the enormous feelings of Jesus.

To be sure, we can ask ourselves how was it possible that in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus prayed: "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me" (Matt 26:39), and then when the soldiers come to arrest him, he says: "Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?" (Matt 26:53). How do you sort that out? The answer is: Don't go there.

The ancient ecumenical Council of Chalcedon (451) said that Jesus, true God and true man, is unmixed and undivided. That is incomprehensible for us, and it has nothing to do with what we need to know. We do not have a way of sorting out Jesus' inner thoughts and feelings. It is not about psychology. It is about theology, and we are not trying to make him into some kind of psychological problem. Rather, he is the theological answer.

The second thing has to do with what Jesus' dying on the cross means. A few years ago the head priest of St. Albans Church on the edge of London preached a sermon that made headlines. He said that what happened on the cross is about love and truth, not wrath and punishment, and that Jesus died on the cross to share the grief and suffering we have. The priest also said that when we say when Jesus took the rap and we are forgiven as long as we believe in him, that that is repulsive and nonsensical. It makes God into a punishing monster. Of course, all the news media jumped at that.

How do we sort out the meaning of Christ's death on the cross? Was it a redemption, like buying a slave out of the marketplace? Was it reconciliation of two parties that were angry and estranged? Was he the great example, or the great sacrifice? Is he involved in sharing our sufferings in a cosmic way?

What matters is that God saw that we were caught in sin and death and the devil. He solved it his way on the cross. Not our way. It has nothing to do with whether we understand it or figure it out. He has done it without us. The church has never defined how we are to interpret the meaning of the cross.

In the third place, we come to the institution of the Lord's Supper on Maunday Thursday and ask ourselves: How does the Lord's Supper bring us closer to Jesus himself?

There was a book from the 1950's by Joachim Jeremias called *The Eucharistic words of Jesus*. This great scholar took the various accounts of the Last Supper in the Gospels as well as in Paul, translated them back into Aramaic, and then sorted them out and concluded that we can get to the very words of Jesus. Then we can really know and we can really believe. We can really celebrate the Lord's Supper correctly. We can do it right.

To which the answer is: That is irrelevant. That is not what it is about. (And we have to say that we do not know if this scholar did it right.) Even if we could do it exactly right, it is not about whether we do it right or understand it correctly. It is about what God does. We know that he comes to us in his Word, the Word of the Gospel, and in the Lord's Supper he brings us freedom from sin, death, and the devil. Out of that we gain certainty and freedom because it does not depend on our doing, or thinking, or understanding. This comes to us in spite of us. It comes from outside of us. It does not depend on us. It comes to us because he makes his promise, and he comes to us directly. This is the Gospel message of true freedom and we rejoice in this freedom. Amen