

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Easter

RCL Lectionary

[Acts 9:36-43](#) / [Psalm 23](#) / [Revelation 7:9-17](#) / [John 10:22-30](#)

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The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour

Mill Valley, California

If You Meet Jesus in the Temple. . .

by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

Poking around online yesterday, I came across a video highlighted by a blogging bishop (yes a few of them blog) entitled "What People Really Think: Jesus vs. Christians."¹ The video is a series of short cuts of people on the streets of Chicago saying what they think about Jesus, and then what they think about Christians. You can probably imagine the stark contrast in the responses. Jesus was pretty well respected for being one amazing guy, but Christians, well, get the raw end of the stick for being backwards, out of touch, preachy, uneducated, extreme, fanatical, overly conservative, hoping for something we'll never get. . . Well, you get the picture. It's a bit tempting to start nursing a persecution complex.

Alan Wilson, Bishop of Buckingham in the Church of England, wrote this in response to the video:

"Good news is that 2,000 years into the resurrection, many people actually get it about Jesus, in spite of the distorting glass Christians have so often been in our blindness, folly and fallen nature. Bad news is that the distorting glass is often bottle green and six foot thick."

And then he goes on to quote a line from Paul (2 Corinthians 4:5):

"We preach Christ Jesus as Lord and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. . ."

"Really?" Bishop Alan asks, "How?"

A good question for Eastertide, it seems to me. A question for us as a parish family in a part of the world where we know claiming our Christianity is probably not likely to win us popularity contests. A question for us as people on a journey. . . an Easter journey. But I do wonder if we sometimes have the tendency to worry too much about our reputation as *Christians*. For instance, we find ourselves often at a loss to describe in positive terms our own peculiar brand of Christianity – something we generally call Anglicanism. We find it easier to describe what we are not, caught as we sometimes feel between Christianities of inerrant biblical fundamentalism on one side, and scandal-ridden hierarchies on the other.

The label "Christian" displaces us somehow, if it doesn't disquiet us. Maybe it should. By claiming our life as "Christians," we find ourselves a bit out of place in the wider world, and, of course, a bit ashamed in the ways we fall short of the example of our beloved Christ.

Jesus is found a bit out of place in today's Gospel. . . in some ways, it seems, about as far from Easter as he could get – the Feast of the Dedication is more familiarly known to most of us as Hanukkah, commemorating the re-building of the altar and rededication of the Temple when, in 164 BCE, Jewish rule over Jerusalem was reclaimed by Judas Maccabeus from a tyrannical Seleucid king.

That Jesus is at the Temple during this celebration, and in Solomon's Portico, a porch named for the ancient great wise king of Israel, might suggest to us that expectations are running high when people outside of his circle of disciples

¹ <http://bishopalan.blogspot.com/2010/04/houston-we-have-problem.html>

surround him and ask him directly about whether or not he is the Messiah. But the author of John makes it clear their question is not simply one to satisfy idle curiosity. It comes with a challenge. First of all, to question anyone publicly in the first-century world was to challenge that person's honor. And secondly, John's Greek is even a bit more disgruntled than our translators let on. Literally, the question reads, "How long do you take our life from us?" an idiomatic expression that might mean, "How long will you provoke us?"²

It's easy to imagine the crowds are hoping cynically or anxiously -- or both -- that this provocateur, Jesus, believes himself to be the latest Judas Maccabeus. Maybe, they hope, he will throw the Romans out and restore the line of King David and his son, Solomon; or maybe, if they're feeling cynical, he's a pretender and will simply die in a foolish attempt at revolution. That Jesus doesn't quite come out and say whether or not he fits either Messianic bill is galling enough, for sure. But Jesus' answer to their heated question -- his answer about sheep and his being one with God -- provokes them to violence. In the following verses, the crowd prepares to stone him for blasphemy.

You could say the scene bears witness to what we might call a Christian paraphrase of a rather famous Zen teaching: "If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him" (Linji). For the crowds of today's Gospel and for us, it might be, "If you meet God in the Temple, kill him!"

Jesus knows that simply proclaiming himself Messiah will get him no traction with anyone. If we must ask him whether or not he's the Messiah, we have not arrived as far as faith goes. If we do not recognize his voice and follow him, we clearly do not see him as a Messiah, no matter what he might do or say about himself. Instead we see him as someone else -- someone other than the Savior of the World and the Shepherd of our Souls. Maybe we see him as a charlatan or a magician. Maybe a charismatic guy with some slightly weird ideas about his relationship with God. Maybe as a great teacher and healer distorted by the imperfect eyes or rose-tinted spectacles of his own followers. Or as C. S. Lewis once retorted, maybe we must regard him simply as a crazy man. At any rate, we have an imposter of some kind. And Jesus merely claiming himself to be Messiah probably won't help that judgment much.

"On the other hand. . ." as Tevye is fond of saying in *Fiddler on the Roof*, the Zen teaching also reminds us in all of its own provocative irony, the moment we think we have figured out the Messiah -- that is, the moment we think we know exactly what the Messiah is about; the moment we encapsulate the mystery of who Jesus is in an idea or a notion of the way things should be; the instant we think we are certain of God's will in the working out of our salvation. . . well, we are in very deep spiritual trouble, just as the crowds appear to be in today's Gospel. And, it is true, we Christians can be very good at that -- thinking we've got it buttoned down and getting into very deep trouble as a result, I mean.

Yet, on the other hand. . . maybe we need to remember, too, that if you meet the perfect Christian sitting in the pew next to you, or if you find the perfect Christian community on the road to church. . .well. . .Let me know!

Christ's Messianic identity is not rooted in doing what others expect of him, meeting their notions of Messianic perfection. Nor is it rooted in arrogantly laying claim to the title of Messiah. Nor is it in establishing the perfect community, or leading perfect disciples. Rather, Jesus' Messianic identity and our identity as imperfect Christians and an imperfect Christian community is rooted in no small part in a radical kind of faith -- one based on trust and hope and a willingness to follow -- follow this God through death and resurrection and inviting others to join in that journey.

And that trust, hope, and willingness to follow depends, just as Jesus' identity depended, not so much on what we claim about ourselves, but ultimately upon our actions. "The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me," Jesus says to the crowds, and to us. After all, we read from the *Acts* of the Apostles this time of year, during Eastertide. It's not called, the *Thoughts* of the Apostles, or even the *Teachings* of the Apostles -- although they did teach. But their teaching is active, faithful, salient, relevant, embedded in life and community and all the touch, push, pull and grit of relationship,

² Malina, Rorbaugh. *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*. pg. 185.

just like Peter's raising up Tabitha. In short, it is rooted always in action. And those acts are not perfect. But they do change the world.

The disconnect between Jesus and Christians isn't our imperfections or our annoying lapses and errors. The disconnect is the arrogance in assuming Jesus is too good to mingle our faults and edges with his blood, too good to be amongst the broken with the broken bread that points to his broken body on the cross. The truth we lay claim to is that Jesus is so *good* that God is fully among us wayward souls, leading us on our pilgrimage, plumbing the depths of our darkest moments, gathering us out of the tombs into resurrected life, remaking us on the Way. There are far worse things than our being judged wanting against Jesus' standards. The fact that people on the streets of our contemporary cities can talk well of Jesus is Good News. It's Gospel. Full stop. Our reputation as *Christians* might need some work, but that's ultimately in God's gracious hands, too. Isn't that what we believe?

We are called by today's Gospel as sheep. Sheep follow. Sheep move. Sheep, in their own woolen way, *act*. They don't sit around and make up stories about themselves or fancy theologies about their shepherd all day. They don't wait for the perfect weather conditions, grass, or stream. They jostle and push, pull and bray. They listen with active ears, seeking out the voice of their shepherd. They get muddled sometimes, like all of God's creatures. They are vulnerable and obnoxious, loving and chilly depending upon their moods.

Instead of worrying about our reputations, we are called by our God in Christ to be like sheep doing our best in our own woolen ways to follow a shepherd. The life of faith is a life of courage, of stepping out and stepping forward in love – sometimes into darkness like the valley of the shadow of death. Sometimes onto green pastures where there is plenty with sunshine. Sometimes we are chastened by rod and staff – gently, I would hope, much of the time; but sometimes a bit rougher than we would like as we encounter the circumstances and chances of this world. But always the Good Shepherd's grace is there to keep us on the path, on the Way.

We are chastened and sent forth a people, as we say, forgiven, healed, renewed. Raised up in the resurrection. At work, getting our imperfect hands dirty for God in Christ – dirty with compassion and peace and justice. Setting aside the arrogance of claiming we know, and embracing the uncertainty of life-altering relationship. Searching beyond mere claims of knowledge, loving far beyond mere sentiment. Of tossing worry about our reputation as Christians aside and standing up and saying, "Yeah, we think Jesus is a great guy, too." Why? Because we hear his voice – the voice of the Good Shepherd – and we do our best to follow that voice wherever it leads us.

How?

Well, we'll show you.