

The Gospel and the Truth

Jesus asked them, "But who do you say that I am?"

- St. Mark 8: 29a

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Biblical scholars surmise that the evangelists – the first of whom to compose a gospel was Mark, on whose writings Matthew and Luke based their gospels – had before them accounts of Jesus’ life, ministry and sayings, and out of this material they constructed their gospels. And each gospel has its own themes, its own concerns, as it were, and each presents Jesus in a different way. And why? Not because they were heretics or mischief-makers or planning to lead untold millions astray. They wrote their gospels in the way they did because in so writing they were trying as best they could to answer the question, “Who do you say that I am?” The gospels are not history; they are not biographies. (At least they are not biographies as we would think of biography, though they may share some similarities with ancient biographies.) They are, well, gospels – and a gospel is a singular literary invention whose *raison d’etre* is to proclaim the central facts of Jesus’ life and death and resurrection and the meaning those events had – and have for us still. If you have ever wondered why the gospels contain no

episodes recounting a typical day in the life of Jesus Christ, this is why. It simply didn't matter. The evangelists were interested in conveying religious rather than historical truth and thus it didn't really matter if Jesus' words were recorded exactly as presented. (They probably didn't know this, anyway). What mattered was that the theological truth of the question, "Who do you say that I am?" was presented and lifted up.

This shouldn't surprise us, since we are all looking to deepen our personal relationship with Jesus Christ and we are all seeking to have our experience of him validated. But the authority by which our experiences are validated isn't *extrinsic* – something outside – but must be *intrinsic* – something inside. It is the mindset of most of us, and of the church for much of its history, to use the scriptures as buttresses for our own weak faith; in short, to use the scriptures as an extrinsic authority. If this is what we seek, we shall doubtless shrink in fear and disgust from scholarly arguments, for they seem to call the authority of the Bible into question. But the Bible has never claimed for itself this kind of authority; it has never claimed to be, for example, a science text-book or an absolutely word-for-word record of Jesus' sayings. Thus when we rush to the defence of the Bible and say, to use a popular example, that the account of creation in Genesis I is an exact representation of scientific fact, or if we insist that the words Jesus says in the

gospels in places like the Sermon on the Plain or Mount were said in exactly that way and exactly that place, we are rushing to the defence not of the Bible, nor of God, but rather of our own flimsy and childish faith. The threat we may feel when we encounter scholarly Biblical criticism is not really a threat to God or the Bible at all, but is a threat to ourselves. H. A. Williams writes,

“There is, shall we say, some discovery, some new form of knowledge, and it contains a threat – a threat, that is, to ourselves as committed to untenable ideas and attitudes. But we shan’t think of it as that. The threat, we shall think, is to God Himself – as indeed it is to the God of our own invention. So we shall rush to God’s defence.”

We may ask when confronted by things that threaten our idol-God, “But isn’t the Bible the word of God?” What we must remember is that *the Word* is not the Bible but is the Word incarnate, Jesus Christ. He is the living Word of God and it is to that Word that the word of God as contained in the Scriptures gives witness and testimony.

And we, how shall we give witness to that word? Shall we live circumscribed lives in service to our idol-God? Or shall we pray passionately and unceasingly for the mind and courage of Christ? Simply reading the Bible will not give it to us, as if the Bible were some recipe book with 1-2-3 steps to holiness. The Bible points to the central truths, yes of course, that God is sovereign, that God is love, that Jesus is the living word of God,

that Jesus is the Saviour, that it is God's purpose to redeem the world through the sacrificial work of Christ, a work in which we all share. But the Bible is a difficult book, whose meanings are often difficult to get on board with. And we shall never understand it if we don't pray to have the mind to discern its hidden riches.

I am not saying that we can afford to jettison the Bible as something passé and quaint. Far from it. We need the Bible – we would be lost without it. But we have to recognize that our experience today, and what is disclosed to us *now*, must play a much larger part in deciding what Christianity is than was formerly appreciated. This should not surprise us, for we can hardly suppose that God ceased to enlighten his people the moment the last New Testament writer took pen from paper. Nietzsche – the German philosopher – rightly has hard words for those who teach that the past should be allowed to swallow up the present. The present also has its rights.

Our charge today is, as it has always been, to pray and watch and wait for the Spirit of God to inspire us, to fire us up and reveal to us yet again what God's will is for us and for the Church. And it may be that his will for all of us is not what we thought it would be. But we must listen for the voice and move bravely forward; if we don't we will die. But God is not dead – he is gloriously and dramatically alive and working in this world, and he is calling us to

participate in that work. It may be – it will be – surprising and challenging, and it will require that we release so much of our baggage and preconceived notions. It may be that we shall have to be emptied of everything before we can be filled. It may be that we will hunger as never before to know and do the work of Christ, who to us says, “Who do you say that I am?” Amen.