

JESUS AND HIS OPPONENTS

"Are we at liberty to change Jesus?"

Matthew 22:23-33

St. Michael's Church, March 18, 2018

There is something really shocking about this passage I just read as the Gospel. Jesus is engaged in an all-out debate with the Sadducees about whether there is a general resurrection of the dead, and he makes some stunning accusations about them right to their faces. But we'll get to that in a minute.

First, I want to confess a little secret. When I was a young man I never wanted to engage in debate. I avoided joining debating clubs, or engaging in the usual high school debating societies. It was not that I didn't like public speaking. I loved that. But debate was something else. It required that one think on one's feet. There were verbal salvos and ripostes. There were implied insults of the other side's intellect. There was scoring and often you had to defend positions that you didn't believe in, just because your team had been assigned that topic. The whole thing seemed to me a game – a tough, quick, verbal tournament. I wasn't cut out for that. But I kind of envied those who were. Looking back, I wish I had done it more.

But then in my mid-Twenties I was ordained into the Episcopal Church and began to realize that a host of controversial issues were coming down the pike. They all required sharp, thoughtful responses: Prayer Book revision, women's ordination, the peace movement, the civil rights movement, gay rights, same-sex marriage, and so on. I wanted nothing of it. "I'll just stay out of church politics" I said to myself. I'm going to reach young people, then eventually lead a parish, then recruit and train future clergy, and maybe write a book or two. The larger issues of church controversy were not mine to tackle.

But a couple of things changed that. First, I was shamed into involvement. I looked around and asked myself: "Who's going to step up to the plate, it not me? Who's going to stick their necks out, if not me? Who has the background to lean into some of these issues? The exposure? The gifts? The opportunity? The answer I came up with was me.

Then, while I was living in Manhattan, something happened that shook the world. Kitty Genovese. You remember her, don't you? A young bar manager of Italian heritage, Kitty was assaulted by a man in the alley of her Queens, New York

apartment. He stabbed her, and she screamed. Lights flashed on in apartments all around the alley. Some windows shot up. One neighbor cried out: "Let her alone." Kitty screamed again for help. The attacker went away and then came back twice. He raped her and finally murdered her. The whole thing took about a half hour. At his trial, he said he had no motive. He was just a "woman killer."

Thirty-six of Kitty's neighbors heard her cries and did nothing. The whole bloody incident became an illustration of the perils of not getting involved. I couldn't get this incident out of my mind. The story of all those witnesses who did nothing is now taught in every introduction-to-psychology textbook in the United States and Britain, as well as in many other countries, and it's been made popularly known through TV programs, books and songs. The shame of not getting involved.

I had to face these issues. I'd grown up an Episcopalian, gone to an Episcopal boarding school, was acquainted with Episcopal chaplains at college, attended two Episcopal seminaries, and eventually was ordained an Episcopal priest and was one for 53 years. Who, if not me, should speak up? I was shamed into involvement.

The second thing that changed me was that I took a fresh look at Jesus. In my young years, I had read a book entitled *Christ the Controversialist* by John Stott. Of all the books that he had written this one stopped me dead in my tracks. In fact, a few weeks ago I re-ordered it from Amazon.com and re-read it to prepare for this sermon. In a careful reading of the Gospels, Stott shows a Jesus who is constantly debating the religious leaders of his day, and he shows how those debates are still very relevant today.

Jesus debated the Sadducees, as he does in this passage before this this morning. The Sadducees were wealthy aristocrats, the governing class in Israel. And they were the theological modernists of his day. They denied the Resurrection. Some have quipped, "That's why they were sad-you-see". But seriously, Jesus saw their rejection of the immortality of the soul as a blind spot. With all their knowledge, they didn't know the power of God.

Jesus debated the priests and elders over whether Scripture was the final authority, or whether human traditions could trump Scripture. Jesus accused

them of substituting the “teaching of men” for the “commandment of God.” (Mk. 7:1-13)

Jesus debated the Jews as a whole over their view of the Bible. Was the Bible an end in itself? Was studying it the be-all and end-all of life –so that if you immersed yourself in the text of the Bible you were OK? No, said Jesus. “You search the Scriptures...but you will not come to me to have life.” (Jn. 5:39,40). Scripture was to be a means of finding life. They were missing that completely.

Jesus debated the Pharisees on whether a person is justified by God on the basis of his or her good deeds or only on the basis of God’s mercy. The Pharisees were the “good people” of their day. They fasted, tithed, gave to the poor, and they thought that their good works would justify them in the sight of God. But no, said Jesus. It’s not the Pharisee who does good, but the Publican who throws himself on God’s mercy, who is justified.

Jesus debated the Scribes -- the educated elites of his day. Most people in those days didn’t read or write, so if you needed a document written or read you went to a Scribe. The Scribes thought that morality was a matter of obeying a written code. No, said Jesus, it’s the thoughts and intentions of the heart that matter to God.

These frequent debates were not pleasant little chit chats. Jesus had no hesitation in calling his opponents odious names. “You hypocrites.” “You whitewashed Tombs.” “You blind guides.” “You brood of vipers.” “You are ignorant. You are wrong. You are judgmental. You are oppressive. You are of your father the Devil.” And he warned other people about them: “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.” (Matt. 16:5)

So, much as I wanted to get on with the job and ignore the debates that were coming down the pike like an unwanted avalanche, I had to get involved. And so, I did. But as I got involved I discovered three things about the church in which I was ordained.

First, I discovered my church was embarrassed by its Lord. Why did I hear so little about Jesus from the pulpits of my denomination? He was everywhere in the

liturgy, but often left out of the sermon. Few of the clergy ever talked about having a personal relationship with him.

Yes, we talked about his birth at Christmas and his death on Good Friday. But, where was he? I recall one sermon from a Rector of a prominent church. He was talking about Christ being our advocate before the Father. That was good. But then he asked: "On that judgment day, what would Christ say to the Father about us?" I waited to hear something like: "Father, I died for him. I forgave him. I covered him with my righteousness." But what I heard almost took my breath away. "Father, this is a pretty good person. He's done a lot of fine things with his life. He really is OK." The Rector denied the need for Jesus to ever have had to come and die for our sins. The church was embarrassed by its Lord

Second, I saw my church at war with its own members. I watched as lawsuits began to proliferate. Churches all over the country had to walk out of their buildings and put their church keys on their bishop's desk. Millions and millions of dollars were being spent by my Church to punish those who would not follow its revisionist agenda.

Pleas at General Convention went ignored. Papers written to present the "other side of the argument" went unread. Dire predictions by Anglican leaders all over the world were dismissed. Property was taken and sold to the highest bidder. This was my church at war with its own members.

And, third, I saw that my church was captive to its culture. Rather than help its people see the secularization that was happening before their very eyes, it was joining forces with that secularization and pretending that it was "business as usual."

My Church put out a curriculum on sexuality to be used in all churches. It was called *Sexuality A Divine Gift*. In the words of Kendall Harmon, the curriculum in effect told everyone, young people especially, to go out and fulfill their sexual desires and see sexuality of all kinds as a sort of sacrament." But it wasn't just on issues of sexuality that the Church excelled in mimicking the culture, it embraced the anti-war movement, the pro-abortion movement, the student revolts of the Sixties, the environmental movement. Not all were wrong; but they all signaled a

Church moving *with* the culture and trying very hard not to be irrelevant. Even the Death of God movement had advocates in the Church. (Paul Van Buren).

So, as I look back now, in a sense the war is over. We are like the two Koreas, aren't we? We have many of the same names. We often look alike. Our histories are totally intertwined, but we are as different as night and day. There is a DMZ, but there has been no peace agreement signed. The Anglican world is irrevocably shattered. Most of the issues are still unresolved, and the only re-unification offers made from other side, are 100% on their terms.

Which brings me back to our text this morning. Jesus had three basic problems with the Sadducees that meant that there was very little chance at rapprochement.

First, he said that they were wrong on the Resurrection. Jesus believed in the general resurrection. On this he sided with the Pharisees, who accepted the whole Old Testament, not just the first five books as the Sadducees did. Although not developed, there were hints of a General Resurrection in the Old Testament that could not be denied: This in Job: "I know that My Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been destroyed, then from my flesh I shall see God." (Job. 19:25). One of many clues.

So, the first thing he said to them was: "You are wrong." He didn't say, let's discuss this further. He didn't offer to organize a seminar on differing visions of the afterlife. He didn't decide to have a conversation on the subject. He simply said: "You are wrong." Kind of blunt. Kind of direct. But, friends, this is the only Jesus we know. This is the canonical Jesus. He used strong terms. And he did not suffer fools gladly. It's kind of refreshing – certainly different from the "gentle Jesus, meek and mild" that many of us were brought up on in Sunday School. I'm not saying that Jesus isn't loving. He's incredibly loving. But like C. S. Lewis' Lion Aslan, he is good; but he is not tame.

The second thing that Jesus said to them was "you are ignorant of the Scriptures." "You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God." (v.29) This was like waving a red flag before a bull. They were the scholars, the elites, the educated ones. They had been to seminary. And they had degrees after their names. And who was he? Somebody from a nowhere place up north.

Uneducated. Unconnected to the corridors of power. Unsophisticated. Who was he to teach us?

But Jesus accused them of not really knowing their Scriptures. If you know French you know that there are two words for to “know” in French: **savoir** and **connaitre**. One means to know about, the other means to know personally. Same in the Greek that Matthew uses. One Greek word means to know in the sense of be aware of, to have objective knowledge of. In Greek that word is: **gnoto**. Of course, the Sadducees had this kind of knowledge of Scripture.

But Matthew uses a different word when Jesus says: “You know neither the Scriptures”. He uses the Greek word **eideo**. It is a deeper kind of knowing. It means really being skilled in something. Really getting it. The Sadducees didn’t really know the Scriptures. They didn’t get them. If they’d had, they’d have known that there was no marriage in heaven, and that the whole story they told him was poppycock. Levirate marriage – where a brother-in-law was supposed to marry his sister-in-law so that the family name wouldn’t die. A woman marrying seven brothers. Give me a break. It’s a joke. “In the resurrection” Jesus said to them, “they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but they are like angels” In other words, our loves in heaven will be so big they will burst the bonds of family, tribe, nation and even the wonders of marriage.

And then the third thing Jesus said to them was that they didn’t know the power of God. How sad. To be a religious leader, but have no confidence in God’s power. What’s the point? Somehow, these Sadducees could believe that God had created the universe out of nothing. They could believe that God had created life out of inert matter. They could believe that God had created humans out of the dust. They could believe that God had created something as intricate and perfect as the human eye. But they thought that in the end everything would go up in smoke. Death would have the last word. What a mockery of the whole creation process. Their God would just breathe a big sigh, close the covers of his book, and watch his handiwork dissolve into the black hole of nothingness.

No, said Jesus, God is powerful, transcendent, glorious. And there is a wonderful final chapter in his book of Life. It’s called Resurrection. Anyone who knows the Mighty One, the Powerful One, knows that death cannot be the end. God will

renew, restore, and re-create his cosmos because he is the great I AM. v.32 “He is not God of the dead, but of the living.”

So, what is the message in all this for us? We have our modern Sadducees who are more united in what they don't believe in than in what they do. They want business as usual. They have their modern synagogues, their libraries, their discussion groups, and like the Sadducees of Jesus' day, they want no part of the spiritual awakening that has been going on around this Nazarene preacher who always seems to create such a storm. This Nazarene who even his own townspeople wanted to throw off a cliff and end his crazy revival once and for all.

First, we are not to be ignorant. We are not to twiddle our thumbs while in the words of one of our South Carolina Supreme Court Justices “a judicial confiscation of church property” is going on under our eyes. (Jean Toal) Let's not close our windows, and turn off the lights so that we don't hear the desperate cries in the alley below.

But second, we need to get these Scriptures. Really get them. Jesus knew that what would sustain his disciples through the stormy days ahead was to be grounded in the Word of God. “Father, I have given them the words that you have given me...and I am praying for them.”

And, third, we need to know the power of God. He alone will carry us through the storm. If we lose everything, we still have Him. Underneath are the everlasting arms. Those same arms that cradled us when we were helpless infants are there throughout every stage of life, especially when we go through painful transitions.

So, how did the story end? Well, the Sadducees and the Pharisees and the Herodians won. Jesus was falsely accused, brutally tortured, nakedly crucified, and laid forever in a cold dark tomb. Case closed.

But, of course, it didn't end, and you and I are here. There is new life in this Jesus Christ, and its running through our spiritual veins. Buildings or no buildings, we are here, and we are not going away.

I've got to tell you a story in closing. The University of Chicago Divinity School each year had what they called “Baptist Day.” It was a day when all the Baptists in

the area were invited to the seminary -- because, they wanted those Baptist dollars to keep coming in.

On this day, each one was to bring a lunch to be eaten outdoors in a grassy picnic area. Every "Baptist Day" the school would invite one of the greatest minds to lecture in the Seminary's theological education center. One year they invited Dr. Paul Tillich.

Dr. Tillich spoke for two and one-half hours proving that the resurrection of Jesus never happened. He quoted scholar after scholar and book after book. He concluded that *since* there was no such thing as the historical resurrection the religious tradition of the church was groundless. It was emotional mumbo-jumbo because it was based on a relationship with a risen Jesus who, in fact, never rose from the dead in any literal sense. He then asked if there were any questions.

After about 30 seconds, an old, dark-skinned preacher with a head of short-cropped, wooly white hair stood up in the back of the auditorium.

"Docta Tillich, I got one question", he said as all eyes turned toward him. He reached into his snack lunch and pulled out an apple and began eating it.

"Docta Tillich..." CRUNCH, MUNCH... "My question is a simple question." CRUNCH, MUNCH... "Now, I ain't never read them books you read..." CRUNCH, MUNCH... "and I can't recite the Scriptures in the original Greek"CRUNCH, MUNCH... "I don't know nothing about Niebuhr and Heidegger",... CRUNCH, MUNCH...

He finished the apple, "All I wanna know is: This apple I just ate... was it bitter or sweet?"

Dr. Tillich paused for a moment and answered in exemplary scholarly fashion: "I can't possibly answer that question, for I haven't tasted your apple."

The white-haired preacher dropped the core of his apple into his crumpled paper bag, looked up at Dr. Tillich and said calmly, "Neither have you tasted my Jesus."

The 1,000 plus in attendance could not contain themselves. The auditorium erupted with applause and cheers. Dr. Tillich thanked his audience and promptly left the platform

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