

The One Who Is to Come

Deuteronomy 18:15-22, John 6:1-21 (ESV)

February 11, 2007

“This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!” Thus concluded the five-thousand men who had eaten their fill of the five barley loaves and two fish for which Jesus had given thanks and which he had then distributed to them. This is the climax of today’s reading. This is the gospel affirmation toward which the story drives. Jesus Christ is the one who for centuries had been expected to come. How interesting that the people who saw the sign that Jesus had done seem to have perceived that he was the Prophet, or at least to have articulated that, even before his own disciples did. The question this raises for us is, How do we perceive him today?

“This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!” Moses had predicted this more than a thousand years earlier. And apparently the people had not forgotten. Unlike the various one-prophet religions of the world, there had been many great prophets in centuries between Moses and Jesus: Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Micah, and on and on. But none of them had been “the” prophet. None of them was the one of whom Moses had spoken, the one to whom the people were to listen. To whom do we listen today? Whose words do we heed yet today? Whom do we follow? Whom do we believe? Whom do we obey?

“This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!” Now the people realized that Jesus was “the” Prophet who was to come into the world, the one of whom Moses has spoken, the one in whose mouth the Lord would put his words, the one who would speak to the people all that the Lord commanded. And Jesus did not reject their realization of who he was, their identification of him as the Prophet. He did not accept their efforts to make him into an earthly king. That was not the kind of king he was going to be, and the time was not right for him to be elevated to his throne. So Jesus corrected their identification of him as the Prophet, across the course of his ministry, since he was so much more than the Prophet. But in that he did not reject their acknowledgment he admitted that he was at least the Prophet, and for this we give God thanks and praise.

What does it mean that Jesus is the Prophet? It means at the very least that Jesus is the successor to Moses. Whereas Moses led the people of Israel out of slavery in the land of Egypt, Jesus Christ led the people of God out of bondage to sin, death, and evil. Whereas the law was given through Moses, grace and truth

came through Jesus Christ (John 1:17). Whereas Moses led the people to the promised land, Jesus brought the kingdom of God to the people. Whereas Moses brought the people to freedom, Jesus brought them eternal life (John 3:16). At the very least Jesus is the successor to Moses, and he is not simply a successor in kind but also and instead is far superior to Moses. Jesus is the one whom we can follow yet today through the wildernesses of our lives.

What else does it mean that Jesus is the Prophet? It also means at the very least that Jesus speaks the word of God. That is what a prophet does. Jesus does not speak on his own behalf. Jesus does not even speak on his own initiative. Jesus speaks on behalf of God his Father. Jesus speaks the words which God gives to him and says what God commands him to say. The words, teachings, preaching, and gospel of Jesus Christ are none other than the very word of God. They are the word of the one who made us. They are the word of the one who sustains us. They are the word of the one who saves us. They are the very word of God. Thus they are true, trustworthy, reliable, and life-giving. We would do well to hear, listen, believe, and obey them yet today. Amidst all the competing demands for our attention, energy, commitment, loyalty, and resources, here is the one word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death (“The Theological Declaration of Barmen,” proposition 1).

How did the people realize that Jesus was the Prophet? They recognized him in the giving of the bread. Centuries earlier, the prophet Elisha had faced a crowd of hungry men with limited resources with which to feed them. But acting on the strength of the word of God, Elisha fed a hundred men with twenty loaves of barley, and they ate and had some left, according to the word of the LORD (2 Kings 4:42-44). That was one loaf of bread for every five men. In today’s reading from the gospel, Jesus fed five-thousand hungry men with five barley loaves, and they ate their fill and had twelve baskets left over. That was only one loaf of bread for every one-thousand men. So by simple arithmetic alone, Jesus was a prophet two-hundred times more powerful than Elisha, who himself healed lepers and raised the dead, not insignificant displays of power. Surely, Jesus was the Prophet who was to come into the world!

The disparity of this comparison with Elisha begins to point beyond even what the people realized. How is Jesus even more than the Prophet whom Moses predicted and whom the people expected? While a prophet is one who speaks the word of God, which Jesus certainly did, Jesus not only speaks the word of God but also actually embodies the word of God. He is the word of God become flesh. He is the word of God who dwelt among us. This of course has a number of immediate implications. In that Jesus is the word of God, he is also the truth. He not only speaks the truth but also embodies the truth. In that Jesus is the word of God, he is

also the way. He not only tells us the way to God but also is the very way. In that Jesus is the word of God, he is also the life. He not only tells us about life but also is our very life. So, Jesus not only speaks the word of God as a prophet but also is the very word of God. This is a huge difference. He is what God has to say to us.

How else is Jesus even more than the Prophet? In that Jesus is the word of God, the eternal word of God, with God from before the beginning of the world and through which the world was created, Jesus is also the Son of God, “the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father” (“The Nicene Creed”). All the other prophets bore witness to God. This one not only bore witness to God but also is God himself with us and among us. Thanks be to God!

How else is Jesus even more than the Prophet? In that Jesus is the word of God and the Son of God, he is also our Savior and Lord. This is what we need! This is what we yearn for! This is what the people expected for centuries, the Prophet who was more than a prophet, the Prophet who could and would save his people! This, indeed, is why we are here today. It is good that God has sent many prophets to his people to speak his word. We are grateful for that. But we are here today because God sent the Prophet who has also saved us from our sin and promised us and given us eternal life. And because he has done that he is also Lord over our lives. “As Jesus Christ is God’s assurance of the forgiveness of all our sins, so in the same way and with the same seriousness is he also God’s mighty claim upon our whole life” (“The Theological Declaration of Barmen,” proposition 2). He did not save us for nothing. He saved us for himself. Once we belonged to sin, death, and evil. Now we belong to him. We are his, and it is our life to do his will. He is not only the Prophet, but also Savior and therefore Lord. Thanks be to God!

Having come to this realization ourselves, how then shall we respond to the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ? How shall we appropriately acknowledge who Jesus is and who we are in relation to him? There is a suggestion made in the reading, or rather an example of a response to Jesus, a gift given which Jesus received, which became the occasion for the sign he did, and which led to the gospel insight we have heard. We might think that the boy’s gift was small and therefore insignificant, But we might instead have the grace to realize that he had the grace to respond by giving all he had, “five barley loaves and two fish.” “What are they for so many?” They are the sign and the reality of faith, trust, love, hope, discipleship, and obedience. In that gift, the boy gave himself to Jesus. Along with that gift of bread and fish, Jesus received the boy unto himself. Perhaps it is only in and through such giving of our possessions which we cherish so greatly that we actually give our heart and soul to Jesus Christ.

Before the crowds acknowledged Jesus as the Prophet, and before Jesus fed the five thousand men, he inspired the gift of the boy's self as evidenced by the gift of loaves and fish which Jesus used to feed the five thousand men. That inspiration is amazing. Multiplying the loaves and fish was one thing. Getting this boy to give himself to Jesus and thus also to give the loaves and fish to Jesus was quite another. That was the act of salvation! How did Jesus do that? How did he inspire that love and faith? How did he move the heart so much? And can he still do the same thing for you and me today, inspiring our love and faith?

Jesus Christ did that by giving himself to and for that boy on that day, before he gave himself even more later as he was lifted on the cross, and gave himself again as he was lifted from the grave. Jesus Christ gave himself to and for you and me also, both that our sin might be forgiven and also that we might live forever. Is this of interest to you? The primary gift giving is his, and he has already done that. The secondary gift giving is ours. How shall we respond? Surely it is the goal and purpose of the gospel of Jesus Christ not only that we receive Christ but also that we give ourselves, all that we are and all that we have, to Christ. Have we done that?

The glory of God shone so brightly in and through the life and ministry of Jesus Christ that the faith and life of that one boy were forever changed. The glory of God in Jesus Christ ignited a response in that boy. It awakened that boy to a new and eternal life. It became more important to him than his daily bread, literally. It turned him around, lifted him up, and made it possible for him to open his hands, giving of his substance. The glory of God in Jesus Christ is a powerful thing. It may even get hold of us today. How shall we respond?

The glory of God in Jesus Christ, which inspired the miraculous giving by the little boy, still shines brightly into our lives today. And the little boy's response stands as a good example for us. "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?" The important thing about our gifts is into whose hands we place our gifts, into whose service we place our lives. "Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted." Yes, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!"

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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