

You Are the Christ

Daniel 7:9-14, Matthew 26:57-75

February 25, 2001

“I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.” Thus the high priest speaks for us the truth he did not know himself. He proclaims to us and for our benefit the gospel he did not believe himself. He honors for us in his command the incarnation he did not realize.

He addresses for us the Messiah he did not recognize. For barely hidden in his imperative, “Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God,” is the great affirmation of the Christian faith, “You are the Christ, the Son of God!” God used the words of the high priest, who presumed to be judging Jesus, to bring the announcement of the gospel to us.

It is part of the burden of being the Christ that at the time no one recognized Jesus as being the Christ. Here he is, up against the religious leaders of the day—the high priest, the scribes, and the elders—all the people who ought to know who he is, but none of them realize who he is. It is part of the burden of being the Christ that the Christ must be rejected precisely for claiming to be the Christ, as if the claim were false. On the other hand, if he had denied being the Christ, and so avoided rejection and suffering, then he in fact would not have been the Christ. It is part of the burden of being the Christ that the innocent Christ must suffer and die on behalf of the guilty people who actually deserve to die. This trial, which started with the council seeking false testimony, is one more step along that way. It is part of the burden of being the Christ that the one apparently being judged here shall in fact be elevated to the throne of heaven and sit in dominion and judgment over all others. So does Jesus here approach his own death as being the will of God for him. It is part of the burden of being the Christ that even those who believe and follow the Christ eventually desert and deny the Christ. So does Peter complete the condemnation of his Lord and of our Lord.

This is a strange and wonderful story! It is wonderful in what it tells us about who Jesus is. It is strange in how it tells us who Jesus is. People speak out loud the truth they do not know themselves. At the same time, the greatest truth is lived out silently.

First, it is affirmed that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. This is what Matthew has been telling us since chapter 1, verse 1! Here it appears on lips of people who do not believe it themselves. The Christ, or the Messiah, is the Anointed One, sent by and from God, chosen for a particular task, set aside for a special purpose, authorized and equipped for a special mission, to save his people from their sin. The Messiah had long been expected, but he was not accepted. Not this one. No way.

Second, Jesus is also the Son of God. This is the great truth of the Gospel according to Matthew! One of the high points of the gospel will come in the next chapter when the Roman centurion says of Jesus on the cross, “Truly this was the Son of God!” But here, in today’s reading, this great truth is spoken by one not even knowing it. What the high priest did know was that for one to claim to be Son of God was an offense carrying the death penalty! Why? The single most important teaching of the Old Testament is this: “Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is One.” The very title “Son of God,” indicative of one carrying the authority of God, suggests a division within God, a multiplicity of divinity, even a pluralism of deity. This was horrifying! It seemed to violate whole Old Testament. Nevertheless, here we come to core of the

Christian faith—Jesus is God himself among us. Now, in this person, God has entered humanity, never to leave it again.

In this trial, Jesus agreed to the titles of both Messiah and Son of God with a simple, “You have said so!” Another title spoken here is the “Son of Man,” a name from the Old Testament prophecy of Daniel. It refers here to the King of the coming kingdom of God, the Judge of all people and nations! Those in attendance may or may not have caught this. The one being tried, the one being falsely accused, the very one falsely convicted was actually the Judge over everyone there! This very trial was part of his enthronement as king! This very humiliation was the path to the glory of the throne! All of this was within will of God. Those who convicted the Son of God were unwittingly serving the very purposes of God for grace, forgiveness, and salvation.

What is the great unspoken truth here? Jesus embodies the silent suffering love of God. Jesus is lied about; Jesus is spit upon; Jesus is struck; Jesus is slapped. Through it all he offers no defense. He makes no resistance. He calls upon no attorney. Jesus puts away all care of defending himself. There is no setting the record straight. Jesus makes no effort to avoid or to evade the wrongness of what was happening. Jesus simply lets the high priest, the scribes, and the elders do what they want to do, decide what they want to decide, and convict him falsely. That is why we call this the passion of Jesus Christ. This passion is not about feelings, but about suffering unto death. It is passive. Jesus is acted upon. The one who renounces all violence suffers terrible violence, and so is Lord of the universe. This suffering is the way of his enthronement. It is the way he carries out his ministry. It is the way he accomplishes our salvation. It is the way he shows the glory of God.

You see, here in all this horror, we find and see the majesty of Jesus! You and I would have defended ourselves. We would have argued, resisted, and fought back. Jesus stood there and took it. His majesty is made visible in his lowliness. His majesty is not in crowns, robes, jewels, palaces, attendants, or armies. His majesty appears under this sign of its opposite, which is to say in his lowliness. This started with being placed in a feed trough at his birth. It led eventually to his death on an ugly, disgusting cross.

Consider the suffering of Jesus Christ here—and by that I mean not only his pain and death, about which we will hear more in the coming weeks—but here I mean his rejection and humiliation, his being pushed outside the circle of religious leaders, pushed outside the bounds of social acceptability, pushed outside the bounds of humanity. He was utterly rejected. Consider the horror of the situation: Jesus is the truth, but he suffers from the lies of others. Jesus is the image of God, but he is spat upon, in order that the image of God in us, twisted and marred by sin, might be cleansed. Jesus is life itself but he was condemned to death.

A deep and darkening loneliness settles across his life. His disciples have deserted him. The religious authorities condemn him for blasphemy. And then Peter denied Jesus, denied him with an oath, and finally denied him with both a curse and an oath. Peter, the bold and the strong, failed miserably. This is as bad or worse than the trial! The religious leaders had opposed him all along. Now his own followers turn against him. In the next reading, the political authorities join in and condemn him for sedition. Finally, Jesus cries out on the cross, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” What does this deepening loneliness mean? Peter represents all the disciples in his denial. Jesus is absolutely alone. The one bears the cost for the many. The one pays the price for all.

Why does this happen? What does all this strange reversal mean? God who made us wants to win us back. God who made us free, so that we freely turned away, wants to show us the infinite extent of his suffering love and so win us back by his grief. The human heart was made to worship. It will attach itself to, and worship, something! Many things in world compete for the human heart— hatred, revenge, money (yes, we need money, but there is always the danger that we will love it), pleasure, even misguided patriotism. In Jesus Christ, God shows us the infinite extent of his love and suffering and grief for us, in order to win us back to himself.

So, in this reading, Jesus stands before us, on trial, as the Christ, the Son of God, the King, the Judge and especially as the suffering love of God. What does this ancient reality have to do with us today? First, this is our salvation. Most important of all in this reading, God wants to win us back. Can you see his grief? Can you feel his loneliness? Can you know his suffering? Are you willing to commit your life to the majestic, suffering Christ? A few minutes ago a young woman reaffirmed her faith in Jesus Christ and committed herself to being an active member of this congregation of the church of Jesus Christ. In so doing, she brought us a wonderful gift, more than she realized. I urge us all not only to rejoice in her reaffirmation but also to use this occasion to reaffirm the Christian faith for ourselves.

Second, not only is this suffering of Christ our very salvation, but also it is an example. No one has suffered as much as Jesus. We do not suffer alone. Christ does not ask us to do anything he has not done himself. This example give us the courage to live. I have told you before of Chuck Jones, member of the first church of which I was pastor. During World War II he was a Prisoner of War. One day he was on a forced march, suffering to the point that he was almost ready to ask the guard to shoot and kill him. Just then they came over a hill, so that he could see a village below, and there was a church with a steeple, and on top of that steeple was a cross. When he saw that cross, he said to himself, “If Jesus could suffer that much for me, I can keep going at least a little farther.” Thus he lived to tell me the story forty years later. Life is hard! In today’s reading from the gospel we find nourishment, food, energy, and courage to keep the faith, and to keep going.

Third, in addition to the account of our salvation, and a good example of enduring suffering, we also have a warning about betrayal. Avoid it! It is a terrible, horrible, consuming, dreadful thing.

And yet, fourth, in addition to salvation, example, and this dire warning, we are also given hope. How and why are we given hope? Because Jesus eventually brought Peter, who betrayed him, back to himself! In this story, the cock crowed, and that was the prophesied signal of Peter’s three-fold betrayal. Peter wept bitterly. And Jesus restored to himself even Peter who denied him! He brought Peter back to fellowship.

He brought Peter back to useful service. Eventually, Peter was given the privilege and honor to suffer like and for his master, giving his very life for the gospel. If Jesus forgave and welcomed Peter back, Jesus can save, forgive, welcome, and use even us, unworthy servants though we are. So, in this backwards kind of way, Peter is a sign of hope, even for us.

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To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.

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