

A Life of Jesus

fourth in a seven-part series

"a teacher with authority"



This is the fourth sermon in a series of seven, which I have been preaching this Lent in an attempt to sketch the life of Jesus. Last week we looked at the great signs and wonders which Jesus wrought, the healings and miracles and prophetic actions, those things which first attracted the crowds to him. But Jesus was also a powerful teacher, and it is his teachings that caused some to murmur and others to rebel against him.

According to Matthew's Gospel (4.12, 17), Jesus began to preach only after he heard that John the Baptist had been arrested, and the message that he preached, according to Matthew (4.17), was the exact same one that Matthew records John had been preaching, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (cf. 3.2). The Greek verb used repeatedly in speaking about the kingdom of heaven translates such that in one sense the kingdom has already arrived, but also that in another sense it was not

yet fulfilled. It is a proleptic activity, one that has begun, but is not yet complete.

Jesus demonstrated the emerging presence of the kingdom of heaven with his great signs and wonders. This is obvious, I think, say with the cleansing of the Temple and the feeding of the five thousand, as Jesus prophetically fulfilled the message of John the Baptist. Jesus' emphasis on the imagery of Isaiah's foreshadowing of a time when "the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame leap like a hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy" (Is. 35.5) also points to his belief that the kingdom of heaven had begun in his healings of the sick. For it is to these scriptures that Jesus refers when the messengers from the imprisoned John the Baptist come asking whether Jesus is the one sent from God, or should they look for another (Lk. 7.22). And it is again to these scriptures that Jesus turns to read in the synagogue at his homecoming in Nazareth (Lk. 4.16).

Jesus' primary teaching instrument about the kingdom of heaven was the parable, an ancient formula for reinforcing teaching with a simple story. Numerous of Jesus' parables, for instance, illustrate that the kingdom of heaven was an active process; that it had begun but was not yet complete, like the parable of the sower who went out to sow, or the parable of the weeds, or of the net. Other parables simply attempt to explain what was meant by the kingdom of heaven, how it was like the

mustard seed which grew into the largest tree, or the leaven in bread which causes it to rise, or the salt of the earth which gives it flavor. Others stress the need for our preparedness for the coming kingdom, like that of the wise and foolish virgins, or of the sheep and the goats, or the thief that comes at night. The acceptance of Jesus' message by the individual hearer was revealed as a matter of great joy in heaven, as in the parable of the lost coin, or the pearl of great value, or the treasure hidden in the field, or the story of the prodigal son.

Now I grew up thinking that the crowds following Jesus simply grew larger and larger and larger as he went through the towns and villages teaching and healing, until the number of his followers climaxed in Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, where the throngs shouted out "Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord", and then that same crowd oddly within days turned against him, crying out "Crucify him, crucify him". And Hollywood has certainly contributed to this image. So I was surprised later to read in the Fourth Gospel that the great crowds that turned out to welcome Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday were there not just to see Jesus, but also came out to see Lazarus, that local boy recently raised from the dead, a sight to behold! (Jn. 12:9-11). Indeed the chief priests, we are told, schemed to put Lazarus to death as well because of this.

Moreover as we saw last week, not everyone appreciated Jesus. The crowd at the synagogue in Jesus' own hometown turned against his teaching and even tried to kill him, tried to throw him off the hill upon which their town was founded (Lk. 4.28-30). That other crowds turned away from Jesus' teaching is also apparent in the sixth chapter of the Fourth Gospel. At the beginning of the chapter, Jesus and his disciples have returned from Jerusalem to the Sea of Galilee. A multitude has followed Jesus from Jerusalem, because they saw the signs that he did there. There follows the familiar story of the feeding of the five thousand, and the attempt by that crowd to crown Jesus king, to anoint him the messiah, but Jesus withdrew again to the hills by himself.

The next morning that crowd tracked down Jesus to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. And the story goes on that as Jesus taught them, the Jews began to murmur and to dispute among themselves (Jn. 6.41, 52). "Many of (Jesus') followers, when they heard (his teaching there) said, 'This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?' But Jesus, knowing in himself that his followers murmured at it, said to them, 'Do you take offense at this?'" (Jn. 6.60-1). And then the Fourth Gospel records that "After this many of his followers drew back and no longer went about with him" (Jn. 6.66). Then Jesus turned to the twelve and said to them, "Do you also wish to go away?" (Jn. 6.67). For Jesus, we are told, knew that some of the twelve did not believe, and that

one of them would betray him" (Jn. 6.64). But they did stay, and after that point the twelve who stayed with Jesus took on a more important and prominent role in propagating his message.

This is, I think, another clue in the Gospels that the crowds had begun to thin out about this time. In Mark's Gospel, right after his rejection at Nazareth, it is recorded "that (Jesus) went about the villages teaching. And he called to him the twelve, and began to send them out two by two." "So they departed and went through the villages preaching that all should repent" (Mk. 6.12). In Luke's Gospel, Jesus sent out seventy of his followers on ahead of him, two by two, into every town and place where he himself was about to come" (Lk. 10.1), a sort of advance publicity team. But why? Why was Jesus suddenly sending out his disciples to spread the word? We have heard these stories so often that I think we sometimes fail to see what is implied in them. Before this, the people had been coming from afar to Jesus, a great multitude from Galilee, also from Judea and Jerusalem and Idumea and from beyond the Jordan and from about Tyre and Sidon (Mk. 3.7-8). Now apparently the crowds were not coming to Jesus in the way they had at first. And the importance of the message and teaching was so great, that Jesus apparently responded to this decline by sending out his disciples to them.

From the story in the sixth chapter of The Fourth Gospel, it is clear that Jesus' teaching was becoming offensive to many. Indeed I think we often overlook the harsh demands of much of

Jesus' teaching. To be a disciple of Jesus was not easy. The way is narrow that leads to life. For Jesus required absolute sincerity and singleness of purpose for members of the kingdom of heaven, as the parables of the light, the lamp, the eye, and even the salt are used to illustrate (Lk. 11.34-5, 14.34-5). Jesus required radical acceptance of this new covenant in his followers, for "where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." "You cannot serve two masters." "Take up your cross and follow me." Jesus has very hard sayings indeed about the rich entering the kingdom of heaven, such as "Go sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven" (Mt. 19.21) or "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (Mk. 10:25). High among the duties of Jesus' followers is the love of one's neighbor, especially the outcast. Ethically Jesus appealed to the highest principles of love, of forgiveness, and of the mercy of God. "You must be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Mt. 5.48).

Moreover Jesus took his stand upon a direct, intuitive understanding of God's will and requirements, not upon the common scribal practice of authoritative interpretations of Scripture and tradition (Mk. 7.5-13; Mt. 5.17-48). It was Jesus' freedom from the scribal tradition, and his unhesitating rejection of scribal authority, which astonished the crowds, and roused the antagonism of the religious authorities of his day. His teaching

was a threat to their influence over the people, and to their whole system of religious interpretation and regulation.

Matthew provided a long summary of Jesus' teaching, which we collectively refer to as the Sermon on the Mount, and concludes with the often repeated response that "(the listeners) were astonished at (Jesus') teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes" (Mt. 7.28-9). There in the Sermon on the Mount is the crux of Jesus' message: "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake . . . Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account . . . Let your light so shine before others, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven . . . For unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven . . . You have heard that it was said to the those of old, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is (even) angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment . . . You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you sin, pluck it out and throw it away; it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell . . . You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye . . . But I say to you, Do not

resist one who is evil. For if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also . . . Give to him who begs from you, and do not refuse him who would borrow from you. You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you . . . Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal . . . Do not be anxious about your life, (about) what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on . . . Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Judge not, lest you be judged . . . (and) Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but (only) he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. . ."

and so on and so forth (Mt. 5-7).

With teaching like that, perhaps it is not surprising that the crowds were astonished, or that many rejected Jesus. For Jesus' sayings are indeed "hard" and demanding. It is perhaps not surprising that when the crowds, which were first attracted to Jesus because of the signs and wonders which he wrought, when they heard Jesus' words and understood his teachings, "drew back and no longer went about with him." Who was Jesus that he demanded such loyalty of those who would follow him? Just who did he think he was? Alas, that is the topic for next week's sermon.

AMEN.