

## A LIFE OF JESUS

*"the one sent from God"*



This is the fifth 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 Jesus' teachings, and one of those occasions where the crowds began to distance themselves from Jesus. Possibly in response to that, we observed that Jesus then sent out his disciples two by two to preach to the surrounding villages and towns.

Shortly after their return, Jesus asked his disciples that most fateful of questions, "Who do people say that I am?" (Mk. 8.27) The question in this sermon is just who did people think Jesus was, and perhaps more importantly, just who did Jesus think he was, and what did he think was going to happen.

Jesus was spoken of in many different ways in the Gospels. To Nicodemus, he was a teacher come from God (Jn. 3). To the woman of Samaria, he was the man who had told her all the she ever did (Jn. 4.29). To the man born blind, Jesus was the one who restored his sight (Jn. 9.25). To others, he was a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners (Mt. 11.19). To

the high priest, he was a blasphemer (Mk. 14.64). To the centurion at his crucifixion, he was simply a man of God (Mk. 15.39).

Jesus was called by many names in the New Testament; rabbi, teacher, Master, Lord, prophet, but there are three titles that are particularly prominent in the Gospels, namely, "Son of God", "Son of Man", and "Messiah." A careful look at the use of these titles is necessary if we want to understand what others really thought of Jesus, and more importantly, what Jesus thought of himself.

First there is the title "Son of God." This was an extremely popular title for Jesus in the early Church, and it is the favorite designation for Jesus in the Gospel of Mark. So what does it mean? The phrase "Son of God" is found in the Old Testament in various places but always in plural form (Gen. 6.2, 4; Job 1.6, 2.1; Dan. 3.25), where it's meaning is obscure. Jesus, moreover, is never quoted as using the phrase himself. This term is only used by others about him. Jesus preferred instead the phrase "Son of Man."

And interestingly the phrase "Son of Man" is found *only* in words attributed to Jesus himself. But he used this name without explanation. So what exactly was meant by the expression, 'Son of Man'? In the Old Testament, Enoch and Moses and Ezekiel and others were also described as the Son of Man, and it appears at times to be a term for any man, for any one. In the Book of Daniel, and even more in the Book of Enoch, a popular Jewish work

from the time between the Old and New Testaments, there are apocalyptic descriptions of a Son of Man who reveals hidden treasure, one who will remove kings from their seats and the mighty who have persecuted God's people, who will be a staff to the righteous and a light to the Gentiles. But at the end of the book of Enoch, Enoch himself is identified with that Son of man. Yet even so, these references may well constitute the contemporary background for Jesus' use.

Finally there is the familiar title of Christ, the Greek translation of the Hebrew word 'Messiah,' which means simply "anointed one." We Christians have become so familiar with the title, that we think it was part of Jesus' name; Jesus, son of Mary and Joseph Christ of Nazareth, right? But remember that there have been many anointed ones in the history of Israel. Still we usually think of Messiah in terms of the expectations at end of the Old Testament of an ideal ruler, descended from David, in whose time God will establish a perfect and permanent reign on earth, characterized by peace and justice, and the knowledge and true worship of God. Interestingly, though, Messiah is a title that others use for Jesus in the Gospels (e.g. Mk. 8.29, 14.61-2), but it is not a title which Jesus appears to have accepted for himself. Remember earlier that Jesus had fled from the crowd that would have crowned him king, that would have anointed him.

And so we return to the pivotal story this week, when Jesus asked his returning disciples at Caesarea Philippi, "Who do people say that I am?" Was Jesus here concerned only about his

acceptance among the people now that the crowds were diminishing? Maybe, but if so, then why did Jesus then turn to his disciples and repeat the question to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Was Jesus only testing the faith of his disciples, or was he perhaps truly questioning his own place among them? How did Jesus perceive himself? Did he know who he was?

And who did the people say that Jesus was? There seems to have been no agreement. The twelve answered that some say Jesus was John the Baptist returned from the dead. Others said he was Elijah, or Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. It appears that most people thought of Jesus as a great prophet. The title Messiah had not come to their minds. And what about Jesus' disciples? What did they think? There seems to have been an awkward silence when Jesus asked them, and only Peter's simple response is recorded, "You are the Christ." This is the first time in the Gospels that one of his followers declared that Jesus was the long awaited Messiah.

And in a time when there were many messianic pretenders, it is intriguing to think that Jesus never clearly accepts the title of Messiah for himself. For what was Jesus' response to Peter? Was it welcoming? Was it time now to reveal himself to his disciples? No, Jesus immediately commanded them all to tell this to no one.

Then after Peter's confession, it is recorded "From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that the Son of Man must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief

priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised" (Mt. 16.21). This is the first of three predictions of the passion which are recorded in the Synoptic Gospels (Mk. 9.31, Mk. 10.33). On all three occasions Jesus very specifically declares that the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, who will condemn him to death, even mock him, spit upon him, scourge him, and kill him, and after three days he will rise from the dead.

These passion predictions as recorded are so specific in detail. They read, to me, more like a later summary of events projected backward into the story, presumably to show that Jesus was not taken unaware in Jerusalem and that he knew what he was doing. For numerous later incidents make it hard for me to imagine that the disciples were ever told so plainly about the details of the passion; for the disciples seem so surprised at Jesus' arrest that they scattered and fled and hid behind close doors for fear of the Jews, they were in despair and shock at his actual death, one of his followers actually killed himself in despondency, another denied in fear even knowing him, and none of them appears to have expected his resurrection either, or understood the meaning of the empty tomb, or believed the stories of those who later reported that they had seen Jesus resurrected (Mt. 28.17; Mk. 14.29, 31, 32-4, 47; 16.1, 3, 8; Lk. 24.11, 22) or even recognized him themselves when they saw the resurrected Jesus.

So did Jesus really know what was going to happen as he headed towards Jerusalem? Even if Jesus didn't predict his passion in detail as recorded, it would not be surprising that Jesus anticipated trouble if he was heading back to Jerusalem. There had been increasing trouble every time he went to Jerusalem. One has to read the Fourth Gospel, to see this, because the Synoptic Gospels record only one visit to Jerusalem by Jesus, his last. But the Fourth Gospel records several other visits, each to celebrate Jewish feasts, and each indicating trouble. And a careful reading of the Fourth Gospel reveals, that unlike the Hollywood portrayal where everything was going well for Jesus until his final entry into Jerusalem, there had already been a series of troubled encounters for Jesus in that great City of David.

You will recall that according to the Fourth Gospel, it is on his first recorded visit to Jerusalem after his baptism, that Jesus cleansed the temple, driving out the money-changers with a whip, along with their sheep and oxen, pouring out their money and overturning the tables, and causing quite a scene (2.13-6).

In Chapter Five Jesus has again gone up to Jerusalem for a feast of the Jews, and while there he healed the invalid by the pool at the Sheep Gate. And the scriptures record that "the man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had healed him. And this was why the Jews persecuted Jesus, because he did this on the Sabbath. . . This was," we are told, "why the Jews sought

all the more to kill (Jesus), because he not only broke the Sabbath, but also called God his own Father." (5.1-18).

The next time the Passover was at hand, Jesus appears not to have gone up to Jerusalem (6.4). In fact, the Scriptures record that "Jesus went about in Galilee; he would not go about in Judea, because the Jews (there) sought to kill him" (7.1). But soon afterwards the Jewish feast of the Tabernacles was at hand. Jesus' brothers urged him to go to Jerusalem, but Jesus replied "Go to the feast yourselves; I am not going up to this feast . . . so saying, he remained in Galilee. But after his brothers had gone up to the feast," we are told, "then (Jesus) also went up, not publicly but in private. The Jews were looking for him at the feast . . . About the middle of the feast Jesus went up into the temple and taught . . . Some of the people of Jerusalem therefore said, 'Is not this the man whom they seek to kill? And here he is, speaking openly, and they say nothing to him! . . . The Pharisees heard the crowd thus muttering about him, and the chief priests and Pharisees sent officers to arrest (Jesus) . . . So there was a division among the people over him. Some of them wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him" (7.2, 8-11, 14, 25-6, 43-4, 8.2). Jesus went on teaching in the temple the next few days, and on one occasion it is noted that "(the crowds) took up stones to throw at him; but Jesus hid himself, and went out of the temple" (8.59).

Again Jesus was in Jerusalem later that winter during the feast of the Dedication and he was walking in the temple, in the

portico of Solomon, and the Jews gathered around while he taught, and it is recorded that "The Jews took up stones again to stone him" (10.31), and "again they tried to arrest him, but he escaped from their hands" (10.39).

Now the next time Jesus was near Jerusalem was at the raising of Lazarus from the dead. When Jesus heard that Lazarus was ill, he said to his disciples, "'Let us go into Judea again.' The disciples said to him, 'Rabbi, the Jews were but now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?'" (11.7-8). But he did go and raised Lazarus from the dead, and it is recorded that some of those who witnessed the raising of Lazarus "went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done . . . So from that day on (the Pharisees) took counsel how to put him to death. Jesus therefore no longer went openly among the Jews, but went from there to the country near the wilderness . . . and there he stayed with his disciples. Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and many went up from the country to Jerusalem before the Passover . . . They were looking for Jesus and saying to one another as they stood in the temple, 'What do you think? That he will not come to the feast?' Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that if any one knew where he was, he should let them know, so that they might arrest him. Six days before the Passover, Jesus came (back) to Bethany, where Lazarus was . . . When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came, not only on account of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he raised from the dead. So the chief priests



planned to put Lazarus also to death, because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing Jesus. The next day a great crowd who had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying, 'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord'" (11.46, 53, 54-7, 12.1, 9-13).

Now did Jesus really know what awaited him in Jerusalem? Yes and no. That there might be trouble was obvious. The authorities in Jerusalem had already on several previous occasions sought to arrest him and plotted to kill him. The crowds also on several previous occasions had tried to stone him to death. Jesus could surely read the writing on the wall. He knew that they would eventually get him and what they would do to him when they did. So why did he go then? Because he knew he was the Messiah, that he would be killed, and in three days rise again? I think not. But Jesus did trust in God in a radical way, and as a result, his actions began to take on more importance than his words. Thus we need to look more carefully at those actions, which we shall do next week. AMEN