

Fr. Loring's Sermon at St. Mark's on Sunday, August 23rd.

"YOU ARE THE CHRIST": NOW WHAT ABOUT THEM?

Ideas from Pulpit Resource 8/25/96

Prev. preached: SS. Augustine & Marin Roxbury, MA 8/25/96; Christ, Quincy 8/22/99; Grace, Norwood 8/25/02; Holy Nativity, So. Weymouth 8/21/05 (All using BCP propers – see below)

In the Name...

I am Christian. But a short time ago a perplexing problem with my car was fixed by a brilliant Muslim mechanic. I ate food that was prepared by a Hindu cook. A little further back, a Zoroastrian told me how to handle a software problem with the computer I then had. And a Jew took me to lunch to try to persuade me to be on a citizens' committee in my town.

Welcome to America – multi-religious America! We all could tell of such incidents ourselves. But I am not sure that we mainline types know how to live in such a world. After all, a major project of many of our churches, well into this century, has been to make a Christian America, to make a country so uniformly Christian that we would never meet anyone who would not confess with St. Peter, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

But even here in America, Christians are increasingly feeling like a minority in the very culture that we thought we had made Christian. More and more of us are asking, "How are we to live as Christians in communities that are bubbling with a variety of other religions?" As a Christian, what are you to say – what should you say – to the person who works next to you and who is a Muslim? What should you say to your Hindu dermatologist? Is she going to hell because she doesn't believe that Jesus is the Son of the living God?

Yet today's Gospel story comes out of just such a time. Christianity then was a tiny minority movement on the edge of Judaism. When Peter said, "You are the Son of the living God," he said so in the middle of dozens of other strong and different religious expressions. Not one single verse of the New Testament was spoken for a time when Christians were in the majority. I say this because sometimes it is difficult for American Christians to remember that our faith originated in a thriving religious marketplace where one met people of other faiths every day, every hour.

How do we relate to these other faiths? Other faiths believe that they have met God in the words of Mohammed, who was a wise warrior; or in the Buddha, who was an introspective and contemplative mystic. Either point of view will make a difference in how they look at us Christians. And Jesus makes all the difference in how we view them, how we talk to them, how we listen to them, The Gospel sets some standards for our encounters with people of other faiths. And it stands in judgment on some of the ways we Christians have tried to relate to people who believed differently from us.

For instance, the well-meaning soul who says, "Hey, you're Hindu, I'm Christian, but that's not really important. After all, we're all saying fairly much the same thing: "the person who says that is wrong." For if you will sit down and actually listen to the Hindu for more than five minutes, you will see that he or she is not saying the same thing as Christians say, by a long shot.

What first appears as gracious: "Hey, we're all heading in the same direction after all." – that is actually the height of arrogance: "Hey, your Hinduism is really unimportant and insignificant."

Statements like “Well you’re Jewish, I’m Muslim, but what really matters is that we’re all human beings” – that kind of statement shows, not that someone is open-minded about religion, but just the opposite. One is so closed-minded about religion that one cannot conceive that a person’s religious belief could be the most important thing in that person’s life.

We do a Jew no favor when we say something which suggests that Jewishness is insignificant, is a mere quirk of the personality, or a pre-modern vestige that can be overcome by appeals to common humanity, or universal feelings, or some other pagan ideas.

That is why many Jews and Christians have learned to be suspicious of such expressions as “Judeo-Christian”. There are Jews and there are Christians, but there are no Judeo-Christians. Jews really do not believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. They really do not want to be baptized by us, certainly not baptized into something called Judeo-Christianity. They want to be listened to as Jews, respected as Jews, and not demeaned by being absorbed into some neutral blob called Judeo-Christianity.

The first step in learning to live with our religious differences is learning to respect those differences, and allowing one another to live in those differences.

Our worst foe is not Jews or Muslims who won’t become Christians, but rather pagans who teach that all religion is an outmoded vestige of the past which enlightened people have at last overcome. We Christians have a lot more in common with the Muslim who says that “There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is His prophet” than we do with the happy American pagan who says, “Well all religions are pretty much the same thing.”

As Christians, we are to relate to people of other faiths as Jesus related to them:

We are to relate to them with respect and love, because we look at them as beloved children of God, for whom Christ died. We may have a chance to tell them about Christ, or we may not. God will make the opportunity when the time is right.

We are to relate to them with humility, knowing that we didn’t come to Christ, but that He came to us.

We are to relate to them with joyful curiosity, to learn more about what they have learned of the ways of God – hoping that one day they may in turn ask us what we have learned of God in Christ.

And we are to relate to them with awesome responsibility, knowing that they will rightly judge the claims of Christ by watching how we live.

From what I have seen, for most people who do not believe in Jesus, it is not because they think that He is a fraud, but because they see so little of Jesus in the lives of those who say that they follow Him!

You and I are here this morning because we are among the millions who, when Jesus asks, “Who do you say that I am?” confess, “You are the Christ, the Son of God.”

Note the movement in the Gospel: First Jesus asks them, “Who do others say that I am?” That mechanic who worked on my car, that chef who prepared my lunch, who do they say Jesus is?

But then, quite quickly, Jesus moves to the heart of the matter: “Who do you say that I am? That’s the most important question. The ultimate fate of others who do not believe in Jesus, and the quality and significance of their relationship with God. We can become so concerned about what everybody else is believing, that it can become a way of avoiding Christ’s claim upon our lives.

Our greatest concern is not “What about them?” Our care should be “What about me? What do I say about Jesus? How does my life, in the way I go about life in the world, in the manner in which I relate to others: - how does my life demonstrate that Jesus really is the Christ, the Son of the living God?”

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

BCP Propers 16A: Isaiah 51:1-6; Ps. 138; Rom. 11:33-36; Matt. 16:13-20