

First Sunday After the Epiphany, January 8, 2006, Liturgical Year "B"

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY

The Rev. Arthur W. Ward, Jr. + Rector

"Is Jesus Really God?" (part 1)

DID JESUS EVEN EXIST?

Some of you may have heard of the recent court case going on in Italy. A court there is being asked to decide if the Roman Catholic Church may be breaking the law by teaching that Jesus existed 2000 years ago. It seems that Luigi Cascioli, a seventy something atheist, filed a lawsuit against fellow citizen, Fr. Enrico Righi, a Roman Catholic priest who writes for his parish newspaper. According to atheist Cascioli, *"I started this lawsuit because I wanted to deal the final blow against the Church, the bearer of obscurantism and regression."*

Cascioli says Righi broke two Italian laws. The first is Abuse of Popular Belief which is meant to protect people against being swindled or conned. The second crime that is being committed is impersonation. Cascioli claims the Church constructed Christ upon the personality of John of Gamal, a 1st century man who fought against the Roman army.

Later this month a court will decide if the case has enough merit to go forward.

Fr. Righi said, *"We're both from Bagnoregio. We were in school together. Then he took a different path and we didn't see each other anymore. Since I'm a priest, and I write in the parish newspaper, he is now suing me because I "trick" the people."*

While such a story may seem to us to be surprising and somewhat ridiculous, there are a number of people (usually atheists) who go around believing and saying that Jesus is a made up myth, even though the historical record shows otherwise. Unlike the Greek gods of Zeus and Apollo, Jesus was not some mythological figure. He walked this earth, dealt with real people - both friends and enemies alike. Yes, the man, Jesus, did exist. Biblical documents as well as non-Christian documents attest to this truth. In fact, there is so much evidence that Jesus existed that in its entry on Jesus, the Encyclopedia Britannica states concerning non-biblical documents, *"These independent accounts prove that in ancient times even the opponents of Christianity never doubted the historicity of Jesus, which was disputed on inadequate grounds by several authors at the end of the 18th, during the 19th, and at the beginning of the 20th centuries."*

Noted British scholar I. H. Marshall writes, *"It is not possible to explain the rise of the Christian Church or the writing of the Gospels and the stream of tradition that lies behind them without accepting the fact that the Founder of Christianity actually existed."*

So the question is not whether or not Jesus existed, the real question is who is the real Jesus? Is he a great prophet like the Moslems claim? Is he a wayward rabbi with some good teaching that was perverted by his followers as many Jews believe? Is he another guru as the Hindus claim or good moral teacher as the Buddhists claim? Is he a god as the Mormons believe? Or the highest created being as the Jehovah's Witnesses contend? It seems everyone has an opinion when it comes to who Jesus is?

WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?

It was no different 2000 years ago. Jesus asked His disciples, ***"Who do men say that I am?"*** They replied, ***"Some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, and others one of the prophets."*** But then Jesus then asked His disciples ***"But who do you say that I am?"***

That my friends is the key question for us. As Christians we believe Jesus is God in human flesh. We believe that He always existed. He is the Son of God, one with the Father, distinct as the Son, but the same,

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as God. These are the foundational truths that make Christianity unique among the religions of the world. It doesn't matter if you are Baptist or Roman Catholic, Presbyterian or Pentecostal, Church of Christ or Lutheran, Methodist or Episcopalian, we all believe that Jesus is God.

But the question remains how do we know that Jesus is God? If someone were to ask you why do you believe Jesus is God, what would you say? A lot of people just say it is by faith. But that really doesn't hold up if it is just by your faith or by what you believe. Yes, faith is involved. A decision has to be made. You have to believe one way or the other, but why? Anyone can believe something is true but that does not make it true. What makes something true is if there is evidence that backs it up. What makes something true is does it stand the test of time? What makes something true is whether or not it is objective reality? And while we cannot prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus is God, we can find and look at the evidence and have more than just a pretty good hunch.

The Bible tells us in **1 Peter 3:15** ***"But sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to every one who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence."*** As Christians, our hope is grounded in who Christ is, in what He has done and in what He has promised to do. So we need to know why we believe the way we do, and be able to give a defense for our belief. And so today and next week, I would like to do that. For who we understand Jesus to be is the pivotal key for understanding life and fulfilling our destiny here on earth. It will have profound and lasting implications in this life and in the life to come.

THE WORLD'S RESPONSE

Now what you'll find is that, in addition to those who do not believe Jesus ever existed, and those who believe that He existed and is God, there are two other types of people when it comes to the question of Jesus' identity. Outside the church there are those who adhere to another religious belief and as a result have a false understanding of Jesus identity, and then there are those inside the Church who also have a misunderstanding. They believe He is the Son of God but that He is not the only way to God. He's just the way to God for Christians. Of course you can't have it both ways. When claims are made that contradict each other you have a problem whether outside or inside the Church.

For example, if a Jehovah's Witness comes to your door, they will tell you that God had a Son, but that the Son is not God, he is a created being. They carry with them their own unique translation of the Bible – *the New World Translation*. Please turn with me to **John 1:1**: ***"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God."*** Do you know what the Jehovah's Witnesses do with this verse? All they do is add one word, the letter "a," so that in their translation the same verse reads, *"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was a god."* Throughout their bibles, they mistranslate the Scriptures to support their own dogma that was developed by one man in the 19th century, Charles T. Russell.

But it is not just outside the Church, it can be found in the Church as well. Last year, during the installation of the new Dean of Washington National Cathedral the Rev. Samuel Lloyd, the guest preacher, Dr. George Regas, Rector Emeritus of All Saints Episcopal Church in Pasadena, California told hundreds of Episcopalians at Washington's National Cathedral recently that he could no longer think about Jesus as the only way to God and to a saving faith.

He declared: *"I simply refuse to hold the doctrine that there is no access to God except through Jesus. I personally reject the claim that Christianity has the truth and all other religions are in error. Unfortunately, this is the position of the new Pope, Benedict XVI, who says salvation is only possible through Jesus Christ. I think it is a mistaken view to say Christianity is superior to Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Judaism and that Christ is the only way to God and salvation. I've given my life to a different Jesus,"*

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I remember when I was a freshman at the University of Buffalo, a fellow student who was Jewish told me that Jesus is God because that is how we interpret the New Testament. In other words, Jesus never claimed to be God. We just made him a god. And that is a popular notion in today’s world both inside and outside the Church.

So where do we come up with this notion that Jesus is God? Is it something that the Church just made up?

FORETOLD IN THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES – THE OLD TESTAMENT

We begin where Jesus would have begun and where His disciples would have begun – the Old Testament – the sacred Scriptures of the Jewish people. When two of the disciples were on the road to Emmaus after Jesus had died, they ran into Jesus but at first did not recognize Him. What did Jesus do with them before they recognized them? Please turn to **Luke 24:25-26: *Then Jesus said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory? And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He explained to them in all the Scriptures concerning Himself.”***

You see for the Jews – our Old Testament was their Bible – the Hebrew Scriptures was God’s Word to them. And in the Old Testament you have what is called prophecy – the Word of the Lord coming to men set apart by Him for God’s people with messages that speak to the present situation and the future. And one of the things that God showed to His prophets over and over again was the coming of the Anointed One, literally the “Messiah.” In the Greek, the word for “Messiah” is “Christ.”

Now every book of the Old Testament was written hundreds of years before Jesus was even born. We know this from Archaeological evidence and thousands of ancient manuscripts. And in many of these books there are what are considered to be messianic prophecies. I want us to briefly look at some of the over 100 messianic prophecies recorded in the Old Testament:

Is. 7:14: *“Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look a virgin is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.”* – (which means “God with us”).

Is. 9:6-7: *“For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore.”*

Is. 53: 1-12: note some of the descriptions of this suffering servant: *“He was wounded for our transgressions, and crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed...by a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future? For He was stricken for the transgression of my people. They made His grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush Him with pain. When you make his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the Lord shall prosper. Out of anguish he shall see light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge. The righteous one, my servant shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.”*

Micah 5:2: *“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come to Me, the one to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from old, from everlasting.”*

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Zechariah 9:9: *"Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King is coming to you; He is just and having salvation, humble, lowly and riding on a donkey, a colt, the foal of a donkey."*

Zechariah 12:10: *"They will look on me whom they pierced."*

Malachi 3:1: *"See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple."*

So it is clear that the Jews were looking for this Messiah, an anointed leader to come and deliver them. Orthodox Jews are still looking. So the obvious question is did Jesus fit the profile of this Anointed One foretold by the prophets? How does Jesus fit the profile?

WHO IS THIS MESSIAH?

Now what's interesting is that Jesus rarely ever called Himself the Messiah. Why? There were so many different interpretations in Israel concerning who would be the Messiah and what the Messiah would do, that Jesus generally avoided the issue. Jesus told his followers not to tell anyone until after His mission was completed. Why? Because He knew that even they didn't fully understand the role of the Messiah. Rather, Jesus unveiled His messiahship through how He identified himself, what He talked about, what He did, and what He promised. And so we need to look at the evidence. How did Jesus fulfill the prophecies of the Old Testament?

"SON OF MAN" AND "SON OF GOD"

First, how did Jesus identify Himself? The two most common titles that He used to identify Himself were the "Son of God" and the "Son of Man." Many people think that Jesus used "Son of God" to highlight His divinity and "Son of man" to highlight his humanity. But this is faulty thinking. The angels and the leaders of God's people were called sons of God in the Bible, and even God's people (see Hos. 1:10) were designated as such. But Jesus spoke of Himself as THE Son of God. And as THE Son of God, He spoke time and time again of His special relationship with the Father that no one else had, has, or ever will have. This designation was considered blasphemy among the religious leaders. Yet, Jesus used it of Himself over and over again. For example, He addressed the Father as "My Father," but when He commanded His disciples and us to pray, He said, "Pray *Our* Father."

And then there's the title Jesus most often used: "Son of Man." Karen Armstrong, a former Roman Catholic nun who wrote the best-selling book, *A History of God*, contends in her book that the term, "*Son of Man*" simply stressed the weakness and mortality of the human condition so by using it Jesus was merely emphasizing that he was a frail human being who would one day suffer and die." Such erroneous thinking is exposed when we find how the term is used in the Hebrew Scriptures. Please turn with me to **Daniel 7:13-14:** *"As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages shall serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed."*

You can see why from this passage, the title, "Son of man" was considered to be a title only associated with the Messiah. It was not a title of weakness, but rather a title conveying the authority the Messiah has as the sole ruler over all mankind. Jesus was known by his friends and enemies alike to use the titles "Son of God" and "Son of Man." He used them to convey His identity as the Messiah but more importantly to demonstrate His divinity. You see what we've been doing is getting to the heart of what we believe and why? The answers are here in this book, the Word of God. But we need to get into the Word if we are going to be able to give a defense for the hope that is in us. Please join me next week as we continue to look at the question, "Is Jesus Really God?" Let us pray....