

SERMON - Good Friday

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Lessons: Isaiah 52:13-53:12, Hebrews 10;16-25. John 18:1-19:37

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Who is this man? Who is this who is executed like a common criminal? Who is this Jesus? What does he mean to the men and women who encounter him? What does he mean to you and to me? People asked questions just like these in Jesus' time just as you and I do today.

When we read the gospels we find this question being asked again and again.

Some people came to him expecting an itinerant preacher. a **rabbi** who was preaching a new life-giving message. In the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, Jesus proclaims **good news** to the downtrodden people of his time. He told them that God would reward them fulfilling their needs – providing for them the qualities they lacked: for the poor in spirit - the **kingdom of heaven**. For the meek - the **earth** as their inheritance, for those who mourn a loss - **comfort**. for those who seek justice - **satisfactory settlements**, for the merciful - **mercy**, for the peace-makers - the title: **sons of God**, for those persecuted in the cause of right - the **kingdom of God**.

He proclaimed that God would set things right and not allow the inequities of their age to stand. Jesus' message was a proclamation that God was preparing His kingdom right under their noses - all they needed

was the faith to see it happening and their choice to participate in it. That kingdom became the **church** - Christ's body here and now - a blending of the supernatural and the worldly - of God and Man. **Do you look to Jesus for words to reassure you?**

Others looked to him as a **miracle worker** who could heal their hurts, illness, or deformities. **He cured or healed all who came to him.** In Mark we find countless stories of Jesus driving out demons and healing the sick. At this time in history it was popular belief that illness of the mind and the body were due to possession by demons. So casting out demons - or exorcism - and curing illness are one in the same. There is no doubt that one of the primary causes of Jesus' popular appeal was his ability to cure the ill. Raising of the dead, as with the son of the widow of Nain, is meant to set Jesus apart from other healers and miracle workers of his time. It sets Jesus on a **different plane of authority** from other healers or exorcists of his time, for only God can raise the dead. **Do you look to Jesus for healing? - Do you look to Him for new life instead of death?**

Others looked to him as a great **teacher**. Let's look at one of these encounters. In the Gospel of John we have an encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus, one of the important people of this time. When you are highly placed in public life you have everything to lose by making a **careless move** which could be misinterpreted to your discrediting by your opposition (We've seen enough of that in recent elections). Nicodemus was in such a position at the very top of the national cabinet called the Sanhedrin. He was like THE national expert on God. He had met a stranger - this small-time rabbi from out in the country who was attracting such a large following. Nicodemus needed to know who this person was who was attracting such large crowds and **why**. When he came to meet Jesus he came at night so that he would

not be seen and he said. "Rabbi - we know that you are a teacher who comes from God; for no one could perform the signs that you do unless God were with him." Jesus answered, "I tell you most solemnly, unless a man is born from again (or born from above), he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus was troubled by this and asked. "How can a grown man be born again? Can he go back into his mother's womb and be born again?" Jesus answered. "I tell you most solemnly, unless a man is born through water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God: what is born of the flesh is flesh; what is born of the Spirit is spirit." John shows us that Jesus is superior in his understanding even to the best minds of his day. He is able to teach even the teachers. Most of the material in the synoptic gospels about Jesus' teaching - the parables - is about the kingdom of Heaven. **Is Jesus a teacher for you?**

Who did **Jesus' followers** perceive Jesus to be? The Twelve, whom he had called, had been with him throughout his ministry. Of all of his followers, they probably knew Jesus best. In Luke 9:18-21 we find Jesus asking his disciples, "Who do the crowds say I am?" And they answered. "John the Baptist; others Elijah; and others say one of the ancient prophets come back to life." "But who do you say I am?" It was Peter who spoke up. **"The Christ of God"** he said. But he gave strict orders not to tell anyone anything about this. This title *Christos* in Greek - 'Christ of God' - means 'the anointed of God'. In the times of the Hebrew Kingdom, a prophet was called to anoint the head of God's chosen with oil. This was the symbol of kingship in ancient Israel. God sent Samuel to anoint David when he was in his teens to become the second king of Israel. To be king of Israel was to be **God's chosen**.

In the writings of the Old Testament prophets we find references to one who will come to save his people - a **Messiah**. This is the same concept in Hebrew which parallels *Christos* in Greek. The Messiah was

expected to save his people - but we need to ask, "**from what?**"

If you were living in Jesus' times under the rule of Rome it was from the Romans. So it was, that a Messiah was hoped for, who would lead the Jews to **military victory** over their Roman oppressors. This was the hope of the Jewish people when Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. This was the expectation of religious party called the **Zealots** who sought to foment rebellion to overthrow the Romans who occupied their land. Jesus' understanding of his Messiahship was different from the hopes of these people. He saw himself as a **spiritual leader** who would lead his followers to **spiritual victory** rather than military victory. The clash between these views of what the Messiah was to be, along with the threat which Jesus posed to their current Jewish authorities - of whom Nicodemus was one - all lead to the Passion drama we read from John: Jesus capture by night in the garden, his trial before Pilate who finds no fault with him, and his execution with two criminals. So you may ask - **What does the death of this good man have to do with me?**

Jesus is the lamb who is sacrificed for us to atone for our sins - like the lamb sacrificed in the Passover ritual of which we read last night, or the ram sacrificed by Abraham in place of his son Isaac. **Jesus offered himself bearing witness to God's truth willingly.** He could have denied the accusations that he blasphemed and claimed to be God's son, but he did not. He offered himself willingly and his death redeems us, just as the Passover lamb redeemed the lives of the first born sons of the Hebrews in Egypt on the night of the Passover.

Let us look at one more encounter with Jesus - this one is with one of the twelve: **Thomas**. It occurs over a week after the crucifixion. Jesus had appeared to his followers on the Sunday following his death and had

appeared to others in the days following. When Thomas was told of Jesus' coming to them he was too overwhelmed by his grief and disappointment to believe them - he said, 'Unless I see the holes that the nails made in his hands and can put my finger into the holes they made, and unless I can put my hand into his side, I refuse to believe.' Eight days later the disciples were in the house again and Thomas was with them. The doors were closed, but Jesus came in and stood among them. **'Peace be with you'**, he said. Then he spoke to Thomas, **'Put your finger here; look here are my hands. Give me your hand; put it into my side. Doubt no longer but believe.'** Thomas replied, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him: 'You believe because you can see me. Happy are those who have not seen and yet believe.' He calls us to believe. He has not left us without aid. When he greeted the disciples after his resurrection, he breathed on them and said "Receive the Holy Spirit. For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; for those whose sins you retain, they are retained." He gave us the Holy Spirit to guide and to comfort us and with that gift he gave us power. His spirit is with us as it was before the beginning of time and the creation of the universe and as it will be after all this has passed. **Are you among those who have not seen and yet believe and yet can confess with Thomas 'My Lord and my God!'?**