

# **“What is He Then?”**

## **“I Don’t Know!”**

by

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**March 28, 2010 - Palm/Passion Sunday**

**Eternal God, Jesus has marched into our midst this day, and we have welcomed Him with shouts of, *"All glory, laud and honour...!"* We know that this Sunday soon turns to the violence, terror and blood of the passion, and yet, through this day and the events of the week ahead, we are reminded that You have not forsaken us. You have come to us! You have taken us as we are! You have embraced us! Grant to us now, open hearts and minds that in the passion of the One we experience as the Christ of God, we may be empowered to be Your people. Amen**

I want to share three vignettes, or slices of life, as we reflect upon the meaning of this day, and this week - as we reflect upon the question, who is Jesus for you, for me?

A short time back I was asked in the course of a conversation, *"Doug, are you a Christian?"* My answer to that is usually, *"Yes, I am Christian by accident of birth!"* The question this time however, came from a person who is literal in their interpretation of the Bible, and "Yes," the sort of person who wanted her Jesus to be my Jesus. Do you know what I mean? My response: *"Tell me what you mean by the word Christian and I will give you my answer!"* The question wouldn't let me

go. It wouldn't let me go even as we enter the holiest week within the Christian year.

How do I see Jesus? With many different faces: often times a prophet, my friend, my counselor, on and on; one who had such an impact on His followers, and those who came after, that they found themselves debating, as you must debate at times. (*Maclean's Magazine*, in the March 29, 2010 issue under an article titled, *The Real Jesus*, points out that there are more than 100,00 biographies of Jesus in English alone, 100 written in just the last decade)

Was Jesus born of the Virgin Mary? Was Jesus, "God" on earth? Is Jesus the One who took my sins and the sins of the world on His body and in His heart to the cross? "My Saviour"! You see it is hard for me, as one ever growing in faith, to see a God who would place God's Son on a cross! Is God One who sits on a throne and judges me like some kind of terrifying monster? Am I a Christian? To me, and countless others through the years, Jesus is the One in whom, as in no other, I see and experience God!

The second vignette comes from a moving scene in Lloyd C. Douglas' book, *The Robe*. Demetrius, a slave, is pictured as being among those in the crowd on the first Palm Sunday. We watch as he pushes his way far enough into the crowd to get a close-up look at the face of Jesus. Jesus, the one who was the very centre of attention! Later that day another slave asks Demetrius if he saw Jesus close up. Demetrius nods in the affirmative. "Crazy?" asks the second slave. "No, not crazy!" Demetrius responds. "A King?" "No, not a King!" "What is He then?" "I don't know," Demetrius responds, "I don't know, but He is something more than a king!" One in whom, as in no other, I see God!

The third vignette, or slice of life, comes from Philip Yancey's book, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* A group of

scholars gather to discuss, what if any belief was unique to the Christian faith. They began by eliminating possibilities: Incarnation? Other religions had different versions of gods appearing in human form. Resurrection? Again, other religions had accounts of return from the dead. The debate went on for quite some time until C. S. Lewis (novelist, academic, lay theologian, best known for his, *The Screwtape Letters* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and always, his memoir, *Surprised by Joy*. Lewis died November 22, 1963 - the same day that U.S. President John F. Kennedy was assassinated) walked into the room where the debate was taking place and asked, “*What’s the rumpus about?*” As I have said, they were attempting to discuss Christianity’s unique contribution among world religions. Lewis responded “*Oh, that’s easy. It’s grace.*”(Yancey, pg. 45)

Hold to those vignettes as we look at what - for those of us who call ourselves Christian - is the most intense week in the life of Jesus:

- Today, the Triumphal Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, Palm branches waving in the breezes! “*Hosanna. Blessed be the one who comes in the name of the Lord?*”
- Monday, the cleansing of the temple. “*My house shall be called a house of prayer for all people and you have made it into a den of thieves!*” What a burning indictment!
- Tuesday, a day marked with controversy over His teachings. Which is the greatest commandment? The response, “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and you shall love your neighbour as you love yourself.*”
- Wednesday - how grateful we are for the kindness of Mary of Magdala. She is the one who provides what I like to think of as an oasis of sweetness in a week otherwise

filled with bitterness. We watch as she breaks the jar of sweet perfume and anoints the feet of Jesus.

- Thursday, the night of the Passover, the supper with His disciples, the garden where, as Luke tells it, *"sweat stood out on his brow like great drops of blood!"* The anguish of the prayer, *"Father"* in Greek quite literally, *"Daddy, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless not what I will, but what you will."* The kiss! The Kangaroo Court! *"I find no fault in this man!"* *"What will you have me do with him?"* *"Crucify Him! Crucify Him!"*
- Friday - "black Friday" it must have seemed to the early disciples, to His followers. The torture, the attempts to humiliate, and being led out to a hill shaped like a skull! We watch as the cross is placed upon the ground, the wrists and ankles are tied, the nails are driven through hands and feet, and slowly the cross is raised upward and dropped with a sudden wrench into the ground. The words come, *"Father, forgive them for they know what they are doing!"* *"My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?"* *"Into your hands I commit my Spirit!"* A spear is thrust into His side, and the writer of Luke's Gospel places on the lips of one of the soldiers - one of the centurions, the words, *"Surely this man was the Son of God!"* And the body is taken from the cross and buried in a borrowed tomb, and there it lies until, as Fred Craddock, Professor Emeritus of Preaching at Chandler Theological College, Atlanta, Georgia expresses it, *"God takes the cross and using it as a battering ram rolls the stone away and we become an Easter people."*

Powerful, isn't it! Don't ask me to explain it, or explain it away! This I do know the very heart of my faith is to be found in the words, *"In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us!"*

What does it all mean? Do I believe that Jesus literally takes my sins upon Himself to the cross, “washing me,” as many hymn writers express it from their experience - “*washing me clean with His blood!*” You know what I mean! I love so many of our hymns, but have to constantly remind myself that they speak in the language of their day and generation. (I'm being very personal here and not attempting to speak of your expressions of faith.) You know what I mean when I tell you that recently while worshipping in another church, I heard two lovely voices, singing as though one, “*without His cross there is no crown; without His blood there is no salvation; without His blood there is no pardon!*” I can't believe in that kind of God! No! I can't believe in that kind of God!

What does it all mean to me? The events of this week remind me that in Jesus - with all the stuff, good and bad that has been written about Him over 2,000 years - I believe and thank God that in Jesus, as in no other, I experience God's grace, God's love, God's Presence.

I believe at the same time that there is always a contemporary element in the crucifixion. Remember the old piece of free verse:

“So one by one they turned away from Him  
Until He stood alone on Pilates' floor  
A tired young man, yet stalwart, straight and slim,  
Whose heart was broken, yet whose visage bore such  
depths of peace the rulers paused afraid and murmured  
“Tell the sin this man has done!”  
In all Jerusalem none came to aid.  
The cry rang back  
‘They say, “He is God's Son!”  
They say, “He is God's Son!”  
O, where were they the halt, the deaf, the blind?”

He had made well  
Why did they not come running swift to say?  
“We are his proof!”  
They had so much to tell....

I censure them,  
And, yet because of me,  
Christ kneels alone,  
Sometimes at Calvary”

Always the contemporary element in the crucifixion!

Lent, as Aaron said from this pulpit on February 28<sup>th</sup>, reminds us that all is not well or fair or right in the world in which we find ourselves. Indeed, as you will understand from what I have been saying this morning. Lent and Holy Week leads to the cross, and through the cross to the wonder of Easter morning. Through it all we see Jesus, the Christ of faith, the One in whom we experience God’s love *“pushing through the hate, the violence, the hunger, pushing through the homophobia, the bigotry, the depression,”* Yes, Aaron continued, *“pushing through the closed mind, ...through the doubt, the injustice, the indifference, pushing through the disease, the addiction, ...the pain, not to fix it but just to reach you and me who are hanging on those crosses so that He can be beside us, turn His head to the side and say, “Today you will be with me...”* (Feb. 28, 2010 – Rev. Aaron Billard, St. John’s United Church, Moncton)

Whatever else this week means to you, or to me, as Shelby Spong so well expresses it in his, *A New Christianity for a New World*, *“The cross does not represent a sacrifice required by a blood - seeking deity; it rather reveals the ultimate portrait of the threatening power of love that is present in the life of Jesus”* (Page 138.) Hear that! *“...the ultimate portrait of the threatening power of love that is*

*present in the life of Jesus” Jesus looking over Jerusalem – “How often would I have gathered you as a hen her chickens...and you would not?”* The events of the week calling me, and I pray, calling you into being. Love, God’s grace in you and in me, in our Church community inviting us to be participants in a faith that transcends all barriers, unites, calls and enhances.

Hear what I am saying. Listen to these words again from Spong, *“love gives itself away with abandon. If denied, love embraces the denier. If forsaken, love embraces the forsaker. If tortured love embraces the torturer. If crucified, love embraces the killers...”* (Pg. 140.) *“For one to abide in love is to abide in God...”* (Pg. 140.)

*“Friends it is over now, the passion, the sweat, the tears. Only the truth remains!”*

Thanks be to God! Amen and Amen!

