

Lent V 2024
Saint Patrick's
3/17/2024

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be always acceptable unto Thee, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. *Amen.*

From the Gospel: **“Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am.”** (John 8:58)

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Today, on our calendar, this is Passion Sunday; for other traditions it is simply the Fifth Sunday in Lent.

For us, this is the start of the season, or perhaps better, the sub-season, of Passiontide.

I say “sub-Season” because Passiontide a still part of Lent, it is simply the fact we now begin to focus more directly on our Lord’s Passion and Death.

One of the things which has changed, as you can see, is the crosses, statues, and pictures are now veiled.

They are presently veiled in purple, but on Good Friday they will be veiled in black.

The purple reminds us to prepare ourselves for Good Friday, and the black tells us that great and terrible day has arrived.

Our Gospel Lesson for today shows us one of the two primary motives which led the authorities seek the judicial murder of our Lord.

And it was, most assuredly, a judicial murder; the authorities tried to cloak his execution with a bit of legal pretense, but everything they did was in stark contrast with proper Jewish judicial practice, in other words, they did not even play by their own rules.

To take one example, it was against Jewish law to hold a trial at night.

Or to take another, an accused person was to have legal representation, clearly Jesus had no man to speak for him.

Today's Gospel is the climax of a very contentious dispute between Jesus and certain Pharisees.

Our Lesson joins the discussion "in progress," if you will.

There has already been a lot of back and forth, which is well worth reading.

It is always challenging to say with any certainty what biblical figures are thinking, but my sense throughout this exchange is the Pharisees are just getting angrier and angrier; Jesus, on the other hand, seems to me to be quite in control of himself.

I imagine he was getting annoyed by the nastiness of the Pharisees, but he responds with the truth, although the Pharisees were further provoked by his words.

The old saying is true, "the truth will make you free, but first it will make you mad."

The argument is about the most important question in the New Testament, indeed in all of life, "who is Jesus?"

Answering this question is the focus of the Gospels, the rest of the New Testament, and indeed the Ecumenical Councils.

One of the first times the question is addressed is in Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi, when "[Jesus] asked his disciples, saying, **Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?**

And they said, Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets.

He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am?

And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.

And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven.”

It was also answered by the Father himself, when, at Jesus’ Baptism, the Voice from Heaven proclaimed, **“Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”** (Mark 1:11)

Or again, at the Transfiguration, God said of him, **“This is my beloved Son: hear him.”** (Mark 9:7)

The controversy in our Gospel Lesson for today is about this same question, the identity of Jesus.

The Pharisees try to answer this by identifying him with Satan.

“Then answered the Jews, and said unto him, Say we not well that thou art a Samaritan, and hast a devil?” (John 8:48)

Jesus responds with the truth he is the Son of God.

“Jesus answered, I have not a devil; but I honour my Father, and ye do dishonour me. And I seek not mine own glory: there is one that seeketh and judgeth. Verily, verily, I say unto you, If a man keep my saying, he shall never see death.” (John 8:49-51)

The Jews (which should be understood as the Jewish authorities and their agents, not all of the Jewish people) respond to this assertion; **“Then said the Jews unto him, Now we know that thou hast a devil. Abraham is dead, and the prophets; and thou sayest, If a man keep my saying, he shall never taste of death. Art thou greater than our father Abraham, which is dead? and the prophets are dead: whom makest thou thyself?”** (John 8:52-53)

“Jesus answered, If I honour myself, my honour is nothing: it is my Father that honoureth me; of whom ye say, that he is your God: Yet ye have not known him; but I know him: and if I should say, I know him not, I shall be a liar like unto you: but I know him, and keep his saying.” (John 8:54-55)

Once again, Jesus asserts his Father is God, the same god whom the Jews say is their God.

Further, he goes on to say these Jews do not know God, but He does; if he were to say he does not know God, he would be a liar, like them.

But now, he further clarifies his position:

“Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad.”
(John 8:56)

In short, he is older than Abraham, and hence greater.

Mocking him for what they saw as an absurd statement, the Jews said: **Thou art not yet fifty years old, and hast thou seen Abraham?** (John 8:57)

At this point, Jesus ends the discussion with his last and crystal-clear statement.

“Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am.” (John 8:58)

This requires some unpacking.

In the first place, he is reassessing his claim to have been before Abraham.

Even more shocking, for the Pharisees, not us, is his use of “I am.”

It doesn't come through in English, but in Greek and Hebrew, it is crystal clear.

Greek is a highly inflected language, which means the ending of a verb changes depending on the person and number of the noun, much as in English the form of the verb is “am” in the first person singular but it is “are” in the first person plural.

In the Greek, the use of a pronoun is optional, and indeed the pronoun is usually omitted, in other words, “eimi,” and “ego eimi” mean the same thing; when the pronoun is included it is for emphasis.

Jesus' use of “ego eimi” in this sentence would have the implication of I and only I am.

This is perhaps a small point, but the most shocking would be “I am” is the English translation of the Personal Name of God, YHWH.

For instance, in Exodus 3:14, God tells Moses, **“I Am That I Am: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I Am hath sent me unto you.”**

In applying the Holy Name to himself, Jesus is in essence, saying “I am God.”

Clearly, this was the way the Pharisees understood it, **“Then took they up stones to cast at him: but Jesus hid himself, and went out of the temple, going through the midst of them, and so passed by.”** (John 8:59)

The penalty for blasphemy was stoning, much as they would later stone Stephen.

So, if anyone ever tells you Jesus never said he was God, here is your answer.

This of course, sets up C. S. Lewis’ famous quote, “the only sort of man who says he is God is either a lunatic, a liar, or the Lord.

In Mere Christianity C. S. Lewis writes: **“I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him [that is, Christ]: ‘I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept His claim to be God.’**

That is the one thing we must not say.

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher.

He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell.

You must make your choice.

Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse...

You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God.

But let us not come up with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

Over the next two weeks, we will see the Pharisees’ anger work itself out.

We will the verdict of the Jewish authorities, of the crowd, and finally of Pilate.

And on Easter Sunday we will hear God the Father’s verdict.

In the end, however, the verdict which should most concerns us is our own verdict.

As Jesus said to the disciples, **“But whom say ye that I am?”**

And so, the question we must decide is C. S. Lewis’ trilemma, “is he a Lunatic, and Liar, or the Lord?”

Amen.

And now we ascribe, as is most justly due, unto Thee, O Lord, all might, majesty, power, and dominion, both now and forever. *Amen.*

“To do good, and to distribute, forget not; for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.” (Heb. xiii. 16.)