

THE BODY OF CHRIST: MEETING THE JESUS WE NEVER KNEW; PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11; PALM/PASSION SUNDAY/MARCH 29, 2015; THOMAS H. YORTY; WPC

No less a critic than Harold Bloom, the iconic authority on Western literature, wonders whether we can meet Jesus at all. “Doubtless the historical Jesus existed,” he says, “but he can be recovered only in shards, and just a handful (or fewer) of historians are of much use in deciphering these.”

“Though most scholars regard Jesus as Jewish,” Bloom continues, “he now appears to be American. We may as well have a Southern Baptist or Pentecostal or Mormon Jesus as a Jewish one, he says.”

89% of Americans consistently tell Gallup pollsters that Jesus loves them on a personal and individual basis. Bloom says this phenomenon has its roots in 19th Century revivalism from the Cane Ridge Revival of 1801 to the circus-like Revivalism of Charles Grandison Finney, precursor to Billy Sunday and Billy Graham, who had such fire and brimstone success in WNY they refer to this as the ‘burned over district.’

Yet, Professor Bloom aside, for many of us Jesus is more than an historical shard or relic of revivalism.

For many, the name Jesus evokes a presence, if not a guiding moral and spiritual influence we have known since childhood; that awareness and, for some, *relationship* has been instilled and nurtured by the church, by parents, by Sunday School teachers, preachers and by our own study and reflection.

Let me add another ingredient: you could say that we never meet the same person twice; people and life are dynamic, we are constantly in flux; we never enter the same river twice, the philosopher said—the river and we are always changing. Former pastor of this church Ray Kiely says when people ask his wife Martha how long she’s been married and she replies sixty years, the questioner often says, “That’s a long time Martha! All to the same man?” To which she responds, “Ray isn’t the same man I married, I changed him a long time ago.”

I’d like to explore the question this morning of who Jesus is and not just Jesus in general but the Jesus who rides into the Holy City like a conquering King David on Sunday but by Friday afternoon is a despised criminal hanging on a cross.

On the one hand, I agree with Bloom that history leaves us little more than textual shards; a patchwork of sayings and moments from Jesus’ life held together by edits and glosses like bailing wire and packing tape; not to mention religious and social movements that shape our perception of him.

But on the other hand, fragmentary as the biblical sources are and time-bound as the church or society’s take on Jesus may be they set the stage on which we meet him and act out accordingly what our understanding of his instruction or guidance is at particular moments in our lives. It is the extent to which we expect or trust him to be present in our circumstances that brings Jesus to life as we encounter, speak to, and follow him.

It is the Jesus who meets us in the text or sermon or anthem and the person in us whom Jesus meets that makes for the dynamic influence and relationship with this first century rabbi we call teacher, prophet and savior.

But here's the catch: too often when we think or read about him, we do so as if he were merely an historical figure. Reading the Bible, however, is different from reading *Moby Dick*. The difference is this: when we read *Moby Dick* we are bystanders outside the action; when we read the Bible we are reading the story of our lives; we are the actors, characters in the story.

There are few weeks in the church year as important as this one to ask the question: where and who are we in the story? Some of us walked into the sanctuary today as if we were the crowd welcoming Jesus to Jerusalem. But as the week unfolds do we remain members of the crowd or do we slip back into the shadows as bystanders, or even further distance ourselves as just 21st century readers of a story?

It makes all the difference. When Pilate is standing before the crowd with Jesus at his side, asking the crowd what they want Pilate to do with him and the crowd shouts back "Crucify him! Crucify him!" either I can say, "Look, isn't it terrible what that man Pilate is doing and how despicable that mob is demanding his death!"

Or, I can say "Yes, I've coldly, suspiciously interrogated Jesus in public without a shred of commitment just like Pilate and tossed him aside to be discounted by skeptics," or "Yes, I've stood in that crowd and shouted for revenge on a man who failed to give me what I wanted, when I wanted it."

Perhaps the reason we fail to see ourselves in the different characters of the story is because it places a magnifying glass on our souls. And no Gospel makes this a more difficult connection to make than the Gospel of Mark from which today's lesson and much of the passion on Good Friday is taken.

The Jesus of Mark is a perplexing man – asking his followers, "Who do people say that I am?" All of whom divide into those who understand and those who miss the point of his strange sayings. Mark is secretive and not eager to assist us in interpreting the Good News. Only the devils seem to know exactly who Jesus is and what his mission is about. Mark's Jesus often tells those who've witnessed miracles or heard his pronouncements – "Do not tell anyone what you have seen or heard."

Frank Kermode in his commentary on Mark says "there are many knots; they occur in riddling parables and perceptive demons and imperceptive saints, in the delight and gratitude of the outsider who is cured, and the fear and dismay of the insiders who do not understand."

What is striking and even attractive about Mark is his willingness to entertain and not shrink back from what is contradictory and ambiguous. Mark is obsessed, Kermode says, with mystery, silence and incomprehension. He prefers the shadows. He prefers to let readers, you and me, like his disciples, see, hear, possibly understand and almost certainly deny who and what Jesus is, yet how else is it we come to and discover our faith?

Could it be Mark's point, uncomfortable as it makes us, and could it be that the irony distinctive throughout his Gospel suggests that *only what is demonic in us* can accurately perceive the identity of Jesus.

Could it be that Mark is putting his readers then – the early church – and his readers now – you and me – in the shoes of those confused disciples and perplexed insiders so that we will discover the parts of us that need exposure to God's light, grace and healing?

There is a powerful, revelatory truth here: Ingmar Bergman featured in one of his films a White Knight who asks, wherever he goes, for the devil because surely he if anyone must know where the Holy One is to be found. Mark wants us to recognize what is demonic in us.

The problem with the evangelical Jesus and the historical Jesus and nearly every other Jesus much modern scholarship and church politics creates is that we invariably find ourselves – our values and customs and biases if not bigotries endorsed, baptized and sanctified.

But this week does not permit such easy associations. It was, after all, everyone, liberals and conservatives, who deserted him. There is little room left for the comfortable reader and bystander. The terrifying, stultifying story of the Passion begs the questions Mark routinely asks throughout his Gospel – who was this man and what significance if any does he have for my life?

Albert Schweitzer the first and most brilliant quester after the historical Jesus finally gave up on that enterprise and concluded that the glorified body of Christ was not to be found in textual shards and archeological ruminations but in his sayings; nevertheless the question remains what does Jesus mean and to whom is he speaking when he says what he says? We answer that question depending on whose shoes we are standing in, in the story.

The entry to Jerusalem, the arrest and trial, the crucifixion on a Roman cross and the empty tomb are the equivalent of a literary earthquake to our settled opinions and beliefs about Jesus. Maybe, just maybe this is not the Messiah we want but Messiah we need because maybe we are not the people we think we are but the people God wants us to become.

What we want is a God who vanquishes our foes and puts us on higher moral ground and, therefore, on higher social if not also political ground than others. But Jesus came to serve and give his life as a ransom for sin, not to leverage us to higher standing in the community or among our peers or on the right side of history. It wasn't what we wanted; it was what we needed.

Jesus told us in Mark 7 that it is from us, from our own hearts, that war, adultery, murder, slander and all manner of human tragedy and sadness come. Our politicians tell us that our greatest problem is to protect the borders from alien persons when we know deep down that our real problem starts with borders we erect within our own hearts behind which we judge and condemn the alien and stranger.

It will be clear this week that the Jesus whom the crowds welcome and want is not the Jesus they in fact get. They desire the genial guest, the teacher who will say what they want to hear and in ways that are pretty and soothing. The “kingdom” they prepare to receive is not a kingdom for which they are prepared.

Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah but his understanding of that title conflicts with the Messiah who stands before him. Other disciples engage in the same misunderstanding when they want Jesus to grant them seats adjacent to his own in the kingdom. This week that misunderstanding extends to the many in Jerusalem, who welcome the kingdom of David but do not perceive what that kingdom means.

How utterly remarkable, as Paul says, though in the form of God he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness, humbling himself and becoming obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

How could their misunderstanding of this beguiling figure do anything but turn to rejection, betrayal, arrest and crucifixion?

Were the rally to be held this Friday in front of Pilate’s portico I am quite confident that we would see each other there, in the crowd.

Yet if we are to be saved from anything maybe that is the best place for us to be so that one week from now when the tomb stands empty we will hold no illusion about who he is and who we are. It is when we make that deep recognition that he saves us from ourselves. Amen.