

The Fifth Sunday in Lent, commonly called Passion Sunday

3/22/26

by the Rev'd John Crews

Epistle Heb. ix. 11, *Gospel* St. John viii. 46

+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

It is common when pontificating on the Gospel to equate the 'Good News' with what Jesus has done and is doing for us, to talk of our fallen nature, our inability to free ourselves from the shackles of sin, of God's love for us, leading us towards a growing understanding of our weakness against the darkness, and the light of Christ breaking into the world, dying for us, and overcoming death and sin so that we might be partakers of life everlasting in the resurrection. And to be honest, I've been as guilty of this as anyone.

But in today's Gospel lesson, when confronted by those who bristled at His teachings, Jesus did not offer a defense of what He was doing; rather His defense was to explain who He IS.

When our understanding of the Gospel emphasizes it as a work of God, a thing that was, and is, and will be done, that emphasis comes with a focus on God the Father... as creator, sustainer, and on His relationship with humanity. And when such talk gets around to Jesus, it can tend toward an image of Him more as a symbol or a living sacrament, both God and Man, a guarantor of God's word rather than as the Word itself made flesh.

But while what God has done, is doing, and will do are true and of profound importance and beauty, worthy of our contemplation and thanksgiving, in today's lesson we are taken to task no less than those who accuse Jesus of demonic influence if we do not grasp that Jesus Himself is the Good news. Jesus did not need to be God incarnate to effect our salvation, but rather He effected our salvation because He is God.

For my own part, there have been certain passages that hit me like a freight train when I first encountered them, and this morning features one such moment that closes out today's Gospel lesson: "I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I AM," which obviously harkens back to God's interactions with Moses in the Burning Bush and God's response when Moses asks what to call

him: “I Am That I Am: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I Am hath sent me unto you.”

I had no understanding why those declarations struck me with such force. It wasn't until much, much later that I started to acquire an interest in philosophy and ponder the mysteries of existence (and that's not code for hanging out in a smoke-filled dorm room speculating whether a hot dog falls under the definition of a taco or bowl of Lucky Charms qualifies as a soup). I'm talking about really pondering these things, tapping my head saying, 'think, think, think,' like Winnie-the-Pooh.

The philosopher Leibniz declared the greatest question is, “Why is there anything at all rather than nothing whatsoever?” Of course, he wrote in Latin so it only took him six words what English takes 10, but then again, he was German so it probably sounded much angrier in his head.

But the question of existence itself is so complex that it has its own branch of philosophy devoted to it: Metaphysics. Now the philosopher Immanuel Kant was no fan of metaphysics, saying, “Metaphysics is a dark ocean without shores or lighthouse, strewn with many a philosophic wreck,” but his inability to grasp metaphysics owes more to the limits of his approach and the confines of his own pedantry.

Being, existence itself, that there is something rather than nothing requires a cause, and to cut to the chase, the cause of all existence is God and in scripture we witness that God declaring that He is existence itself.

Now for a philosophically minded, this is thrilling stuff. All of the lines of thought running from Aristotle, the power of rational thought to discern the necessity of an unmoved mover finds its answer in the declarative, “I AM”.

Little wonder then that my understanding of the Gospel tended towards the works of God, their cause and effects and God wholly other, the great circle whose circumference is nowhere and whose center is everywhere.

But that God, while worthy of fear and trembling, awe and adoration, is still a distant God, only approachable and understandable through intellectual thought and contemplation. But it is a rather bloodless God, and as we enter into Passiontide and journey towards Calvary and the Cross that stands before Easter, we know that our God is anything but bloodless and it is in the blood of Christ we find WHO GOD is.

Our faith is not one of intellectual proofs, although we should be clear that rationality and clear thinking are not to be dismissed. It is only to say that our faith is of an entirely different sort than mere intellectual assent, just as our faith is more, far more than a feeling or emotion. Our faith is in God, yes, but a God who became flesh so that we might know Him as a man. A man who once walked on the Earth and we are to remember that it means he walked on dirt, got blisters if His sandals were too loose, and had to wash His feet.

He was a man who other men and women saw and touched, listened to and even smelled. He looked into the face of men and women and they looked at Him. And some of those men went on and beheld the face of other men, and touched them and gifted them the Holy Spirit, as Jesus did for them. And in turn, those men did the same, from the Apostles to Gregory the Great, to Augustine of Canterbury, to Samuel Seabury, to our own Bishop and whichever Bishop may have or will soon confirm you.

Our relationship with Jesus is with a person. What that means is difficult to quantify because we're not entirely sure what it means to possess personhood, to be a person. I know that I am a person and I know other persons. I know a dog, for as loving and affectionate as they can be is not a person. And I know that what God is, being infinitely greater than we, must possess whatever we call personhood to some unfathomable greater degree, but what this entails is far beyond our human understanding. But while we cannot say with much certainty what personhood is, the implications of God's personhood are no less profound. For whatever makes

us unique amongst all other things in creation is this thing we call personhood and that its essence is found in our relationships with other persons. I alone am just an isolated individual, but it is only in relationship with another person do I myself become a person. We all, each and every one of us need another person to become one ourselves just as others become persons because of their relationship with us.

And it is through our relationship with persons that we come to a relationship in Christ and with the three persons of the Trinity. No one can baptize themselves, no one receives the gospel without it being relayed by another person, whether preached or written, all of which required other persons to teach you how to understand the spoken and written word, words crafted by generations of your forebearers. The pinnacle of our celebration in Christ itself, Holy Communion, only makes sense as a celebration of relationships.

And while one can take great joy and consolation in contemplating the mystical nature of that sacrament, in how we participate with the hosts of heaven in the supper of the lamb, partaking of the Lord's Supper in a particular place at a particular time which nevertheless is also the same moment existing through all time both backwards and forwards from Jesus's institution of it in that Upper Room long ago. Yet, if I do not take my head from the clouds and look to my left and right at the communion rail and notice the other persons beside me, if I do not see in them the Christ who dwells in them, then I have made little room for Jesus to dwell in me.

It is in the person of Christ that all mysteries unravel, all our unanswered questions fall away because we find an answer to the question we never realized that was in our hearts. An answer to that longing to be known, to be seen and heard, to be loved, even when we wonder if we truly know what love is or whether we deserve it. It is in our encounters with God as a person, that we become persons, and it is only as persons that we can truly know God. And when we come to know Him as He is, all arguments about faith vs. work, whether or not I am truly saved, screeds over predestination, double predestination, and fretting over signs and portents of the end times, cease to hold any meaning because the only meaning is found in our relationships with persons and most importantly, our relationships in and with those three persons above all other persons. The three persons that we invoke at the beginning and the end of our sermons, that our

proclamation of the Good news is an outflowing of our relationship with them, calling upon them that what the words that we preach are not my words but The Word, The Word that IS God but who became man for us so that we might know Him as a person and thus completing the question first asked by Moses at the Burning Bush.

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