



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

Sunday March 13th, 2016 - Passion Sunday

“Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am.”

✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

Several years ago, our parish's annual Lenten study was on C.S. Lewis's vital book *Mere Christianity*. *Mere Christianity* started as a series of radio addresses Lewis gave in the 40s, which were eventually collected into a series of tracts or pamphlets, and those eventually became the single work we know as *Mere Christianity*. The book itself is divided into four books, and each of the postulants in our parish were assigned one book to give a talk on, and we were of course paid generously in bread and soup.

Like a lot of Christians, I always loved to quote Lewis, but I hadn't actually read that many of his books. That's the problem with inherently quotable people - we rely on the quotes and sometimes ignore the bigger works. So it was a joy for me to read *Mere Christianity* in its entirety, focusing on the second book. And in this second book, I read what was one of the most profound yet simplest things I have ever read about the life and person of Jesus of Nazareth:

“I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: 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 the 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 with any patronising nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

And that is the first thing I thought of when I read the Gospel appointed for today; how quick we are to dismiss Christ's claims to divinity, and give him a “1st runner up” ribbon for being “a nice man” in lieu of “God among us.” This is the most polite dismissal we hear today. I hear it regularly, and I'm willing to wager you do as well. Not a week goes by that somebody doesn't say “Michael, of course I believe that Jesus was a good teacher - he wanted us to be nice, and that's what's really important isn't it?” This is of course a very polite way of saying “Michael, I think you must be absolutely daft to be transitioning away from a lucrative career as a technology consultant to spend your days talking about a dead rabbi.”

Certainly, Jesus laid claim to His divinity through allegory, such as when He referred to Himself as “the bridegroom” in Matthew 9. And He certainly laid claim to His divinity through numerous actions and miracles, as when he called poor Lazarus back from paradise; after all, one must be one with God to recall the souls of the dead from God's presence, no? But when it comes to verbal claims to this, there is nothing bolder that any person, especially a first century Jew could do than to say “before

Abraham was, I am.” Jesus is here claiming to be one with God by invoking God’s own name for Himself, introduced in Exodus 3:14: “*And God said unto 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.*”

Jesus doesn’t just end the passage with a claim to divinity, he starts it off that way as well. He starts this passage by saying “*Which of you convinceth me of sin?*” Jesus is arguing from His sinlessness; His perfection. And else but God could argue from a point of absolute perfection? Christ’s claim here to sinless is a claim to divinity.

So He asks them “*if I say the truth, why do ye not believe me?*” He tells them that in rejecting Him, they are rejecting God. So they do the only thing they can do - they accuse Him of being a madman, of being indwelt by a devil. The Hebrews are taking Lewis him up on his suggestion that if you’re not going to acknowledge Jesus as God, you must really double down on him being either a liar or a madman. And since they cannot deny His miracles or His words, they ascribe them to a nefarious spiritual influence, which has driven this poor rabbi mad in the process. They choose “lunatic” because they can’t choose “liar.”

Jesus naturally shoots this charge down, pointing out that He only honors The Father, and doesn’t seek His own glory. Certainly any supernatural event effected by the devil would take glory away from God; as everything Jesus does brings honor and glory to God, surely these things could not come from below. Jesus again offers them a glimpse of eternity and tells them that anybody who keeps His word will not taste death. The Hebrews, thinking He merely means the physical death of the body, say “now we **know** you’re daft; Moses and the prophets have already their physical deaths, are you greater than they?”

Again, Jesus says “My Father, whom you claim as your God, honors me. And if I were to say otherwise, I’d be lying. Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad.” The pre-Christian Book of Jubilees, fleshes this out beautifully when it says of Abraham, “*He knew and perceived that from him would arise the plant of righteousness for the eternal generations, and from him a holy seed, so that it should become like Him who had made all things.*” Abraham, the greatest prophet of the chosen people, saw Christ’s advent in the timelessness of paradise, and rejoiced that the Messiah had come to redeem His people.

Jesus’s words are as stark and bold today as they were 2,000 years ago. He tells us to keep His word because He **IS** The Word; the Logos of God, existing with the Father and the Holy Spirit before time itself. He commands us to forgive that so that He will forgive us. He commands us to love as He loves us. He commands us to act as He acted because He was not merely God’s agent on Earth, He was God on Earth. And He modeled every possible action and behaviour for us that we could possibly need to behave the way God would have us behave.

While Holy Orders does confer both certain duties and certain powers to us, the one thing it doesn’t do is give us the power to see into peoples’ hearts; that is reserved for God alone. But I’ll say this; Jesus wants your attention now as direly as He did 2,000 years ago. Saint Stephen’s is packed to the gills with people of faith, and we can see that in the fruit this parish bears. But we all have struggles, and we all have those moments of doubt. And there’s always that chance that you’ve been wrestling with Him a bit, trying to ignore a calling in your life. Or perhaps you’ve been trying to bait Him into an argument, or daring Him to reveal Himself to you even more than He already has. Perhaps you show up to humor a spouse or for the sense of community while you wrestle with faith.

Now, we don’t do “altar calls” at Saint Stephens. We are Anglican after all, the last great Christian sect to defend both the use of the Oxford comma and the correct fork at the dinner table; so we’re not about to start telling people to stand up and make a scene. I can’t think of a better time to really look Jesus in the eye and say “indeed, you are neither liar nor lunatic, you are Lord. You are my redeemer” than Lent. And if you want a dedicated church family of both clergy and laity, all of whom would be happy to help you with that, you’re in the right place; just ask.

Jesus’ claim to being one with God is as apropos to us today as it was to the Hebrews 2,000 years ago. Now, If you want a nice, eccentric fella encourages you to love each other, dresses in the garb of a minister, and sometimes says things deemed controversial, you can give me a call, or Frs. Hawtin or Kerouac for that matter. But if you want to meet God, call on the only person to ever boldly declare, “before Abraham was, I am.”

To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN.