

St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church sermon for the last Sunday after Pentecost 2020: "the quest for the historical Jesus"

Have you ever heard about the quest for the historical Jesus?

It's exactly what it sounds like. It's a scholarly movement that really caught fire several decades ago, and its goal was and is to use the tools of archaeology and anthropology to unearth details of Jesus' life and character that aren't directly recorded or even mentioned in Scripture.

The quest for the historical Jesus seeks to answer questions such as where did Jesus go in the intervening years between birth, the family's flight to Egypt, his preteen appearance in the Jerusalem temple, and the most active years of his earthly ministry when he was somewhere in the neighborhood of thirty. What did he look like? What sort of family structure did he have? What were the intricate details of how he related with his disciples, his family, and society? Did he ever have any sort of romantic or intimate relationships during his lifetime? The list of questions goes on and on.

On the surface, this seems like an interesting and edifying quest, right? I mean, why not learn more about our Lord and Savior as a historical person?

But there's a hidden trap in this quest. See, Jesus isn't just some historical figure from whom we're clear that we have some distance both in time and in space. In our tradition, we see him as God incarnate, one who is still very much alive and reigning in the heavenly realms outside of time as we know it. So when we discover, or think we've discovered, some significant detail about

him, we attach a whole lot to that information. This tends to take us down paths that are not helpful for the church in fulfilling its mission.

If we believe he was brown-skinned, that gives us subtle license to exclude and devalue anyone who is not brown-skinned. If we believe he saw what he earned through his trade as a carpenter as his private property, this gives us license to demean any more communal philosophies of wealth distribution. If we believe he led a chaste, single life, this gives us license to consider this way of life more holy than one that involves romantic and sexual involvement with others. The very fact that he is a he makes it far too easy for the church to consider women to be second-class citizens. You get the idea.

The problem with the quest for the historical Jesus, as one of my seminary professors said, is that we end up digging down a deep well, and when we finally get to the bottom we see our own smiling faces looking back up at us.

The fact of the matter is that there's a great deal we cannot know for sure about our Lord based upon any reliable resources available to us. And perhaps we're not meant to know.

Perhaps, with the historical Jesus being an enigma to us, it's actually easier for us to live into the very simple message that this Sunday invites us to contemplate.

This last Sunday before Advent is the Feast of Christ the King. It invites us to two very basic things. The first is the clear and certain realization that our King, the only true King, is Jesus the

Christ. And the second is how subjects of this King are called to behave.

If the historical Jesus is largely an unknown to us, that means that the King whom we follow is a mystery. We don't have a crystal clear picture of his appearance or character. I might add here that the lovely stations of the cross in our very own Sanctuary are a wonderful tool for contemplation of this mysterious Christ precisely because they don't show us faces but only more abstract images of the Passion. This kind of abstractions may actually make following Christ a bit easier for us.

Because the most important and probably most difficult step in pledging our eternal allegiance to the true King is dethroning all of the earthly kings we might be tempted to idolize and follow. I would suggest that this is an easier task if Christ is a mystery to us. We are less tempted to think that we know what exactly real kingship and real holiness look like and to attach those things to a mortal person or institution that will, at some point, prove to be limited and fallible.

Yes, it may at times seem frustrating that our true King dwells in light inaccessible, but if we fully accept that reality, we are not tempted to hand too much kingly power over to anyone or anything in the created realm. To put this concretely, no matter how we may feel about the winners and losers in our recent election, our contemplation of Christ the mysterious King is a constant reminder to not hang our eternal hope on any of them.

And a mysterious historical Jesus may also help us in the second act required of us as disciples and subjects of Christ the King.

Today's Gospel laid it out plain and simple. Those who belong to Christ's kingdom show prodigal mercy and generosity toward those who need it most. They are clear that the kingdom operates according to the principle of mercy above all other concerns. And Jesus is very specific about who these people are who are most in need of mercy. They are the unfed, the unhoused, the unclothed, the sick, the lonely, and the imprisoned.

Again, if we have too specific a picture in our minds of who the historical Jesus was, this gets unnecessarily complicated. I mean, since everyone knows that Jesus thought like a modern-day progressive we don't have to show mercy to someone who's in prison but has a totally different ideology, right? And certainly he's talking only about people around whom we are safe and comfortable, right???

Jesus didn't make that kind of distinction in the 25th chapter of Matthew, and I am certain that he would have if he'd meant to. We're told to show indiscriminate mercy, plain and simple. If someone shows up hungry, we feed them. If they show up naked, we clothe them. If they get thrown in prison, we visit them. And we can save all our questions about how and why this situation arose, and even most questions about our personal comfort and safety, for later, once the immediate need has been met.

This Sunday invites us to live into a paradox. Christ is our King, our only King, and every last ounce of our fealty belongs to him. And yet we cannot really know our King. He is a mystery that even our deepest curiosity and devotion cannot fully penetrate.

But that is exactly the state in which we can thrive the most as his disciples. Precisely because we do not know exactly who he is and where he is to be found, we must assume that he can be found anywhere and everywhere. There is not a single person in whom he might not be dwelling, and therefore we had better show mercy and honor to absolutely everyone. There is not a single event or situation that falls utterly outside the scope of what might belong to his will and designs, and so we had better seek him in every moment.

On this Christ the King Sunday I invite you to renew your commitment to your King and mine. And be ok with not knowing exactly who this King historically is. Enjoy the mystery!