

The Jesus Of Our Convenience

INTRODUCTION:

We Americans like our choices, don't we? My wife and I have often heard foreign guests ask us: "Why do you have so many different kinds of toothpaste and cereal? How do you know which one to pick?" Do you remember the Burger King ditty that says: "Hold the pickles, hold the lettuce, special orders don't upset us ..."? It ends: "have it your way at Burger King."

Like I said, we like our choices and we've been hearing from Bill, Ken, and Abel a consistent question during Lent: "Who is Jesus to you?" That's the same question I want us to consider yet again today: "who is Jesus to you?" What is your choice, when it comes to your relationship with him?

As we allow the liturgical year to move us through the life of Christ, we're entering into Jerusalem for the last week of Jesus' life before his resurrection. He knows what's coming. Luke records that *When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.*¹ Until now, Jesus had repeatedly been saying things like *My hour has not yet come.*² But not any more. Now he speaks to his disciples and says *The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified ... What shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? For this purpose I have come to this hour.*³

John 12-17 is the bridge between his ministry on earth and the final work of the cross, the tomb, and the resurrection. The events of chapter 12 bring a kind of final focus to the tensions that have accompanied the Lord throughout this ministry.

SERIES OF CONTRASTS:

Contrast 1: The "Triumphal Entry":

Jesus' rather unorthodox entry into Jerusalem is interesting because of its dual meaning. The crowd's description of Jesus and their use of Biblical imagery is incredibly accurate in its description of Jesus. One wonders how the crowds could fail to understand who Jesus really is! You read this story or heard about it enough times that I don't need to go over it in detail. Let me give you just the highlights:

- It's just before Passover, the yearly celebration of Israel's deliverance from captivity in Egypt. So deliverance – from Rome, from poverty, from hunger, from oppression – is very much on the mind of those in Jerusalem at this time of year.

¹ Luk 9.51

² Joh 2.4

³ Joh 12.23-24, 27

- There's a "messianic" spirit in the air. They're calling out "Save us" – hosanna! They refer to Jesus as "the son of David", referring to the family from which God had said the messiah would come. When we think "messianic," we don't really get the power behind that idea for a Jew of Jesus' day. It's like the excitement before a really big game, but what's at stake here is not the reputation of your favorite college team, but the future of your entire nation, religion, and race.
- We might even say that there's a revolutionary spirit in the air. They're calling Jesus "the king of Israel". This was the very idea that made Herod so upset when Jesus was born. These kinds of statements are treason to the Roman government, so to be shouting them out in public takes some measure of courage and excitement.
- Let's note that there's pretty good reason for their excitement. Go back to vs 9: *When the large crowd ... learned that Jesus was there, they came, not only on account of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.*⁴

Of course, as we all know, this is virtually the same city that will be calling for his crucifixion in just a few days. They'll be demanding that Jesus be traded for a murderous terrorist.

The crowds wanted what they wanted. They were largely motivated by the spectacle: *The reason why the crowd went to meet him was that they heard he had raised Lazarus from the dead. And in vs 37, we read that Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him.*⁵

Which begs the question: what do we want from Jesus? Some think that being a Christian means that God will improve their:

- wealth,
- health,
- marriage,
- job.

That's exactly how this crowd was thinking! They had expectations of what life would be like if they followed him. He was supposed to be their gravy train, their favorite team, the easy out. They apparently weren't listening when Jesus said *If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.*⁶

Contrast 2: Mary And Judas:

Let's look at another contrast. Earlier in this chapter, Mary anoints Jesus' feet with expensive perfume and then wipes them clean with her hair. Judas protests that this is a

⁴ Joh 12.9–11

⁵ Joh 12.18, 37

⁶ Luk 14.26–27

rather extravagant expense (5): *Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?*⁷

On the face of the matter, one would agree! Granted that Martha and Mary both love Jesus very much. Hadn't Jesus just done them an incredible favor? Lazarus wouldn't have been present at that meal, had Jesus not intervened and raised him from the dead. So on one level, we can understand the emotions involved in this act.

But Judas is right too. 300 denarii would be considered a laborer's wage for over 80% of an entire working year – maybe \$20k+ in our currency! Couldn't Mary have found a more economically sensitive way to show her affection and thanks? We can almost imagine Judas looking at Jesus, smugly waiting for the rebuke.

I imagine that no one expects Jesus' response: *Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me.*⁸

Again, like the crowds, there's more going on here than meets the eye. First note that this may be the same woman, who was saved from the crowds, when they accused her of being caught in adultery. And remember, this is the same woman whose brother had been dead, not "merely dead, but really and sincerely dead."

She had an intense sense of her humble position relative to Jesus' lofty one.⁹ Her act embodies the words from that old hymn: *Were the whole realm of nature mine, That were a present far too small; Love so amazing, so divine, Demands my soul, my life, my all.*¹⁰

On the other hand, Judas is a petty thief, taking money out of the common purse the disciples kept for basic needs. He's only pretending to be concerned about the poor. It's interesting to note that it's right after this event that Judas *went to the chief priests.*¹¹

What's in his heart? Is he embarrassed by Jesus? Or fed up with his strangeness? Trying to save Jesus from himself? Who knows for sure? But we do know this: Judas couldn't bear the fact that Jesus was not functioning according to plan! This wasn't what he expected! And so he turns his back on the Savior.

Contrast 3: Jewish Authorities:

One more. In vs 42: *Many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.*¹²

⁷ Joh 12.5

⁸ Joh 12.7–8

⁹ See Joh 11.2, Luk 7.38, and Mat 26.6-16.

¹⁰ "When I Survey The Wondrous Cross", Isaac Watts

¹¹ Mat 26.14–15

¹² Joh 12.42–43

Nicodemus was an example of this in John 3, coming to Jesus by night, so that he wouldn't get caught. What an indictment of their character! They believe, but they don't believe really. They hear the power of his words, see the power of his works, they understand that this really is the chosen one who would crush the head of the serpent – but they fear their colleagues more than they fear God.

Again, my mind is drawn to our own expectations of what following the Lord would be like. Seeing Jesus as a theologian, or a teacher of some skill – that's acceptable to these leaders and authorities. But loss of position and respect, loss of comfortable surroundings and authority – that's too much to ask!

OBSERVATIONS / APPLICATIONS:

There are many different motives at play in chapter 12.

- Ignorance is one element, particularly among the crowds. And it's at least partially purposeful ignorance. *Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him.*¹³
- In the case of Judas, it's personal gain that motivates him. Perhaps he is also ashamed of Jesus, embarrassed by fact that Jesus keeps offending the leaders and authorities.
- With the case of some among the authorities, fear plays a very large part.

But in each case, what's happening is that those who are dealing with Jesus are trying to deal with him on their terms, according to their definitions, by their rules. And Jesus has the very annoying habit of never allowing others to define him, of functioning on the Father's terms, and only acknowledging his own rules of conduct and purpose.

The people in Joh 12 had never heard of Burger King, but they certainly understood what it meant to have it their way. They called him their king. They went to him for healing. They loved to see him embarrass the Pharisees. They went to him for bread. They thought that maybe he could be the savior of their nation. They had high hopes and great expectations.

They were ready to follow him if he was the type of leader to which they were accustomed. But Jesus refused to conform to those expectations. **He would not be the Jesus of their convenience.**

Jesus captures the kernel of the problem in vs 20, when he speaks of his own death and the necessary attribute of one who follows him:

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If

¹³ Joh 12.37

*anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.*¹⁴

When Jesus says “follow me” this close to his crucifixion, what do **you** think he means?

- Mary showed that kind of service, didn't she? Are you more like Mary, willing to humble yourself? Are you like Mary, whose reaction to Jesus is to be completely fixed on honoring and loving Him?
- Or more like Judas? “Let me tell you what you should have done!” – while at the same time hiding his own wickedness from others, from God, from ourselves?
- Like the crowds, schizoid, fascinated by certain aspects, but in no way interested in fully engaging with Jesus?
- Are you like the authorities, you believe, but fear keeps you from being fully committed?

And so I ask again, who is Jesus to you? There is one theme that binds all of the events of chapter 12 together. Judas, the crowds, the leaders: they all thought that Jesus was less than he should have been. But actually, he was far more than they could imagine. Not King of the Jews – King of the Universe! Not the Savior of Israel – Savior of Mankind! Not the potential leader of a small mob in Jerusalem – but the sovereign general over all the hosts of heaven!

Just like the Jews of that day, we are convinced that we have these lives of ours – our sports teams, personal hobbies, business occupations, debt, marriages, children, school – and that our challenge is to find ways to fit Jesus into these things. But we have it exactly backwards and I can promise you that Jesus will disappoint you. He has this very annoying habit of never allowing others to define him, of functioning on the Father's terms, and only acknowledging his own rules of conduct and purpose.

Mary had it right: Jesus is everything and our lives are to fit into his scheme and plan – not the other way 'round. Maybe you're here today and have never committed your life to Jesus. You may have committed Jesus into your life, but never subordinated your life to him. The message of Easter will mean nothing, if the message of Palm Sunday doesn't come through first. It's time for you – and for me – to give up all our expectations. If we do, we'll find that Jesus can exceed them by far more than we can ask, or even think.

John 12: The Jesus Of Our Convenience

1. The End Of The Beginning

1.1. *Jesus' hour has come (23-27) and he has set his face to go to Jerusalem (Luke 9.51).*

¹⁴ Joh 12.23-26

- 1.2. Chapters 12-17 bridge the time of Jesus' ministry on earth and the final work of cross, tomb, resurrection.
- 1.3. Chapter 12 brings focus and clarity to the on-going tension throughout his ministry.
2. Series Of Contrasts
 - 2.1. "Triumphal Entry"
 - 2.1.1. Passover season speaks of "deliverance" (1, 12). "Hosanna" and "Son of David" are messianic phrases (13, Matthew 21.9). "King of Israel" is revolutionary language (13, 15).
 - 2.1.2. But the crowd is fickle (18, 37). He didn't meet their expectations. What do we expect from Jesus (Luke 14.26-27)?
 - 2.2. Mary & Judas
 - 2.2.1. Mary anoints Jesus' feet with **very** expensive ointment. Judas is (seemingly) concerned for the poor (1-8).
 - 2.2.2. Mary is fixed on one thing: Jesus is my savior, master, and life-giver. Judas is fixed on one thing: Jesus is failing to meet my expectations (see Matthew 26.14-15).
 - 2.3. Jewish Authorities
 - 2.3.1. Many believed, but loved the glory of men more than the glory that comes from God (42-43).
 - 2.3.2. Motivated by fear of man (consider also Nicodemus (Joh 3.2 – under the cover of darkness)).
3. Observations / Applications
 - 3.1. (Purposeful) ignorance – the crowds (37)? Personal gain – Judas? Fear – the Jewish authorities?
 - 3.2. These all thought that Jesus was less than He should have been. The truth is that He's far more than they/we ever imagined.
 - 3.3. Do we try to fit Christ Jesus into our lives as may be convenient? Or do we fit our lives into Him?
4. Consider Philippians 2.5-11.