

Sermon: October 4, 2009

Scripture: Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12

Title: The Real Work of Christ

I wonder how many of us here this morning have heard of THE QUEST FOR THE HISTORICAL JESUS?

This is an Historical Movement, mostly within the Church, that has been attempting to piece together all the information, all the data, all the evidence that will give us a picture of Jesus, the real live historical figure who lived and died about 2000 years ago. This QUEST began in the late 1800's with the writings of men like Herman Reimarus, Gotthold Lessing, David Strauss, H. J. Holzmann, Ernest Renan, Alfred Loisy and William Wrede. These theologians began looking at the picture of Jesus that one gets in the pages of scripture and concluded that Jesus saw himself as the Messiah, but failed in that task. And that after his death, his followers wrote fictional gospels to promote their own beliefs. Strauss taught that it would be impossible to write a biography of Jesus because the gospels only contain unconnected fragments of his life.

It was during this period (1800 to 1930) that two important world events happened. The first was the demise of slavery as an institution of society. Beginning about 1840 and continuing to about 1870, the American public soundly rejected slavery as a God given institution. This caused a spiritual crisis in many Christians because they came to understand that the Bible accepted what was to them a morally indefensible practice. It was one cog in the wheel of weakening the belief that the Bible was inerrant.

A second historical event was the publication of Darwin's ORIGIN OF THE SPECIES in 1859. This book had no direct influence on the search for the historical Jesus, but its suggestion that life as we know it today came about through a process of evolution, convinced many believers that the creation stories in scripture might not be actual history. Once a believer questioned some of the stories in Scripture, they could then move on to ask crucial questions about the historical Jesus.

This first wave of theological inquiry into the Historical Authenticity of Jesus came to an end with the writings of Albert Schweitzer. In 1906 he published his book: THE QUEST OF THE HISTORICAL JESUS. In that work, Schweitzer suggested that all of these doubting Theologians were like men who looked into a well and saw reflections of their own selves; their Jesus ended up being almost a copy of themselves. His conclusion was that Jesus will forever remain a mystery and a

stranger to humanity. Almost single-handedly Schweitzer put an end to this first wave of doubting Thomases.

Schweitzer was supported by the highly influential German Theologian, Rudolf Bultmann. He suggested that the early Christian Community was not interested in creating biographies of Jesus; they were motivated by the need to create a theology of faith in Christ. He concluded that the “Christ who is preached is not the historical Jesus, but the Christ of Faith.

Schweitzer died in 1965 and Bultmann died in 1978, but they lived long enough to see the whole question of the Historical Jesus opened up again. In 1953 a German Theologian, Ernst Kasemann suggested in his lectures and in his writings that it will never be possible to write a modern style biography of Jesus. But, he wrote there had to be a “continuity” between the Christ of History and the Christ of Faith. And he suggested that when you move outside the pages of Scripture as we know it and study other writings, some of which the early Church had rejected as not being orthodox, you can gain a better picture of the Historical Jesus. Kasemann was followed in the mid 1900”s by Gunthur Bornkamm who treated the miracles of Jesus as inventions of the early Church, without historical foundation. He taught that the Disciples did not view Jesus as The Messiah; that idea was a creation of the early Christian movement. But by 1980 this challenge to Jesus History and to Jesus Faith had fizzled out.

However, by the middle of the 1980”s a new movement had appeared. Theologians from all over the world, including from every major denomination including Roman Catholicism began a study which became known as the JESUS SEMINAR. The JESUS SEMINAR crowd had no interest in trying to discredit Jesus, or prove that the scriptures were wrong. Rather they sought to understand the social and historical times in which Jesus lived and preached. They believed that if they could understand the culture in which Jesus taught, then they could capture the essence of Jesus himself. Outstanding scholars such as Marcus Borg, Bruce Chilton, Dominic Crossan, Burton Mack, John Meier, E.P. Sanders and Geza Vermes have all contributed to the search for the Historical Jesus.

The important thing to remember about this third wave of Jesus study is that there has been no attempt to disprove Jesus, either as a man or as the Son of God. Rather there has been a concerted attempt to understand Jesus in light of the Jewish tradition from which he came and the faith tradition that emerged after his death and resurrection. And that brings us to our passage in Hebrews.

John P. Burgess, professor of Systematic Theology at Pittsburg Theological Seminary says that the writer of Hebrews is not so much interested in the historical events of Jesus’ life, as he is the Faith journey that Jesus instituted

among his followers. To attempt to place Jesus within the time frame of one lifespan is to have a concept of history that is too narrow.

***Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.... (Heb. 1:1-4)***

Let those words seep into your soul. .... God spoke to our ancestors in many ways..... of course God did!

God has always been in the business of communicating with his creation. And we humans are the high point of that creation. God is a communicating God. It was true long ago, and it is true in these last days. Once through Prophets... then through His Son.

Now we might argue with the last part of that. His Son? There are folks today who reject that Jesus of Nazareth ever was God's Son. A really good man, perhaps. And exceptional prophet, perhaps. Maybe even a Saint or an Angel, perhaps. The author of the Hebrews gives us a more detailed description of what it means to be the Son of God. The Son of God is the heir of God. The Son is the next in line, the one who reflects the glory of the father. But even here the author to the Hebrews goes one step further. Jesus is not just a reflection of God. Jesus is an exact imprint of God's very being.

When the writers of the Hebrew Scriptures wanted to explain how mankind came into being, the only way they could describe it was to say that God made man in His own image. All of the spiritual dimensions that are contained in the Godhead are contained in mankind. With one exception: We have rebelled against that Godhead. It's called Sin.

But when describing Jesus, the writer of Hebrews says that he is the exact imprint of God's very being.

Forget about attempting to find the historical Jesus. Look for the Spiritual Jesus! Discover the Jesus who puts us in touch with the Creator, because that Jesus is a carbon copy of the Godhead. Remember the line from Jesus: He who has seen me has seen the Father. Doesn't that make more sense now?

But our writer goes one step further: ***he sustains all things by his powerful word.***

John understood this. He began his Gospel: ***In the beginning was the Word, and the word was with God, and the Word was God...(John 1:1)***

So, now it is not just a thing of looking like God, or reflecting God's Glory... Now it is a matter of speaking with one tongue. When Jesus speaks, God Speaks. When God speaks, Jesus Speaks. The two are one, and the power of their words is unmatched.

Forget about discovering the Historical Jesus. When we are consumed with the Quest for the Historical Jesus, we are attempting to restrict and confine Jesus to Human time frames. And our human time frame is so restricted and confined simply because we are not God. We are God's creatures.

There is something else that the writer of Hebrews wants his readers to know.

***When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs....***

Jesus did something for us. Jesus came to earth to perform a function that we humans needed to have done. It reads: "He had made purification for sins..." Now, you and I, living in the year 2009 might have problems with this phrase, but the Hebrew people scattered over the known world would know immediately what the writer was saying. Once a year the High Priest entered into the Holy of Holies and made a sacrifice for the sins of God's People. And each year it was repeated because evidently, it did not make any difference in the lives of God's People. They continued to live in rebellion to God, and so, each year the High Priest entered into the Holy of Holies, where no other human was allowed to enter, lest he die... and there the High Priest pled for the forgiveness of the people's sins. All year long, the people had come and brought sacrifices to offer up at the temple, hoping that their unblemished lamb or their first bushel of grain might satisfy God. And it never worked! Even the unblemished Bull that the High Priest sacrificed in the Holy of Holies did not do the trick. Then along comes Jesus. Jesus understood the futility of those sacrifices, and Jesus knew what would be required of him. So, Jesus became the sacrifice.... For the purification of sins....

Does this mean that we no longer sin? Of course not! But it does mean that we do not have to live as rejected sinners. Oh, sinners we are, but in the eyes of God, we have been redeemed through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. So, now when we claim a faith in Jesus, we are claiming the redemption, the purification that Christ performed for us. It is almost too magnificent to comprehend.

And we believe that Jesus ascended into Heaven and sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty. Christ's reward is that he is once again united with The Godhead.

Can't you see? We are talking here of things that are outside of time and space. Our History does not fit. Our time frame does not fit. Our understanding of how things are cannot match the mind of God.

Some skeptics will ask: Why would God do this? For what purpose would God allow his Only Son to be subjected to the whims of human sinfulness? To allow his son to become a human. To allow his son to be subject to the frailties of human existence. To allow his son to suffer human death. It almost seems inhuman!

But when you stop to think about it, what would the life of Christ do for us if he had simply come down for a short time and then went back to be with his father? It would have been like a short visit in a third world country would be for us. We leave the comfort of the USA and go live in Gahna for a while. Perhaps we do some missionary work. Help drill wells for villages. Work in a hospital clinic. Teach in a native school. Train women to open their own businesses. All of these things are good. But, when the time is up, we come back to our homes, patting ourselves on the back and giving nice talks to Churches about the challenges in third world countries.

No, Jesus came with a purpose. He came to offer himself as the perfect sacrifice. He came to die. And the author of Hebrews says that "by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone." Could you believe in a God who scurried back to his safe place in the heavens when things got tough down here? Think about the pantheon of Gods that the Romans and the Greeks believed in. They were mythical beings who had human characteristics, but when things got tough, they scurried back up Mt. Olympus to safety. They aren't Gods. They are imaginary illusions and they have no power in heaven or on earth.

In contrast to this, we have a god who sends his Son into the world, so that the world through Him might be saved. And to complete this saving act, Jesus experienced the depth of what we humans face... human physical death. And the revelation of Easter Morning is that Death could not confine Him. He rose from the dead and ascended into heaven.

And here is the clincher. This One who came, who died and who rose again becomes the avenue by which we are made right with God. The Bible calls this: SANCTIFICATION. The one who sanctifies (Jesus) and the ones sanctified (you and me) are all children of the one Father. And Jesus is not afraid to call us brothers and sisters.

So, where is this Historical Jesus? Why should we spend time and energy trying to prove his existence, or to set him in some historical context? That's not where Jesus is. Jesus is in the faith journey of each of us who has discovered the Grace of God at work in our lives. This Jesus who did something so long ago that has ramifications for us 2000 years later and, by God's Grace, will have an impact on generations who live 2000 years after us. You see, what we are talking about is Salvation History, and Jesus the Christ is the one thread that runs through it all. Amen.

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