

**Sermon Notes – March 25, 2018**  
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**“Jesus”**

Over my years as an educator at St. Paul’s Hospital I had a number of students who came from more conservative churches such as conservative Mennonite, the Church of God, the Covenant church and others. Each day our class spent some time in spiritual reflection with students taking turns leading this reflection from their own tradition. One thing that distinguished these conservative Christians from others was the way they would pray. Always they began with the phrase, “Jesus, I just want to ...” “Jesus, I just want to say how good it is to be together.” “Jesus, I just want to thank you for the sun shining this morning.” “Jesus, I just want to pray for Mrs. Smith on the surgery ward.”

It was a peculiar phrase, yet it reflected their belief that Jesus was as close as a personal friend and that he could be talked with as one might talk to a neighbour over the fence. It is a reflection of their churches encouragement to have a *personal* relationship with Jesus. I have envied these folks. I have wanted to have intimate conversations with Jesus. I have wanted to experience him like a friend or brother. But, I do not.

My own faith journey began on my way to school as I took a short cut through the Anglican church yard. I had a sense that God was very close. God reminded me of my parents who cared for me and loved me. Each day, as I walked through that church yard, I would pray to God. I would pray for my parents, for my dog, for God’s help to get me through math class. The night of my father’s death I remember standing on the front step of our home, looking to the sky, and praying to God. My father did not live;

but regardless; I felt God's deep love for me. By contrast, what I knew about Jesus were stories – stories told in Sunday school and found in my Children's Bible. My **relationship** was with God. Even in seminary I was more interested in "theology – the study of God," than "Christology – the study of Jesus."

There was one exception. In a course on the Gospel of John I was introduced to the writing of a German scholar named Rudolph Bultmann. Bultmann contributed two very important ideas that have shaped my relationship with Jesus ever since. In the first idea Bultmann described the difference between two German words – *historie* and *geschichte*. According to Bultmann, (show slides on these words) *historie* refers to facts and dates and to historical events that can be verified by independent sources. *Geschichte* on the other hand is that version of history that is told in stories – stories about people, about their relationships, about how they live their lives. Bultmann concluded that we know very little about the *historie* of Jesus – there is not much verifiable data. We know that the winter solstice was used to date his birth and the Jewish Passover to date his death – but neither with any accuracy. There is only one source outside of the Bible that confirms that Jesus even lived. An historian named Josephus writing around the year 93 made a one paragraph notation in his book entitled *Jewish Antiquities*: (show slide of quote)

About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. And when, upon the accusation of the principal men among us, Pilate had condemned him to a cross, those who had first came to love him

did not cease. And the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared.

We know far more about Jesus' geschichte – stories of him meeting people, eating with them, sailing, fishing, climbing a mountain; stories about him healing, teaching, praying, dying. As a result, Bultmann's second insight is his distinction (**show slide on Jesus><Christ**) between what he calls "the Jesus of history" and "the Christ of faith". Despite the efforts of many scholars we have limited knowledge about the Jesus of history: but, we have wonderful stories, inspiring stories, legendary stories about the Christ. Bultmann declares that (**show slide died >< rose**) Jesus died on the cross but Christ rose from the grave. Christ who still inspires us and causes love to rise up within us.

In this morning's first scripture Jesus poses a question to his disciples: "Who do you say that I am?" Peter confesses that Jesus is the Christ, the messiah, the son of the living God. This meant different things to the Jews as we see in this morning's Palm Sunday scripture. To the disciples he was their friend and rabbi and when he asked for a donkey to ride into Jerusalem they got him one without question. The crowds viewed him as a king in-waiting, a political leader, a rebel, an insurgent who could help them overthrow Rome. The religious leaders saw him as a trouble maker and slanderer; as dangerous man who might provoke a brutal response from the Romans. Within days of the Palm Sunday parade there were those who saw Jesus as a loser, as a jester, as someone worthy of execution.

"Who do you say that I am?" That ancient question is still relevant for us today. As I have testified, I have come to believe that God is the source

and power of love. I have ventured that God is not a being in charge of the world, not a noun, but rather a verb, specifically the power of love. I have come to understand and often refer to God as the “God-power”. The more I embrace God as “The verb” the more I understand that “Jesus is the noun”. “Who do you say that I am?” - you are the Power of Love in human flesh!

Jesus’ life reveals how love can work in the world. His love is not of the romantic variety or even the love we have for family. His was a gritty, life-challenging, life-changing love. His was love of the neighbour, love of the stranger, love of the leper, love of the grieving, love of the worried, love of the extortionist, love of the adulterer, love of the delinquent, love of the doubter, love of the enemy. This embodiment of the power-of-love, is the Christ that continues to live among us, that inspires my life and calls me forward beyond relentless self-interest.

One summer a student arrived in my class, I’ll call him Ben. Ben told us of how he had been raised with a childhood understanding of Jesus. He had sat through Sunday school lessons and had learned a few Bible stories but as soon as adolescence arrived he began a long journey away from anything Christian. Ben had hopes and completed university; he liked drama and music and dabbled in the arts. But Ben was unsettled. He could not reconcile his inner yearnings and could not find anyone to truly love him. Out of despair he ended up on the steps of a Buddhist monastery in New England. He settled in. The daily regime of prayer, chanting and manual labour quieted his mind and he felt a peace he had not previously known.

When Ben arrived in my class he was training to be an Anglican priest. I asked Ben why, after three years in the Buddhist monastery he

had decided to leave and pursue Christian ministry. Ben simply responded, “Jesus.” I was curious. Ben said that while he was in the monastery he came across a Bible and started to read it anew. He read how he lived love into the world. Ben said that he came to the realization that the life he was living – even though it was filled with much inward peace – took him out of the world instead of into it. Ben saw in Jesus a call to radical engagement with others, a call to love. Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah that drew Ben back into the world.

As I conclude this series on churchy words it is not accidental that we stop on Palm Sunday. I have suggested that sin is the relentless self-interest that can hamper every life by turning us away from our neighbour. Salvation is that which saves us from acts of self-interest by inspiring us to act for others. On Palm Sunday the crowds shout their conflicting messages and the specter of the crucifixion looms as we weave our way towards the cross. We are left with the question, “Who do you say that I am?” For me Jesus is the Christ, the Saviour, whose mystical presence reaches across the centuries and leads me into a life of love for, and with, others. Praise to you, O Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.