

THE PEOPLE ARE DIVIDED
John 7:40-53

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Jesus. Who was He? Who is He? Can anybody born that long ago be anything more than just a memory? More than history? Can we even say with certainty that there ever was a Jesus?

In the words of Calvin Miller, not all who examine the evidence will say with the Centurion at the foot of the cross, “Surely this was the Son of God.” Yet many of us have said that. And hardly anyone tries to escape the fact that there once was a man named Jesus.

The record seems clear. Historically the world has voted: there was a Jesus. A miracle worker. A story teller. A weaver of parables. One to make the lame leap.

John tells us that while the Bible admits to 33 recorded miracles, that Jesus did so many more things that if we really wrote them all down, one by one, the world itself would not be able to contain the books that would be written.

Think of all the names in the Scripture for Jesus. Why, in the Book of John, alone, He’s called the creating Word, the Life, the Light, the Glory of God, one full of grace, and one who makes the Father known. He’s the Only begotten of the Father, the Water of Life, the Bread of Life, the Door, the Door of the Sheepfold, the Resurrection and the Life, the Way, the Truth.

In Matthew and Luke we trace His genealogy back to Jewish patriarchs. The genealogies are careful to show that He was related to King David – baptized by a kinsman named John bar Zechariah – John the Baptist, son of Zechariah – at the outset of his brief three years of ministry. Of all the things He taught, hardly anything was any more fascinating than that of His Second Coming. This great and terrible day of the Lord has haunted Christians of every era of time.

Listen to the words of the “Battle Hymn of The Republic” of the calling of the coming, cosmic event:

Mine eyes have seen the glory
of the coming of the Lord:
He is trampling out the vintage
where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He has loosed the fateful lightening
of His terrible, swift sword:
His truth is marching on.

I have seen Him in the watch-fires
of a hundred circling camps;
They have builded Him an altar
in the evening dews and damps;
I can read His righteous sentence
by the dim and flaring lamps.
His day is marching on.

Jesus, Himself, began His ministry with that programmatic sermon in Nazareth, his hometown. He stands up in the synagogue and reads the ancient scroll of Isaiah. He reads these words:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord.”

Then, after Jesus had read this passage, He said – don’t miss it: “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” Those of Nazareth who knew Him quite well were not hasty to believe that He was the Messiah. In fact, a storm of protest broke out over who Jesus really was.

“And they said, ‘Is this not Joseph’s son?’ And He said to them, ‘You will surely say this proverb to me, Physician, heal yourself. What we have heard done in Capernaum, do also here in your country.’ And then He said, “Surely, I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own country.

“Then all those in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath and rose up and thrust him out of the city. They led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw Him down over the cliff. Then passing through the midst of them, He went His way.”

The disastrous crush of public opinion begins with Jesus’ very first sermon in his hometown. They all see Jesus somewhat differently. No two people know quite the same things about Him, or have experienced Him in exactly the same way.

A children’s Christmas Carol speaks volumes about a highly individualistic vision of Jesus.

Some children see Him bronzed and brown,
The Lord of Heaven, to earth come down.
Some children see Him lily white,
The Baby Jesus born this night.

Some see Him as a judge, coming to scourge the nations. Others see Him as the lover of children. Scholars tend to see Him in scholarly ways, and poets see Him more poetically. Preachers see Him as a preacher, and teachers as a teacher. Carpenters like remembering that He was one of them.

Not hardly to our surprise, but tragically, too often the Jesus we worship is merely a reflection of our own creation.

Who is this Jesus and what does He mean? The Good News really means that God became one of us in Jesus Christ. He no longer is separate in the heavens. He is Emmanuel – God with us. Jesus Christ ended the remoteness of God by coming to earth as a man himself. He is one of us. We don't have to be afraid of God; we can have peace with God. We've been reconciled to God. The austere God who spoke to the Old Testament heroes in thunder and lightning is now real and touchable, as real and touchable as human flesh and blood can make Him.

Charles Wesley wrote the glory of God coming to us in human form in his powerful Christmas message:

Hark! the herald angels sing,
“Glory to the newborn King;
Peace on earth and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled!”
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
Hail the Incarnate Trinity!
Pleased as man with men to dwell.
Jesus, our Immanuel.

That's who he is. Emmanuel -- God with us.

Bultmann, the scholar, told us that the disciples loved Jesus so much they “wrote Him up as more spectacular than He really was.” The New Testament, taught Bultmann, is not the cold, calculating biography of researchers. Rather, it is the testimony of believers, giving their highly privatized accounts of Jesus.

I want you stand this morning on the margin of John 7. I want to ask you the question: What do you think of this rabbi?

Some thought him a wine-bibber. They called him a drunk, in today's terms.

Get rid of that oil painting image of Jesus. You'll never see Him like the Jesus in the text. Get rid of that glowing halo around His head. Get rid of that flat personality that only allows Him to be one dimensional – someone who strides through life as a calm character among a cast of flustered extras, dispensing wisdom in flat, measured tones. Get rid of that image of Jesus.

He's exciting. People have sat for three days straight, without food, to hear Him teach. Jesus was sometimes moved with compassion – sometimes described as being filled with pity. Other times, He was one who blasts anger from his nostrils, one who grieves over an unreceptive city, one who cries out with anguish at Gethsemane, one who cries in front of his disciples. People crowd to touch but the hem of his garment. A guy who accepted anybody's invitation to dinner: the rich, the lepers, the prostitutes. He'd go and dine with them. Some even said He had a devil.

Sometimes He was tired and sometimes He was lonely. Sometimes He was shouting at the weather, like it was an unruly child. Well, it did obey His voice.

As we approach the text of John 7, we remember from John 5 that they'd already tried to kill Jesus. He needed to stay around Galilee and away from Jerusalem because the Jews were waiting to end His life. They'd had enough of this new teaching. They'd had enough of the threat to the social order they enjoyed. They'd had enough of this nonsense that bordered on blasphemy – claiming to have a special relationship with God. They'd had enough of His growing popularity, as the people went to follow Him.

It was that time of year when the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles was near. The Feast of Booths. Each family was to construct its own temporary shelter of branches and live therein for the period of the feast. It typified the years of wandering in the desert before the people entered the Promised Land. The feast was joyful in character. It was a time of thanksgiving for the harvest that marked the transition from nomadic poverty to stable affluence in their own land. It was one of the three big feasts, at which attendance was required for all Jewish men.

Because the crowd would be great and the pilgrims would be from everywhere, far and wide, his brothers saw it as an excellent opportunity for Jesus to acquire some publicity. They advised Him to join the crowds, so that He might enhance His reputation and gain even more followers. Their suggestion was sarcastic, more so than serious. They, themselves, didn't believe in Him.

Jesus asserted He was not living by the chance of casual opportunity, but by a divine calendar, predetermined by the Father. For this reason, the world did not understand His action. Jesus tells them it's not the right time – not so much meaning that the clock wasn't in the right position, but rather it wasn't the time appointed by the Father. He wasn't so much worried about the *chronos* as he was the *kairos*. It wasn't the chronological time, but the divine time.

Jesus makes his secret departure for Jerusalem. He tells His brothers to go ahead – He's not going. But once they are out of sight, He makes His own secret approach, on His own terms, on His own time to the city of Jerusalem.

There was much whispering in the crowd. Listen to them as they whisper. Some were saying He was a good man, and others were whispering, No, no, He deceives many. Others were saying that He might even be the Christ. But it was all a secret grumbling, a whisper. No one had the courage to speak openly about Him because the authorities were looking for Him, to take His life.

He takes them by surprise. While they're whispering about where He might be and who He might be, Jesus stands openly in the temple and begins to teach. They marveled. He'd never been to Jerusalem University. How can He teach? He's never had an education.

Jesus had waited until the feast was half completed. Even as the anticipation was reaching a higher intensity, He appeared in the midst of the scene. Jesus had said to them do not worry about His level of education. He had the words of God on His lips. He warned them that if they chose to do God's will, they would understand what He was teaching. Jesus admitted that Moses had given the Law, but they were not keeping it. And now they were trying to kill Him. The multitude answered that He must have a demon. "Who on earth is trying to kill you?"

Jesus taught on. The people were all the more confused. How is it that Jesus is having conflict with the religious authorities? And why isn't He being censored if He's such a threat to the nation?

The authorities dared not promptly arrest Him, lest they have a riot on their hands. If they acted hastily, they might have an uprising among the people that would most assuredly bring action from the Romans.

"But this teacher can't be the Christ," they mumbled to themselves. "We don't know where the Christ will come from, but we know where this Jesus is from." Some are saying they knew His parents, they knew His neighborhood, they knew His family.

"So you know me, and you know where I'm from, do you?" They were thinking about Mary and Joseph, and He was thinking about His divine origin from the Father and His commission from the Father. He had not undertaken His mission by his own volition. He had been sent.

They wanted to take Him. They wanted to seize Him. But they failed because – notice – the hour had not yet come (verse 30).

Many believed, saying "Even when the Messiah comes, he won't be able to perform more miracles than Jesus, will he?" They had seen the lame leap. They had seen the dark eyes shine forth with light. They had seen the multitude fed. No one was going to convince them that this Jesus was not the Messiah.

Even as Jesus continues to teach, divisions become all the more sure. Some – notice 7:40 – say that He's a prophet. Others were openly saying He was the Messiah. Some were saying He couldn't be the Messiah because the Messiah would never come from Galilee. Others were more certain that the Messiah must be a descendant from David. Therefore, he must be from Bethlehem, they reasoned – the village where David was.

Notice verse 43. Don't miss it. "So there arose a division in the multitude because of Him."

That's always true of Jesus. Whenever He teaches, whatever He has taught – there arises a division over the identity of the Messiah.

Who is Jesus? To the hurting, he is the great Physician. To the confused, he is the Light. To the lost, he is the Way. To the hungry, he is the Bread of Life. To the thirsty, he is the Water of Life. To the broken, he is the Balm in Gilead.

Who is Jesus? C. S. Lewis penned the words a long time ago, but they are still true today: **"A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said wouldn't be a great moral teacher, as some supposed. He'd be either a lunatic — on a level with a man who says he's a poached egg — or else he'd 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....But don't let us come up with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."**

How would the sacred historian have described Jesus? “In those days, one Jesus of Nazareth, a carpenter, began to preach, and gathered around Him certain ignorant fisher-folk, after the manner of His kind, but all the people of repute held aloof, and the chief priest, with most excellent diplomacy, and when this Jesus became troublesome, he induced the procurator to crucify him.”

We all know why God has taken the initiative in Jesus. It's to deliver us from our sins. We all have them, like it or not. Listen to the text: You shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins. The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost. Or, the saying is true and worthy of full acceptance that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Or, even still, we have seen and testify that the Father has sent His Son as the Savior of the world.

Jesus came to save us of our sin.

What are we going to make of this Savior? There is no question of what we can make of Him. It is entirely a question of what He intends to make of us. You must accept or reject the story. There is no in-between. What He has taught is different than the teaching of any other. One teaches, “This is the truth about the Universe. This is the way you ought to go,” but He says, “I am the Truth, and I am the Way, and the Life.” He says, “No man can reach absolute reality, except through Me. Try to retain your own life and you will be inevitably ruined. Give yourself away and you will be saved.” He says, “If you are ashamed of me, if, when you hear this call, you turn the other way, I also will look the other way when I come again as God without disguise.” In the words of C.S. Lewis, **“If anything whatever is keeping you from God and from Me, whatever it is, throw it away. If it is your eye, pull it out. If it is your hand, cut it off. If you put yourself first you will be last. Come to Me everyone who is carrying a heavy load, I will set that right. Your sins, all of them, are wiped out. I can do that. I am Re-birth, I am Life. Eat Me, drink Me, I am your Food. And finally, do not be afraid, I have overcome the whole Universe.”**

Yes, we have to decide. Just like every pilgrim in Jerusalem listening to the claims of Jesus and listening to the whisperings of the crowd – every one of them had to decide. You, too, are called upon today to make that decision. Some of you have already said that, indeed, He is the Christ. Others of you, well, let's be frank – you're just not sure. And it's an honest doubt.

Listen to the whisperings of the crowd. Some say He's a prophet. Others say He was a demon – what we might call a lunatic in our day. And still others see Him as simply a milquetoast, moral prophet who had some pretty good things to say.

But you have to choose. Are you going to let Jesus be who He claimed to be? Or, are you going to put Him in a nice, comfortable box created by your own desires and your own will?

What are we to make of this Jesus, this mysterious figure who comes and takes our hurts – the one who teaches, with no education but with utmost authority – this carpenter, reared outside of the philosophical circles, calling around himself disciples – one who gave a higher code of morals than the world had ever known before and proclaimed Himself the Messiah. He taught and performed miracles for just a few months, and then he was crucified, His disciples scattered and many put to death, His claims disputed, His resurrection denied and His followers persecuted. And

yet, from this beginning, His religion has spread until millions take His name with reverence upon their lips and thousands have been willing to die rather than surrender the faith which He put in their hearts. How shall we account for Him? “What do you think of Christ?” It is easier to believe Him divine than to explain in any other way what He said and did and was.

What about this Jesus? What do you think about Him?

It all comes to this. It doesn't really matter what the multitudes felt about Jesus in Jerusalem that ancient day. It doesn't really matter what the Pharisees were whispering or what the people were grumbling. It doesn't really matter what a few priests thought of His teachings. It doesn't really matter that the demons proclaimed Him to be the Holy One of God. Congregation, the opinions of the multitudes throughout the ages make no difference. Neither the conclusion of the wise sage, nor the conclusion of the most humble pilgrim makes any difference today. History, then and now, has always been divided over Jesus. He always brings division when He teaches. Some have eyes to see, and some have ears to hear. And some have hearts that believe. And others, though seeing, they do not see. And though hearing, they do not hear. And though they have hearts, they have hearts that are closed and cold to the workings and wonders of God.

No, the question that really matters today is simple. What have you concluded about Jesus? You have no responsibility for what the rich, young ruler thought. Nor is the conclusion of the Roman Centurion that, indeed, Jesus was the Son of God of really any importance at this moment. What matters is what you, yourself, think about Jesus.

It is the question of ultimate importance. It is the question of life or death. It is the question of hope or despair. It is the question of truth or lie. It is the question of ultimate importance.

Some of you here today have been wrestling with that question for a long time, and now is the day to have it settled – to come forward today and say publicly, whether child or adult, whether youth or a senior, “It's over. It's all over. I now proclaim Him to be the Holy One of God.”

Look at it again. John 7:43. “And there arose a division in the multitude because of Him.”

You can bet there was division that day. You can bet there is a division today. And I will bet you there will be a division tomorrow. But which side of the line are you on? Have you acknowledged Him as the Christ? Come and do so today.