

On the Campaign Trail with Jesus

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In this campaign season I often wonder what the conversations are like between the candidates and their close advisors when no one else is around. I imagine a candidate asking someone what the polls are saying or asking someone what the editorial writers in the various newspapers and blogs are saying about him or her today.

Today we have Jesus beginning with what sounds like a politician's request for a public opinion poll - "Who do people say that I am?" Today it might sound like "What are they saying about me on CNN? What's the word on the street?"

The answers all seem plausible and reasonable:

John the Baptist - Jesus' message does seem like a continuation of John's cry that the Kingdom of God is at hand.

Elijah - Perhaps Jesus is really the prophet who had never died, who had been carried away by a whirlwind and now had returned.

Some other prophet - Jesus was clearly doing prophetic things and perhaps God had raised one of the long-dead prophets to come back again.

Then Jesus makes it personal and direct, almost as if he is saying, "Enough about me, what do you think of me?" The translation we just heard has Jesus saying "Who do you say that I am?" But in the Greek it is much stronger and more emphatic. A more precise translation might be "But you - who do you say that I am?" You can almost see Jesus pointing his finger directly at each of the disciples and asking them "You - what about you? Who do you say that I am?"

This is another one of those times when we do well to insert ourselves right into the middle of the gospel narrative, to imagine that we are right there. Today you and I are meant to imagine Jesus doing the same thing to us, pointing a finger at us, even jabbing us gently with that finger and saying, "What about you? Who do you say that I am?" Who do we say he is? What more fundamental is there for a Christian?

In this passage, which for emphasis is sandwiched between two accounts of the restoration of sight to blind men, as if to suggest that the disciples - and by extension all of us - are blind too, Jesus presses for the answer that by now the disciples surely must be able to give.

And Peter does, indeed, give the right answer, which is kind of unusual for him; he usually gives the wrong answer, doesn't he? But he gets it right this time, but for the wrong reason. He says, "You are the Messiah" - that is to say the one sent from God. Now, we can infer from what follows that Peter had in mind the kind of messiah that would free the people of Israel from their Roman

oppressors. He had in mind a political and military leader who would rally the people and force the hated occupiers out at the end of a sword.

But almost as if Jesus has not heard Peter's answer, Jesus begins to speak of himself as rejected by the elders and of suffering and death.

At this point Peter steps into the role of campaign manager and takes Jesus aside and if we could overhear them we might hear Peter saying something like, "Listen, Jesus, you've got to quit this crazy talk about suffering and death. That's not what the messiah is all about. That's not what these people want to hear. We've done the focus groups and studied the polling and suffering just doesn't play very well with your base. You're tired and you're not thinking straight - maybe you need to take a few days off. If you keep talking like this, no one will come to your rallies anymore"

As he usually does, Peter here speaks for all of us. Who among us is comfortable with all Jesus' talk of suffering, or taking up a cross in order to follow him? Can't we follow him just as well by being nice to one another and by living moral, upright lives? And can't Jesus overthrow the things that oppress us and weigh heavily upon us the way Peter expected him to overthrow the Romans? Do I as your preacher this morning really have to remind you that it's difficult to be a follower of Christ - that it is costly to follow Christ - when I know it's not what you want to hear?

The answer for us is the same as it was for Peter. Jesus isn't operating by the rules of this world. He is not operating by human values and standards, even when those standards are all that is most noble. Jesus is calling us to something else, to something that transcends everything we know - to something harder.

In telling us who he really is and what will happen in Jerusalem, Jesus tells us what is also expected of us if we want truly to follow him:

- We must surrender our own wills to the will of God.
- We must put aside our own selfishness and empty ourselves to focus on the needs of others.
- We must suffer for others.
- We must love in a radical, unconditional way, becoming humble servants for others.

We hear this throughout the gospels and through the ages from countless Christian mystics who have spent their lives struggling to become closer and closer to God. If we can get past the sweet picture in our minds of Francis of Assisi with the birds and the animals, we can see it in his life, and the life of his friend Clare, both of whom left a life of power and wealth to surrender themselves completely for the poor.

The apostle Paul wrote in First Corinthians: "Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles." And so it is with us - the cross is a stumbling block and foolishness for us too, if we're honest about it. We would prefer to eliminate this ugly part of the gospel and focus our attention either on the sweetness and gentleness of Jesus or on the power of God to wipe away all our tears. Surely that's enough, isn't it?

Well, this morning I think Jesus is trying to tell us in this gospel that that limited image of the Christ and of our call to be his followers is not enough.

Think of the suffering and death of Jesus this way which I have borrowed from the book *Stalking the Divine* by Kristin Ohlson (Plume, 2004): Jesus is saying to you and to me:

"I will suffer to save you from your own limitations; I will give you an example of someone who chooses suffering to help others; and further, I will face the worst of what all of you will have to experience at some point in your life – betrayal, ridicule, pain, and death – and by doing so know you as well as any creator can. In a sense, he was saying: I will become you (page 206)."

By seeing Jesus' suffering and death in this way we can see how the stories of the Last Supper and the Crucifixion are really parts of the same story. In the Eucharist humanity is invited to share in the divine, and in the Crucifixion the divine becomes one with us. Let me repeat that: In the Eucharist humanity is invited to share in the divine, and in the Crucifixion the divine becomes one with us.

The cross of Jesus is high drama, but most of the time the crosses we could carry for Jesus would only take us away from something fleeting and temporary, like someone who once said to me "I couldn't give the homeless man in the subway station any money because I was afraid I would miss my train if I stopped to help him."

Rather than living our life in the present which is the world's way to live, Jesus is asking us to live our lives fully in the present but also with an eye toward the ultimate future of our lives – the life beyond this life.

Jesus never lost this focus in his life. His selfless life was always focused not on present pleasures but on ultimate realities, on lasting happiness. When we grasp this, it is possible for us to think of Jesus on the cross being happy in spite of being in unbearable pain. Imagine that: Jesus being happy while hanging on the cross.

Jesus asks us to make this distinction in our own lives – the distinction between a life of pleasure and a life of happiness. They are not the same thing. (For more on this read Aristotle's *The Nicomachean Ethics*.) The suffering of Jesus and his insistence that to follow him is to take up our cross brings this distinction and all its implications into sharp relief.

The ramifications of this message for the choices we make in life are clear, but challenging and uncomfortable. They have an impact on nearly every choice we make. They have an impact on how we see ourselves in relation to those around us and to our God.

The world seductively calls us to an easy way of pleasure.

Jesus lovingly beckons us to a harder, but far better way of happiness.

Which shall we choose?