



“The Way, The Truth, and The Life”

Psalm 23; John 10:11-18

“ . . . the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father” “He will come again in glory . . . “ We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins”

from the Nicene Creed

Well . . . no, it is not Palm Sunday! But grasping the full weight of Jesus’ words, “I am the way, the, truth, and the life,” requires that we realize he utters them in the days between Palm Sunday and Good Friday. Specifically, as part of a long discourse to his disciples on the eve of his crucifixion, for they are surely as confused as ever. Who is this man that we have been following for two years or more, they ask.

Who is Jesus?

This is the central question of John’s Gospel. It is the question to which all the “I am” statements drive us. It was the question for Jerusalem 2,000 years ago and it is the question for our world still. But it is a question that we can answer only through the lens of Good Friday and Easter.

The Palm-waving crowds rightly expect that Jesus is God’s Messiah, his anointed one. In John’s brief telling of Jesus’ welcoming, the crowds shout Hosanna, which means “save us” in Hebrew. They sing out “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the king of Israel.” This is from Psalm 118, a song of God’s victory, the day when God has finally acted. The crowds expect that Jesus is to be a warrior King and that the anticipated violent confrontation with Rome has finally come to a head.

But John helps us to grasp that things are not as the crowds expect. The crowds thought they knew Jesus, but they did not (John 1:10). John’s quote about the donkey is taken from Zechariah 9:9. This is a passage about the coming ruler of God’s people – very messianic in other words. But there is much more at work here than even the arrival of God’s Messiah.

John changes the opening words of the Zechariah quotation from “Rejoice greatly, daughter of Zion” to “Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion.” Here, John evokes Zephaniah 3: “15 The LORD has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst;¹ you shall fear disaster no more . . . Do not fear, O Zion . . .”

It is not just the Messiah whom the crowds welcome into the city, it is the LORD God himself. God had once been their king and now God would be their king again: God incarnate in Jesus.

Further, centuries before, Ezekiel had brought to the people terrifying visions of God’s departure from the temple in Jerusalem before its burning by the Babylonians. In the centuries since, despite the rebuilding of the temple, there wasn’t really any sign that God had returned.² The Jews still awaited the fulfillment of God’s

¹ Emphasis added.

² I don’t have the space to develop this, but here is the general idea. The Jews believed that their exile to Babylon (their trip to jail) had been punishment for their sin. Though they had returned to the land they were certainly still in jail, with the Romans being the latest in a long line of jailers. They would not be released from jail until their sins had been forgiven. The coming of the Day of the Lord, to be ushered in by God’s Messiah, would entail such forgiveness and, hence, the restoration of Israel. . . . That’s a lot packed into a few sentences, but this is a footnote after all!

promise: “See, I am sending a messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple” (Malachi 3:1).

What must the crowds of followers have thought when, on the next day, Jesus didn’t head for the Antonia Fortress to confront the Romans but to the temple, where he would invoke the words of Jeremiah pronouncing judgment on the people and *their* temple.

“I am the way, the truth, and the life”

Jesus’ claim could not be clearer: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” (John 14:6-7) There you have it. Ask any of Jesus’ fellow Jews on the streets of Jerusalem who the Father is and you’d have gotten a straightforward response: “The Lord God Almighty, of course, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God who revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush and led us out of slavery in Egypt. That’s who the Father is.” And, of course, the next words out of their mouth would be astonishment and shock that any man could claim such a thing.

Earlier, Jesus had asserted, “I am one with the Father” (John 10:30). Now, Jesus has claimed that if you have seen Jesus, you have seen the Father. That Jesus is the way, the truth, the life. Gail O’Day rightly notes that “these verses announce in clear language the theological conviction that drives the Fourth Evangelist’s work. . . . These words express the Fourth Evangelist’s unshakeable belief that the coming of Jesus, the Word made flesh, decisively altered the relationship between God and humanity.”³ As the Evangelist put it when he opened his gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

There’s something very important to notice about exactly what Jesus says. It is not his way that he is talking about – he is the way. He isn’t speaking here of living as he lived or loving as he loved – Jesus is the way. Just as Jesus is the gateway for the sheep (John 10), he is the path to this place we call heaven. Jesus is the way to God because he is the truth of God and the life of God.

For the last couple of centuries, Jesus’ simple and profound statement, “I am the way No one comes to the Father except through me” has been endlessly controversial. How arrogant! How exclusive! How divisive! Yet, Jesus’ claim and the early Christians’ claims about him are made abundantly clear in John’s Gospel. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). If this is truly the truth, how could one claim to know God and yet deny Jesus?

He is God! He is not merely one of the great prophets. He is not merely a great teacher and rabbi. He didn’t come merely to show us a better way of living. Jesus is the incarnation of the one true God, the God of Abraham and of Moses. Jesus has revealed much to us about God that we would not know without Jesus, for Jesus is the full revelation of God.

With all this, Christians today are left with only a few choices:

1. We could simply shut up and enjoy our own private relationship with Jesus. But, then, how could we ever do as Jesus instructed us: “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). No . . . the Christian proclamation of the Good News is meant for the whole world. Shutting up isn’t really an option.
2. We could change our claims about Jesus to make him more “acceptable” to non-believers. Let’s just see if we can’t discover a Jesus who is deeply spiritual, but no more than a poor, Galilean itinerant preacher. It really isn’t that hard to construct a Jesus to anyone’s liking. Of course, it wouldn’t really be Jesus, but at least we’d all just get along . . . or would we.
3. Or, we could learn what it is we Christians have claimed about Jesus for most of the last two millennia and then state it boldly and lovingly to all who would hear. The Good News is not exclusionary; it is a joyous proclamation that God has rescued and is rescuing all humanity and all creation.

³ From Gail O’Day’s commentary on the Gospel of John in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, p. 743.

Our truth claim about Jesus is far too unique to fit with other belief systems. He is not merely a path to God; he is God! Could we be wrong about this? I suppose we could. But I believe with all my mind and heart that we are not. I believe that Jesus the Galilean was truly resurrected on that Sunday morning nearly 2,000 years ago and that belief changes everything. This is something that is knowable, just as it is knowable that Julius Caesar conquered Gaul and George Washington was the first president of the United States.

One caution before closing. Nothing here allows for any us/them mentality or a sense of superiority. Knowing Christ is a gift from God, pure and simple. And it is a gift that I pray will come to all people, if not on this side of the grave then on the next.

I leave with you a meditation on Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life written more than five centuries ago by Thomas à Kempis:

“Follow thou me, I am the way and the truth and the life.

Without the way there is no going;

without the truth there is no knowing;

without the life there is no living.

I am the way which thou must follow;

the truth which thou must believe;

the life for which thou must hope.

I am the inviolable way; the infallible truth; the never ending life.

I am the straightest way; the sovereign truth; life true, life blessed, life uncreated.

If thou remain in my way thou shalt know the truth,

and the truth shall make thee free,

and thou shalt lay hold on eternal life.”