

## What Shall We Do with Jesus?

I was preaching a sermon one Sunday evening in a little country church, when a man stood up and shouted, “Preacher, preacher, you don’t really believe that stuff, do you? Where in the Bible does it say that?” Before I could respond, another man stood up and shouted, “Read the Book of Revelation!” The two men began a heated discussion, which I feared might lead to a fistfight. Thankfully, the wife of the first man grabbed her husband by the arm and said to him, “Shut up and sit down! Let the preacher finish his sermon!”

It happens, doesn’t it? You come to church for a little peace and quiet, but then suddenly something unexpected happens that throws everything into chaos.

But who said church is supposed to be about peace and quiet, anyway? Since when do we go to church to be comfortable?

Some of us may remember Pierre Berton’s controversial book back in the 1970s – *The Comfortable Pew*. It was written at the invitation of the Anglican Church of Canada: “Pierre, tell us what you really think about the church?” Well, what Pierre had to say was not very flattering. He charged the church with being complacent, stale, boring, irrelevant and firmly embedded in the status quo. The book so upset Anglicans that a group of them got together and wrote a response titled *The Restless Church*, which pictured a pilgrim people on the move.

What do you think? Are we Anglicans a people of the comfortable pew or the restless church? Are we staid and stale or bubbling and bursting? Are we dull and drab or vital and vibrant? Are we a monument or a movement, lively or lifeless, Spirit-filled or spiritless?

In our gospel we find Jesus teaching in a synagogue. All eyes are focused on him. Suddenly a man in the synagogue possessed by an unclean spirit cries out, “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God.”

Now, the truth is, we don’t know much about unclean spirits as the New Testament describes it. Was it mental illness? We don’t know. What we do know is this: Jesus brought out the best and the worst in people. If you were on his side, you would give your life for him. If you weren’t on his side, you couldn’t rest until he was destroyed.

Jesus certainly aroused something in this man at the synagogue, which is why he screams at Jesus, “Have you come to destroy us?” The Bible then says that Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit saying, “Be silent and come out of him!” The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. The people were so amazed that they asked each other, “What is this? A new teaching – with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.”

The people didn't know what to do with Jesus. And we don't either. Jesus shakes us, challenges us and turns our world upside down. If we expect everything fixed and settled, nailed down and buttoned down, certain and changeless, then Jesus is the last person we would want.

Methodist Bishop William Willimon tells about a friend of his who returned from an audience with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. "When his Holiness speaks," said his friend, "everyone in the room becomes quiet, serene and peaceful."

"Not so with Jesus," Willimon says. "Things were fine in Nazareth until Jesus opened his mouth and all hell broke loose." (1)

Hell-raiser, peace-disturber, rebel, revolutionary – where Jesus goes there always seems to be trouble of one sort or another. After three tumultuous years of ministry he ends up in Jerusalem where he manages to get himself crucified. And even then he's still causing trouble, because he doesn't stay dead but rises from the grave and shakes the world so thoroughly that history itself is now divided between B.C. and A.D.

Think about it. Before Jesus came, loveless power always seemed to have the upper hand over powerless love. But Jesus' teaching about humility and turning the other cheek refined our views of human character, of war, of masculinity. Jesus' commitment to the poor, to women and children opened the way for civil rights and equality for women. Marriages became more equitable and disabled children were no longer allowed to die of exposure or thrown into the river. Christians, in fact, prohibited the killing of any children for any reason.

But the revolution is not complete. We still live in a world with too much violence, too much hatred, too much debasement of human dignity. We may not have gladiator fights, but we have kickboxing that damages brains and smashes heads – and we call it entertainment. We have homeless people on the streets; hungry people needing food, people drugged up and doped up who simply can't deal with reality. We have a degree of poverty, especially among our First Nations and Aboriginal peoples, that is shocking for such a rich nation. Meanwhile we want to build more prisons rather than rehabilitate more persons. We have children, teens and young adults who don't seem to know a thing about God, let alone Jesus, and their number is growing.

The trouble is: there are some of us who think these things are normal, just another part of life. Jesus would say these things are intolerable, outrageous, and unacceptable. You see: if you are comfortable in Jesus' presence, you simply do not see him as he really is.

Charles Swindoll tells about a commercial venture of one of the largest department stores in the United States. It proved to be disastrously unsuccessful. It was a doll in the form of the baby Jesus. It was advertised as being unbreakable, washable and cuddly. It was packaged in straw with a satin ribbon and plastic surroundings, and appropriate biblical texts added here and there to make the scene complete. It did not sell. The manager of one of the stores panicked. He carried out a last ditch promotion to get rid of the dolls.

He brandished a huge sign outside his store that read: JESUS CHRIST – MARKED DOWN 50% – GET HIM WHILE YOU CAN. (2)

And that is the constant danger – that we will remake Jesus into a meek, harmless figure – discounted 50% to keep us comfortable.

Jesus taught in the synagogue and a man who was possessed by an unclean spirit cried out, “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God!”

And I guarantee you that if Jesus were to visit most of our churches today, the response would be the same. That is to say, you and I are confronted with a decision: what shall we do with Jesus? Shall we continue to ignore his claims on our lives? Shall we live as if he never entered the world? Shall we stop referring to him as Lord and Savior? Shall we cease to think of him as God incarnate? Shall we continue to substitute ecclesiastical protocol or institutional loyalty for conscious discipleship? Be careful how you answer, for once you see Jesus as he really is, you will never be the same.

I know...all this “Jesus talk” – it can make us feel uncomfortable. In my New Jersey parish, an irate parishioner came to me one day and said, “You got to stop preaching this Jesus! You’re driving me crazy!” Well, maybe Jesus needs to disturb our peace of mind, shake our securities, challenge our certainties, and make us feel uncomfortable. After all, if Jesus is at the heart of being a Christian, then we need to make room for him in our lives – sweep out the dust, change our priorities, revamp our values, and even alter our lifestyle. That surely will make us feel uneasy, but there is no way of avoiding it if we want to be his disciple. Jesus has to be the center of everything we are and everything we do as Christians, because without him we cannot succeed, but with him we cannot fail.

When I was a college student at Fordham University, I was privileged to know one of the great Roman Catholic philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Dietrich von Hildebrand. He came from a family of cultured European aristocrats, but both his parents were non-believers. One night at dinner, young Dietrich who was about seven or eight years old at the time, got into a discussion with his parents about Jesus. Dietrich had heard that Jesus was God, but his parents dismissed the notion. Oh no, they said, Jesus was not really God. He was a good man, but not God, not divine. Don’t believe those myths. This is the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after all, and people today are reasonable. (This conversation, by the way, took place less than ten years before World War I.)

After dinner, young Dietrich went to his room and there, as was the custom in many aristocratic homes, was a crucifix on the wall by his bed. He looked at that crucifix with the bloodied body of Jesus hanging on the cross, knelt down, and cried out, “Yes, you are God!” That was the moment Dietrich von Hildebrand gave his life to Jesus Christ and became one of the great philosophers of the Roman Catholic Church.

Year later, when von Hildebrand taught at Fordham University, a Jesuit school, one of his favorite prayers was the *Suscipe* of St. Ignatius Loyola:

*Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty,  
my memory, my understanding,  
and my entire will,  
all that I have and call my own.*

*You have given all to me.  
To you, Lord, I return it.*

*Everything is yours; do with it what you will.  
Give me only your love and your grace,  
that is enough for me.*

When I came to this parish, in my first sermon I said that there were many worthwhile things I could do as your Rector, but there was one thing I absolutely needed to do – preach and teach about Jesus, guide you to know, love and serve Jesus, point you to an encounter with Jesus, help you experience the power of Jesus to transform your life and even the world. In the end, Christian ministry is not about buildings or fundraising or having more programs or (God forbid) going to more meetings. Nor is Christian ministry about saving the institution or promoting religion or maintaining the traditions of the church. No, Christian ministry is all about Jesus – nothing more and nothing less.

So let me ask you: How do you see Jesus? Is he the most important person in your world such that you can't even imagine being a Christian without him? Once you see Jesus as he really is, you will either hate everything he stands for or you will be willing to give your life for him in undying service and devotion.

Yes, there is a cost to following Jesus, but in our better moments we are eager to pay that cost – to do what he calls us to do and to be who he calls us to be. This day, this moment, will you resolve to follow Jesus wherever he leads and whatever the cost?

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Text – Mark 1:21-28  
Epiphany 4, B

1. William Willimon, “Book ‘Em!” in *The Christian Century*, January 27, 2004, 20
2. Charles Swindoll, *Growing Deep in the Christian Life* (Zondervan, 1995)

(This sermon was preached before the 2012 Vestry meeting of St. James Westminster Church, London, Ontario.)