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“Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever”

Heavenly Father, let your Word bind us in mutual love. Amen.

Once there was a Roman Catholic priest who had just moved into a new parish. His first week he was invited by the nuns next door to have dinner with them for that week as he settled in his new rectory. The first evening the nuns prepared a delicious meal for him. It had been a long time since he had a good baked chicken, mashed potatoes with gravy and green beans. He loved it! The next day the nuns prepared him another great meal, mashed potatoes with gravy, green beans and a deliciously baked chicken. So, for the next three days he was served freshly cooked green beans, mashed potatoes with gravy and a chicken baked to perfection. On the fifth day when the mother superior asked him with great respect to say the grace, he said, “Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever”!

Well, that is what we think. We think that the way we understand Jesus Christ today, is how Jesus Christ was understood and accepted always; and therefore, that is how he will be understood for ages to come. Perhaps that is the reason behind the religious fatigue amongst nations who have been Christian for some time now. Or maybe it is the weight of tradition that finds it preoccupied with ossifying the understanding of Christ, so that, Jesus Christ the same yesterday, today, and forever may never stimulate our appetite beyond the same baked chicken, mashed potatoes with gravy and green beans.

While I love baked chicken, mashed potatoes with gravy and green beans, I grew up with a totally different cuisine. For that reason, I feel, I sometimes approach the Bible with a different palate. I hope you will excuse my love for spicy food and for spicy sermons.

I increasingly take issue with thinking of Christ as the loving teddy bear that seeks only to console us and be for us the fountain of love that only brings peace and, god forbid, is never offensive.

This passion less Christ can be found on our calendars, lovingly holding a lamb or seated amongst his disciples and teaching them how to accept humiliation on account of being a good disciple.

So we think that Jesus in today's Gospel is teaching us to be humble; to be considerate; to be self sacrificing; just as he was. The flip side is that if he was not considerate, humble and respecting of people, then how could he teach us to be just that? Moreover, that would mean that he is not really a lover of peace as we want him to be for we call him the Prince of Peace! By the way, you will find it amusing that the term "Prince of Peace" is an Old Testament term and not a term found in the Gospels.

Anyhow, the quandary for us today is, was Jesus teaching people good manners, as many of us would like for him to do, or was he being offensive by calling into question the Jewish understanding of being the chosen people of God? By now you must have guessed that I believe that he was being extremely offensive to the religious sensibilities of those of his time. I hold this view for good reason.

If you go back a chapter you will see statements like, "No I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did". This is not a very polite statement by any stretch of imagination. And when he is asked who will be saved, he responds with a parable that ends with these words to his own people, "There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrown out.²⁹ Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God.³⁰ Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last."

Chapter 13 that builds up to our lesson for today is all about Jesus telling his own Jewish brothers and sisters that don't take your place of honor for granted. This place of honor or special status with God will be taken from you if you do not repent. And it will be given to you by God's grace alone and not by your status as the chosen nation.

To understand how offensive this is, just imagine encountering someone today who stands in the public square and says publicly, "unless you repent and give up your ways you are destined for a place with no baked chicken, mashed potatoes with gravy and green beans! You all are doomed; and your salvation has got nothing to do with who you are, what you have and how you act." Now, no matter how lovingly this is said, it is offensive to the ear that believes that all goodness is his or her birth right.

So friends, Jesus asking people to be humble was humiliating for those who heard him. It was further humiliating because he was advocating the same place

of honor for people who were not considered worth it; the gentiles, the sick, the lame, the blind, and other outcasts.

So, is today's Gospel reading a lesson in humility? Is it a call to live a life that welcomes those outside our boundaries of acceptance? Or is it all that and then some? Is it a call to have the courage to boldly say that this is what it means to be a Christian? And if my speech brings upon me condemnation, torture and ultimately takes my life, which the writer of Hebrews calls "the fruit of the lips that confess his name", then, so be it! I believe it is, for towards the end of this discourse Jesus is reported to have said, "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14.27)

Yes, I know friends, in our 21st century cultural imagination of a passion less Christ such a passion for faith that results in our own sacrifice, is not our idea of Church and Christian life today. For us, living with the secular ideals of freedom, tolerance, equality, inclusion, peace, etc., Jesus Christ is substantially different from the one who boldly proclaimed his understanding of faith to the point of a humiliating and violent death on the cross. This Jesus Christ of today, tamed by the secular ideals, is a teddy bear that is certainly lifeless. This Jesus Christ does not encourage us to ask the question that Bishop Helder Camara asked when he said, "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint, but when I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist". For the sake of peace, this Jesus Christ of today lacks the will to condemn ideologies that subjugate people, oppress them, and seek to spread through evoking fear and violence.

Nevertheless, the scripture says, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. Friends, Jesus Christ has not changed, but our willingness to live his passion has changed. Jesus Christ still calls us to continually offer a praise that may require some substantial sacrifice on our part. Jesus Christ still wishes for us to demonstrate courage; and with conviction boldly proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God.

May God help us to better understand the Jesus Christ who is the same yesterday, today, and forever! AMEN.