

SPG#195, LAST EPIPHANY B

February 22, 2009

2 Kings 2:1-12

2 Corinthians 4:3-6

Mark 9:2-9

Jesus Christ. Apart from being a reference to our Lord and Savior, that name most definitely has ramifications in our everyday lives. And not just in our lives, but in the lives of all our society. And the fact of the use of his name is not so much a factor as how it is used. And even in a sermon like this one, if I say the name of Jesus several times as opposed to once, a lot of us have little alarm systems that warn us that saying his name the wrong way may be nearby. And for sure, if I was to raise my voice and speak of Jesus Christ, and if I was to gesture with some animation while speaking of Jesus Christ we could be in the red zone.

To be sure, there are people today who speak often of Jesus as their friend, or Jesus as “my Savior.” And there are those among us in the Episcopal Church who will speak easily of Jesus in a conversation in just those terms. But for a lot of us, the uttering of the name Jesus is mostly said in the context of liturgical language at church. We say his name in the Creed every Sunday. But it is different when one reads the name of Jesus out of the Prayer Book than if we dropped his name in a conversation.

And so the whole subject of conversing about Jesus, of uttering his name in various settings is an important subject for us to consider.

As a boy, in the Baptist Church, I learned early to verbalize about Jesus, and I learned to listen to others verbalize about Jesus. In the Baptist church there is a doctrine called the Priesthood of All Believers. Put simply it means that there is no higher authority than one’s own individual experience in Christ.

So, individuals in the church are encouraged to share from their own unique perspective of Jesus Christ. Some people in these situations share the same thing every time.

So their unique perspective becomes kind of a creed that they recite over and over again. Others were more creative and shared how their faith in Christ brought them through a surgery or a difficult time. I must admit that it was in this context that I encountered a syrupy sentimentalism that I found distasteful. But I also listened with rapt attention as someone told how Jesus had rescued their life from meaninglessness, and in some cases, from death.

So, at best, this became a faith sharing conversation, a conversation that we had with each other and with God. And at best, as we heard the name of Jesus, it was easy to feel His presence in those conversations. And at worst it was a routine exercise that we did from force of habit., and from a sense of obligation.

In a few minutes we will stand and say the Nicene Creed together. We do it every Sunday with just a few exceptions. At worst it is a repetitive, habitual routine. But at best it is a conversation that we have with God and with each other. The irony of that is that the Creed came from conversations that Christians had with each other in the 4th century. Today's gospel records a conversation Jesus had with Peter, James, and John. It is a remarkable conversation in that it took place in the context of the Transfiguration where Jesus appeared conversing with Moses and Elijah. At a pivotal point in the reading Peter is heard saying to Jesus, "Let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

Then the voice comes out of the cloud and says, “This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him.” And in so doing God redirected the conversation away from Peter’s dwellings back to Jesus.

And so in this one passage Jesus converses with Moses and Elijah. He converses with his disciples, and they with him. And finally God the Father converses with the disciples.

It might occur to us as we read this passage, and per St. Mark, read it again, that there is an abundance of conversation about Jesus in this reading. It might also occur to us that we are having a conversation about Jesus right now in this sermon. It’s just that I am doing the talking and you the listening. Believe it or not, I take very seriously the little conversations we have outside the liturgy where you speak and I listen.

In fact, if the truth be known, we are surrounded by conversations about Jesus Christ.

And in those conversations we all have a role to play as listener, as speaker, as observer.

It may be that in our times that many of us have become very quiet in our conversations about Jesus. And it may seem that those who would converse about Jesus openly must be seen as inappropriately sentimental or as a fanatic. I am here to tell you that is not true.

Within each of us is the private conversation that we have with Jesus Christ. It can be about truth and honesty. It can be sentimentalized. It can be fanaticized. It can be suppressed. And to be sure, there are times when it is appropriate to be more reticent about religious conversation in general, such as in an ecumenical setting, or in a setting where religious and philosophical diversity is the rule.

In any setting that we find ourselves in, beyond sentimentality and fanaticism, for each of us, there is a true and honest conversation with Jesus inside. If we suppress it all the time, then the people we know and love do not benefit from that uniqueness.

I think it is true that Christians, in large part, expend far too much energy trying to keep themselves quiet about Jesus. And perhaps we do this for fear of being seen as a fanatic or as overly sentimental, or perhaps even phony.

So the question is before us. Do we, who converse with Jesus inside, who are surrounded by conversations about Jesus Christ, go to great length to keep ourselves quiet about such things?

When one of us, in an honest attempt, is able in words to paint a picture of faith in Jesus Christ, at best, it is not about pretense or fanaticism. It is about truth. And it is about beauty. And so to convey the beauty of our faith in words we must be artistic, which means we are timely, appropriate, and truthful. It may be that when one of us thinks of what we would say in a conversation about Jesus that we draw a blank. Because it may be seen as too personal.

There are many of us who recoil when we hear someone talk about being saved or having a relationship with Jesus Christ, as though that kind of talk is bad manners.

With that in mind, there is an interesting question that we could try on for size.

If we could hear a conversation about Jesus Christ that was not distasteful, what would it sound like? Further, if we could all be good conversationalists in this regard, what would it sound like? We have the benefit of how he is referred to in scripture. Some of our hymns are about Jesus specifically.

It might be an interesting exercise to take one of the hymns about him, read it through.

And then try to put the words of the hymn in conversational language. For example,

Hymn # 435 At the Name of Jesus

At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow,

Every tongue confess him King of Glory now;

T'is the Father's pleasure we should call him Lord,

Who from the beginning was the mighty Word.

Name him Christians, name him, with love strong as death,

Name with awe and wonder and with bated breath;

He is God the Savior, he is Christ the Lord,

Ever to be worshipped, trusted, and adored.

Hymn # 644 How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds

How sweet the Name of Jesus sounds in a believer's ear!

It soothes our sorrows, heals our wounds, and drives away our fear.

Wherever you come out with such an exercise, to sum up, there is a Christian truth and beauty that only occurs when YOU speak of Jesus Christ. It is the call of God to be more truly who you are in Jesus Christ.

It is about your unique faith. It is about you and Jesus. It is about truth. It is about beauty.

Another hymn writer writes the opening lines, "O for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer's praise." We don't have a thousand tongues. We only have one.

But what a great place to start. Amen.