

Judica, the Fifth Sunday in Lent
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✧ Jesu juva ✧

HE IS WHO HE SAYS HE IS
Hebrews 9:11-15; John 8:46-59

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

Jesus confronts the unbelief of the Jews regarding Him today, saying: "If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth and came from God; nor have I come of Myself, but He sent Me." If you were of God, He says, clearly implying that they must not be of God as they think they are, because they are rejecting Him and His teaching. But our Lord does not stop with this, on account of their rejection of Him they show themselves to be in rebellion against God, and therefore of the devil. He continues: "Why do you not understand My speech? Because you are not able to listen to My word. You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him." There is no truth in the devil, and because the Jews were resisting Christ's Word, there was no truth in them either. They think themselves the children of Abraham and therefore God's people, but in their rebellion they have forsaken Abraham and God and have made themselves children of the devil instead. Jesus sums the whole issue up when He says: "He who is of God hears God's words; therefore you do not hear, because you are not of God."



These are pretty strong words by our Lord. And they provoke an equally strong reaction. Jesus has just called them children of the devil and they reply in like vein: "Do we not say rightly that You are a Samaritan and have a demon?" And as Jesus defends Himself in reply, He again holds out the Gospel to these stiff-necked opponents saying: "Most assuredly, I say to you, if anyone keeps My word he shall never see death." And they reply: "Now we know that You have a demon! Abraham is dead and the prophets; and You say, 'If anyone keeps My word he shall never taste death.' Are You greater than our father Abraham, who is dead? And the prophets are dead. Who do you make Yourself out to be?"

And that is the real question isn't it? Who does Jesus make Himself out to be? Is He who He says He is? Is He really the Son of God and our Savior? Or is He something else. Many people claiming to be Christians nowadays claim that Jesus is something else, something less than what St. John makes Him out to be in this Gospel, they say; great guru, marvelous moralist, or rebel rabbi, but certainly not the Divine Son of God. But the Jews in our lesson today actually got one thing right. Either Jesus is who He says He is, or He is demon possessed and out of His mind. One or the other must be true. Because Jesus claims so much in passages like this one, there simply can be no middle ground on the question of who He is.

A Scottish preacher named John Duncan once wrote: “Christ either deceived mankind by conscious fraud, or He was Himself deluded and self-deceived, or He was Divine. There is no getting out of this trilemma. It is inexorable” (in William Knight, *Colloquia Peripatetica*, 1870). C.S. Lewis also famously said: “A man who said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to” (*Mere Christianity*, Book II, Chapter 3).

What answer one accepts to this question about who Jesus really is in light of who He claims to be, is of course at the heart of both faith and unbelief. For, as Christians, which side Jesus is really on also determines which side you are really on, doesn't it? And the same things that were said of Jesus by the unbelieving Jews have also been and continue to be said about His followers. Real Christianity, after all, is hard edged in terms of doctrine. There is no tolerance for false beliefs regarding God or Christ. Oh we can coexist with people who believe differently; and we should show them love and kindness; but we can never sanction their false beliefs and philosophies as viable alternatives to the real Christ. To do so would be to deny Christ's own Words concerning this and thereby to deny His claims as God's Son and our Savior. Either every other way is false, or Christ is a liar. And so if Christ is telling the truth, then every other form of religion, doctrine, or piety is of the devil.

The pressure for Christians to compromise the exclusive claims of Jesus is not new to our day, though. In the early Church the same demand was often heard. And it must have been especially difficult for those who were newly converted to the faith. They had to make a complete break with their heathen practices and beliefs. In fact that is why during the Lenten season we have so much talk about Jesus as He confronts the devil, his demons, and his followers. Lent was a time of intense preparation just before Baptism, which took place at the Easter Vigil. As the catechumens were approaching this Sacrament they were gradually transitioned by the Church through liturgical ceremony and intense catechesis from their old life under the devil to their new life in Christ. They were now being asked to completely forsake their old ways, to renounce the devil and all of his works and all of his ways as we still say in the baptismal liturgy, and to confess their faith in Jesus. And they looked forward to the new life promised them in Holy Baptism. But all the while the world around them was telling them that they were following a lie and that Christ was not who He claimed to be.

We see today, however, that Jesus is precisely who He claims to be. We see it in the fact that His enemies cannot dispute against His teaching. “But because I tell the truth,” Jesus says, “you do not believe Me. Which of you convicts me of sin? And I tell you the truth, why do you not believe Me?” They cannot, of course, convict Jesus of any wrong doing or false teaching, but can only make *ad hominem* attacks against Him. And when they claim at last that Jesus is teaching falsely because He says they will not taste death if they keep His Word and Abraham and the prophets who were faithful all died, Jesus makes it abundantly clear, not only that He is not teaching falsely (because these men are not dead, but are alive and in heaven) but also that He Himself is the God who appeared to them and spoke with them: “Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.” And when they try to stone Him to death, what happens? He shows His divinity by hiding

Himself from them and passing through their midst. Can you imagine their reaction!?! They go to kill Him for saying that He is God, and then He does something only God could do and disappears from their sight! And still they will not believe.

But this miraculous act was not done so much to convince them of Jesus' claims as it was to preserve Jesus' life for a time. His time to die had not yet come, but it would come shortly. He did not escape just to continue to live, but in order to die in a way that fulfilled the word of the prophets and all of the expectations of His Father. Yes, he passes through their midst that day in order to be taken by them another and crucified. But by this horrific death, He saves us and becomes our mediator not only in terms of His having both human and divine natures in His one person, but as the sacrifice that atones for all of our sins. Hebrews explains: "Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption... He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance." Because Christ is who He says He is, and because He has suffered and performed this sacrifice according to His Father's will, we are now redeemed. All of our sins have been put away and all our debt paid.

And now as the Mediator of this new covenant, He delivers His holy Word to us that we may have a part in it. If you are of God, you will hear and keep His Word in faith. And this Word, because it delivers not only information about Jesus, but also applies Jesus work to the faithful by the power of the Holy Spirit, will deliver you from death. For though you die, in Christ, you like Abraham and the prophets, will live. Let us not reject His Word like the Jews in today's lesson, but rather let us receive them with faith. You are Baptized and are no longer children of the devil. You have been transitioned from death into life by the power of this Word. And having received it, you have been made children of God. Abide in this Word; for Christ is who He said He is, the One who calls Himself "I AM", the Son of God, our Mediator, and our Redeemer. Amen.

✧ Soli Deo gloria ✧