

Lessons from an Encounter with the Pharisees

Passion Sunday (The Fifth Sunday in Lent)

(From the Gospel: St. John viii. 46. ff)

46 [Jesus said] *Which of you convinceth me of sin? And if I say the truth, why do ye not believe me? 47 He that is of God heareth God's words: ye therefore hear them not, because ye are not of God. 48 Then answered the Jews, and said unto him, Say we not well that thou art a Samaritan, and hast a devil? 49 Jesus answered, I have not a devil; but I honour my Father, and ye do dishonour me. 50 And I seek not mine own glory: there is one that seeketh and judgeth. 51 Verily, verily, I say unto you, If a man keep my saying, he shall never see death. 52 Then said the Jews unto him, Now we know that thou hast a devil. Abraham is dead, and the prophets; and thou sayest, If a man keep my saying, he shall never taste of death. 53 Art thou greater than our father Abraham, which is dead? and the prophets are dead: whom makest thou thyself? 54 Jesus answered, If I honour myself, my honour is nothing: it is my Father that honoureth me; of whom ye say, that he is your God: 55 Yet ye have not known him; but I know him: and if I should say, I know him not, I shall be a liar like unto you: but I know him, and keep his saying. 56 Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad. 57 Then said the Jews unto him, Thou art not yet fifty years old, and hast thou seen Abraham? 58 Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am. 59 Then took they up stones to cast at him: but Jesus hid himself, and went out of the temple, [going through the midst of them, and so passed by].*

Jesus' dialogues with the Pharisees are among the most intense scenes of the Gospels. One tries to imagine the occasion: the now fully revealed hostility of the unbelieving Jews, versus the unflinching courage and determination of their divine Opponent. Here he is no Lamb, but a Lion, whose full majesty and kingship are yet hidden in the veil of His flesh. As we contemplate these heated encounters, it is very important for us to remember that Jesus never picked fights. He never purposely incited His opponents with malicious intent. He certainly knew very, very well that His claims, His miracles, and His doctrine would generate untold opposition. But the fury of His enemies was in direct proportion to their own hypocrisy, self-righteousness, and pride. When such motivations are brought to light in the lives of men who are doing their utmost to deceive both themselves and others about the true state of their hearts, the most murderous and basest of reactions are the inevitable result. Such moments turn supposedly civilized men, known for their education, or bearing, or place in the community, into monsters. And so it was in today's Gospel.

St. John's Gospel details the Pharisees' arguments with Jesus. In earlier passages, and those just prior to today's Gospel, Jesus has continued to undermine their assertion of a special standing with God. He has questioned their understanding of Moses (5:45-47), their claim to be Abraham's children (8:39-41), as well as God's children (8:42). Instead, he calls them children of the devil (8:42), implies that they are slaves of sin (8:31-34), and says that *ye have neither heard [God's] voice at any time, nor seen his shape. And ye have not his word abiding in you...* (5:37). Taken in sum, the Jewish leaders could hardly have heard anything worse. No curse ever pronounced against them could equal such words of denunciation.

In the meantime, they are not short of words in response. They call Christ demon-possessed and a Samaritan (8:48), imply that He is illegitimate of birth (8:41), and will soon call him raving mad (10:20).

They, of course, had no idea who they were dealing with. They supposed Jesus to be a mere man, like themselves. But they had plenty of evidence introduced into the courtroom of their hearts to indicate otherwise, especially His miracles. The Gospel of St. John is often called the Gospel of Signs, because a number of miracles are highlighted and featured that were intended to be signs demonstrating to Christ's Jewish peers both His divinity and His messiahship. The Jews had every right, as it were, to require sure certification of any man claiming such a status. These of course were so generously provided and underscored by both the teaching and healing ministry of Jesus that all doubt, humanly speaking, should have been removed. But it is a grand testimony to those qualities of stubbornness and obduracy of which we all are the possessors, that His Jewish witnesses by and large would not --could not-- accept Him. As was stated in last week's sermon, in order for the great King to rule over His subjects, they must be made rula-ble. And this could only be accomplished by the *blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God...* (see today's Epistle, Hebrews 9:14). Unredeemed men are not fit to be governed by a sinless, holy Ruler.

Jesus makes in these dialogues the most astonishing statements ever uttered by any man of any time or place, because of their implications. The first is: *If a man keep my saying, he shall never taste of death.* Such an assertion leaves no comfort zone for anyone! When His hearers understandably reply that Christ is making Himself into someone greater than both Abraham and the Prophets, who, along with Moses, would have constituted their pantheon of great men, He counters with an even more incredible claim: *Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad.* These words defy every form of logic; they are, in modern parlance, mind-blowers! How could Jesus of Nazareth, their neighbor, say this? Elsewhere they had reacted similarly, following a miracle they had witnessed:

Matthew 13:55 Is not this the carpenter's son? is not his mother called Mary? and his brethren, James, and Joses, and Simon, and Judas? 56 And his sisters, are they not all with us? Whence then hath this man all these things?

"Familiarity breeds contempt" indeed!: "How can this mere figure of a man standing before us claim that He can deliver us from death?" they would have asked. "How can He claim preexistence before the Patriarchs, and to be of such a stature as to cause them to rejoice at His appearance to which somehow they looked ahead in faith?"

It is then that Christ utters words that would have been absolutely forbidden by Jewish tradition and Law. The covenant name of God which we know as "Yahweh" (or "YHWH", the

“Tetragrammaton”, from the four letters) or “Jehovah” first formally appears to Moses in a sacred encounter with God:

Exodus 3:13 And Moses said unto God, Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me, What is his name? what shall I say unto them? 14 And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM : and he said , Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you. 15 And God said moreover unto Moses, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, The LORD God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, hath sent me unto you: this is my name for ever, and this is my memorial unto all generations.

Pious Jews still absolutely refuse to utter this name in any reading of the Law. Instead, they substitute “Adonai” [Lord] for it, in prayer, and “HaShem” [the Name] in conversation. If the sacred name is written, it can never be erased for any reason whatsoever. Jesus’ hearers understood the implications of His proclamation, loud and clear: *Then took they up stones to cast at him: but Jesus hid himself , and went out of the temple.* They were seeking to execute Him for blasphemy, there and then. They will soon threaten to do so once more, when the Lord affirms His divinity once again. Speaking of His relationship to God, He will say:

John 10:30 I and my Father are one. 31 Then the Jews took up stones again to stone him. 32 Jesus answered them, Many good works have I shewed you from my Father; for which of those works do ye stone me? 33 The Jews answered him, saying , For a good work we stone thee not; but for blasphemy; and because that thou, being a man, makest thyself God.

What does today’s Gospel describing Christ’s interactions with his hostile foes tell us today? For one, there is an absolute divide between true spiritual thinking and human thought unaided by faith. Jesus’ enemies were the best educated, most highly trained religionists of their time. Doubtless their skills were manifold, and their accomplishments many. They were understandably looked up to, respected, and even feared by the lay populace that surrounded them. Today we live in a time that also very much extols expertise, the professional dossier, a full resume, and credentials. We look to such people to run our lives, because we assume they know more than we do about everything. We do not question their opinions or judgments. They are rolled out by the media at every opportunity. They are hired at considerable fees to aid in legal cases; they charge by the word and by the minute. They own the praise and admiration of men, and are essentially the “priests” of our culture to whom we offer oblations to provide us security, explain our multiplying uncertainties, and salve our consciences as we as a culture move ever further away from God and toward sin and destruction.

The Pharisees had no faith. Their religious lives were based upon a cold, loveless, faithless observance of Mosaic Law, one which had engendered in them much pride and self-satisfaction, attitudes which certainly quenched any love for the One they presumed to worship. They were unprepared for a God who might wish to operate completely beyond their presuppositions of Him.

The New Testament clearly demonstrates that only the humble and meek of the Lord's day were eminently prepared for His first coming (see The *Magnificat*, St. Luke 1:46 ff., BCP p. 26). Their observance of the Law was done in faith and love, out of devotion and admiration for God.

Let me make it personal. Just as the Pharisees were caught off guard, we also will be, if self-confidence has placed us in a spiritual rut that we have mistaken for a superhighway. A thousand "how to" books by others that are based upon their experience as Christians may shed some light on our path, but God is beholden to no man's word. Although He is always true to His own Word, He will not be restricted by our misinterpretations of it.

As we continue through Lent, let us ask an honest question of God: "In what ways have I hemmed you in? How am I misunderstanding those signs You have placed in my life that are plain indications of Your will?"

Let us pray:

O Eternal Father, convert our hearts unto Thyself; for nothing needful shall be lacking to those whom Thou shalt enable to be devoted to Thy worship; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.