

## HOMILY

Passion Sunday 2013

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*Then answered the Jews, and said unto him, Say we not well that thou art a Samaritan, and hast a devil? John viii:48*

Jesus was supremely irritating to many of the religious leaders of his day! Since he simply refused to accept their religion as he found it-- to play by the established rules of the game--they clearly expected to dismiss him as a Samaritan afflicted with a devil--that is a low-life and a nut-case. To them, Jesus' persistent misbehavior was exasperating, and his refusal acknowledge their authority was completely outrageous--hence the fury of these speakers.

To them religion was essentially a complex of ritual acts, supported by reading and detailed discussion of scripture. You may recall how in the 1960's musical, *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevye's ideal rich man would have the leisure to "discuss the holy books with the learned men, several hours every day" and that he speaks of "posing problems that would cross a rabbi's eyes." In St. John's Gospel we see that Jesus was willing to discuss and argue with the rabbis, but he was also prone to make statements that wandered far beyond the polite play of their "religion game."

For example, what were they to make of his startling claim "*If a man keep my saying he shall never see death?*" Since Abraham and the prophets, the greatest of their religious authorities, were known to be dead, Jesus' hostile hearers felt there were only two ways in which this statement could be understood. Either Jesus was talking gibberish or he was claiming a greater authority than any human being mentioned in the Bible. Thus, in their view, Jesus was either a babbling idiot, or--and this would be extremely sinister-- he was claiming to be God in some sense!

Their responses shifted from insults to their taking up stones to throw at him. It was a classic failure in communication. Feeling bound by the precise detail of written law and proud of their knowledge, these Jews could not see its implications as Jesus applied them in his preaching.

But did Jesus naively expect these men to accept—or even fully to comprehend—what he was saying to them? Surely not! A few individuals might take him at his word, but most of them were far too self-satisfied to do so. After all, they were the acknowledged religious experts of their time, and Jesus’ doctrine of salvation stands in stark contrast to their views.

Jesus sees the sinful frailty of human nature as in continual need of God’s forgiveness, and that forgiveness cannot be earned. Remember his story of the two men who went up to the temple to pray. The Pharisee’s prayer is a list of his own pious practices, and he concludes with thanksgiving that his life is not like that of the other man, whom he identifies as a sinner. The Pharisee is sure that his lifestyle has bought him God’s favor. The publican, on the other hand, has no such self-assurance. His prayer takes the form of the words, “*God be merciful to me a sinner.*” And Jesus does not need to tell us which of these two went home “*justified.*”

In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus asks “*And if I say the truth, why do ye not believe me?*” He concludes that these people simply cannot hear God’s truth because they are not “*of God.*”

Today’s reading from the Epistle to the Hebrews explains our Savior’s death in terms of an Old-Testament-style sacrifice for sin:

*For if the blood of bulls and of goats and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean sanctifieth...how much more shall the blood of Christ...purge your conscience....*

The Law of Moses with its sacrifices and other requirements had created the culture and the attitudes of the men who ultimately saw to it that Christ was crucified. However, even in a Christian era we do not find ourselves free of that blind culture and intellectual pride. Pious observances can not save us. Only through repentance can we hope “*to be called to receive the promise of eternal inheritance.*”