

HOW ARE WE CALLED?

Christmas 2 – Cycle A: John 1:1-18

When we returned to Canada from Scotland this past August, a book awaited me on my desk here at the church, a gift from my friend Dave Granskou, retired professor of New Testament studies at WLU. Dave is quite concerned that parish pastors remain aware of current biblical scholarship after they graduate from seminary, and he knew I appreciate the edginess of *The Changing Faces of Jesus* by Geza Vermes. Vermes, who was first known in academic circles for his translation of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1962, moved on in the 1970s to write three books on the historical Jesus, complete the translation of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1997, write his autobiography, and then return to the topic of the historical Jesus in the year 2001 with *The Changing Faces of Jesus* and then write nine other books on Jesus and another on the Dead Sea Scrolls between 2001 and 2012. Geza Vermes died this past year, but his legacy of scholarship will live on for many years to come.

In the first part of *The Changing Faces of Jesus*, he takes on the Gospel of John, criticizing it as poor source material for our coming to know the historical Jesus. Vermes's doing so, however, is not groundbreaking. The first three gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, are termed the synoptic gospels because they, more or less, describe the life and times of Jesus of Nazareth. The fourth gospel, the Gospel of John, is a world apart from Matthew, Mark, and Luke. For John, Jesus is larger than life. He is the Teacher, the Prophet, the Messiah, the King, and the Son of God; Jesus is Lord; Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, the Good Shepherd, the Door to the Sheepfold, the Vine, the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and so on. The "I am" sayings of Jesus are all found in John's gospel, and Vermes is warranted in seeing it as a document that is quite different from an historical account of Jesus' life and times. And because much of the church's understanding of Jesus, past and present, has its roots in John's gospel, Vermes argues that, because of John, Christians have been left with a somewhat altered (he might say distorted) understanding of Jesus when compared with the historical Jesus.

I must say that Vermes's negativism toward John and the church does not disturb my faith or shock me. In many ways, Vermes's work on the historical Jesus is born of his personal, lifelong struggle with Christianity and is a chronicle of that journey. I have also, even before entering seminary, become acquainted with the dark underbelly of the church and its many efforts to use Christianity to gain and hold onto worldly power. The Lutheran Church came about as a result of Martin Luther functioning as a whistle-blower in the medieval church. Consequently, Lutherans are only true to their tradition of reform when they allow themselves to encounter criticism, be it biblical, theological, ecclesial, or social: I feel that we must never be anything less than the church always reforming and always being reformed if we are to retain our integrity in the Christian community.

For me, though, the truth of the gospel transcends the majority of arguments concerning fallibility of Christian doctrine, because the integrity of the gospel points to a Wisdom that is greater than the sum of its parts. And the survival of the church through all its sordid history is nothing less than testimony to the excellence of the gospel of Jesus Christ. God always works through stuff, and it doesn't seem to matter how imperfect and misguided that stuff is, the will and purposes of God will out. If the church needs a point of reference for this contention, it need look no further than the Hebrew scriptures. The Old Testament is a record of faith and faithlessness, of trial and error, of inspired leadership and corrupt leadership; but through it all, it is also a record of God's steadfast love for a people who were only occasionally lovable. God's faithfulness and grace trump all of our failures as the children of God. This is the truth of the gospel, and this is the prevailing message in the history of God's chosen people.

What surprised me in my recent encounter with Vermes was gaining a new appreciation of John as a fellow believer, someone like you and me who is called by Jesus, his teaching, and his love to a new understanding of God and the purposes of God. John's gospel is jam-packed with theological insights, but where Vermes glimpses a conspiracy of sorts in all the new material John presents concerning who Jesus was and is, I have begun to see an authentic response on John's part to the Jesus he came to know through Jesus' disciples, the people of the Way; that John was caught up by the faith in Jesus his disciples carried, by their transformation, and by their stories. And perhaps it was John's genius that he was able to formulate their thoughts and intuitions concerning Jesus with language, with a vocabulary (if you will) that named what they believed.

And so, Jesus as the Word become flesh, the embodied Word of God, Jesus as the Light the darkness did not overcome, Jesus radiant with the glory of God, full of grace and truth, Jesus at one with the very heart of God – these are ideas and an understanding of Jesus with their own power to inspire faith. These are ideas and an understanding of Jesus that translate him, so to speak, as cosmic and universal, the very things we intuit of God as Creator and Holy Spirit, the very things described so eloquently in the first chapter of Genesis by Hebrew theologians. In fact, the first five verses of John's gospel are the New Testament's restatement of Genesis 1.

We now stand at the end of the Christmas season. In Advent, we prepared for and anticipated Christ's coming again in story and in ritual; by God's grace, Christmas this year may have changed us somehow or deepened our faith as we encountered one more time the beauty and truth of Jesus' birth narratives; as we made connections with our own faith in all that is beautiful and true concerning how God is born into our world and into our personal experience. But with the perspective this twelfth day of Christmas provides, we might also ask ourselves what it was that called us again to take our place among the shepherds and magi, to (as Eric Milner-White wrote so beautifully) to "in heart and mind...go even unto Bethlehem and see this thing which has come to pass."

May I suggest that it is the proclamation of the gospel; that we resonate to the very depth of our humanity with the truth and beauty of Luke and Matthew and John's accounts of how God is made known to us; that, as John says, "the law indeed was given through Moses; [but that] grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." We are called to Bethlehem by faith in the God Jesus revealed to us in his birth, life, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection – nothing more and nothing less. And that faith has made us his disciples, as surely as it did John, the author of the fourth gospel. And our call as disciples is to do everything in our power to share with others the unbounded love of God that has been revealed to us through our faith in Jesus and his proclamation of the gospel. It is God's unique and special gift for the world, and it has been placed into the hands of people of faith to use in calling others to faith and understanding and love for one another as children of God.

You are probably tired of hearing of my admiration for Pope Francis; but his election and now his proclamation, even and especially as Pope Benedict lives, is a sign for our time of God's steadfast love for the world. The church, for all of its worldly power and influence, had lost its relevance over the past fifty years. The dark underbelly was in full view as scandals and corruption became what the church was known for. As I have said on other occasions, no one in the Christian community was given a pass: in the world's eyes, in the eyes of the media, we are all tarred with the same brush.

Francis, his heart full of the gospel, understands himself first and foremost as Jesus' disciple called to do everything in his power to share with others the unbounded love revealed through his faith in Jesus and the proclamation of his birth, life, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection. Francis proclaims the gospel, over and over, every time he opens his mouth, every time he celebrates Christmas with street people, every time he washes the feet of those the church has avoided, every time he calls people to account for their cruelty and greed. His message is omni-directional, reaching those within the church as surely as those who have no living relationship with the Christian community. Jesus' parable of the sower is the perfect metaphor for Francis' ministry: he scatters the gospel indiscriminately in the faith that some of it will find good soil. In his New Year's message to those who gathered in St. Peter's Square in Rome he preached, "We are all children of the one heavenly father...This brings a responsibility for each to work so that the world becomes a community of brothers [and sisters] who respect each other, accept each other in one's diversity, and take care of one another...who recognize that even those we call enemies are our brothers and sisters."

It is John the Evangelist who saw in Jesus' birth, life, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection the incarnation of God in our world. And this understanding that the living Word of God can be incarnated is the lifeblood, literally, of the Christian community. We are called by God's Word in Christ Jesus to be present with the shepherds and magi in Bethlehem; we are called by God's Word in Christ Jesus to discipleship; and we are called by God's Word in Christ Jesus, the very gospel, to be people for others.

Francis had a choice some months ago. Would he become the next in a long succession of popes who reigned over the status quo, or would he let loose the living Word of God with its power to change and transform, to pull down and build up, to destroy and make new. The holy example of his papacy, the

testimony of John the Evangelist, and the Carpenter of Galilee all point us in the same direction. They were all called by grace and truth of the gospel. How are we called?