

"THE WORD THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
September 6, 1992

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INTRODUCTION

It's amazing that "one word" could change all eternity. One word! One simple word. You ask what was that word? We'll come to it as we work in to this sermon, but first we need to travel back to Caesarea Philippi where Jesus is on something of a weekend retreat with His disciples. And while they're stretched out on the ground looking at the fleecy white clouds passing over head, Jesus asks one of the most familiar questions in all the Bible. "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

DEVELOPMENT

I've often wondered if Jesus was really that interested in finding out what the people thought of Him...and how He was going over with them. He wasn't much for polls. And He probably knew that the masses of people are quite fickle and easily led astray.

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There are a lot of people who will follow just about anybody who does something different. They're a bit like baby ducks. As you know, some baby birds have a strong instinct to follow the first moving thing they see after they're born as though it were their mother. Ducks in Bali have been known to follow a flag stuck on a pole and have stayed within sight of it while they graze in the rice fields. And that's the way some people are; they'll follow almost anything or anybody.

I really don't think that Jesus was that interested or concerned with what the masses were thinking about Him. Winston Churchill once was congratulated on the size of a crowd that turned out to hear him speak. He responded by saying that the crowd would be twice as large if he were being hung.

WHAT REALLY MATTERED TO HIM

Jesus probably knew that some in the crowds cheering Him would later be shouting the loudest for His crucifixion. So, He wasn't concerned about the latest Gallop Poll figures in response to His question, "And who do men say that I am?" He was far more concerned about what the Disciples thought about Him. "And who do you say that I am?" After all His future plans for the salvation of the world were reasting pretty much on their shoulders. He was building His team that would carry on His work after He was gone. It was their opinion that really mattered to Him.

And that's the main concern of Jesus today. Who do we think He is? It matters immensely what you and I think for He is counting on us to offer up our lives and our loyalty in service to His Kingdom. You can go so far as to say that it doesn't really matter what people outside these walls think of Him. They're not called to be "the light of the world". We are. What we think about

Him is of vital importance. It determines the level of our loyalty and our individual commitment to Him. "And who do you say that I am?" said Jesus to His disciples.

Now there are three things that we could say about Jesus on this Labor Day weekend that are absolutely essential.

THE STANDARD BY WHICH OUR LIVES ARE MEASURED

ought to be measured.

First of all, He is the "standard" by which our lives

Haddon Robinson in one of his books tells about a series of victory parades that were planned by General Pershing through many of the great European cities after World War I. He needed something like 27,000 soldiers to march in those parades. Each participant in the parade was to have two qualities. First, he was to have an unblemished military record. Second, he was to stand at least one meter, eighty-six centimeters tall.

Forty American soldiers, guarding an ammunition dump some one hundred miles from Paris read with great interest this notice about Pershing's victory marches and each man in that company met the first qualification: unblemished military record. However, they were puzzled by the second condition for they did not know how high one meter, eighty-six centimeters was.

Since nobody in the camp knew how tall that was, they began to compare themselves with one another...you know how...they stood back to back like children in a kindergarten class until they knew the tallest through the shortest men in the company.

The tallest, whose name was Slim, figured he had it made and he was got to kidding his buddies about taking a good look at the girls in the capital cities and sending back some picture postcards. On the other hand, Shorty, knew that if he qualified that everyone else would, too.

When a captain from headquarters arrived at their camp to find out if anybody qualified, the soldiers told him their problem.

"We don't know how tall one meter, eighty-six centimeters is....."

And so he translated the meter and the centimeters into feet and inches and made a mark on the mess hall wall. Some of the men looked at the mark and then walked away, knowing they could not measure up to it. Others stood up against the wall, but they fell short of the mark by an inch or more. Finally, Slim, stretched himself as tall as possible, but he fell short, too - by a quarter of an inch. Not one of them came to the six feet, one and one-fifth inches that one meter, eighty-six centimeters represents.

Now it's easy, isn't it, to feel good about ourselves and about our accomplishments when we use other people as our standard? But what happens when we measure ourselves to Jesus? Do we love as He loved? And are we able to forgive as He forgave? Could we lay down our lives not just for our friends, but even for our enemies? He is the standard by which our lives should be measured. And using Him as our standard, are there any of us who measure up? Let's move on to a second thought to turn over in our minds.

THE EMBODIMENT OF ALL HE TAUGHT OTHERS

Now, in the second place, He is the "embodiment" of all that He taught to others. And this is why He is worthy to be our standard, our yardstick. His very nature was love. It was truth. It was righteousness. It was compassion.

Not to long ago a study was done to determine how people attain a permanent place in the memories of their countrymen. For example, of the thousands of past major league baseball players, only a hundred are remembered. Ask people to name the most famous baseball players of all time and they're likely to come up with the names of Ruth, and Gehrig, and Cobb and Musial and Williams. Ask the same question about football players and you'll get the names of Grange, Harmon, Unitas and perhaps Jimmy Brown. Or go to the "greats" of opera and who is named: Caruso, Callas and perhaps Pavarotti. These are those who have earned a "niche" in the hall of fame of their endeavor, a permanent place in the memories of people.

Historically, there have been several routes by which people reach this plateau, this status. There are those who were "first and most". Some people earn their place in history because they were the first to do something. So it is that Charles Lindbergh has a permanent place in history, the first to make a non-stop solo flight across the Atlantic. Sir Edmund Hillary was the first to climb to the top of Mount Everest. The Guinness Book of Records is filled with names of those who achieved the first or the most.

Others make it there because they are connected with a great event. Lincoln's fame rests partly on the fact that he freed the slaves and led the nation during a civil war. If he had served in peacetime and had not freed the slaves the chances are he wouldn't be in our presidential Hall of Fame. Paul Revere's there not because of his work as a silversmith but because he spread word that "the British are coming".

Then there are those whose names have been attached to familiar places. They lend their name to something that lasts - the Gugenheim Museum, or Bob Jones University, Oral Roberts University, or a foundation (the Ford Foundation), a prize (the Nobel Prize), a street (Madison Avenue), a city (Columbus, Ohio).

But consider our Lord. The teachings of Jesus are the finest ever recorded, but we are not here this morning because he was a great teacher. Jesus had a way with crowds, with people. The "common people" we read "heard Him gladly". But we are not here because he was a good public speaker. He was a great healer. He healed the blind, the lame, made the deaf to hear, helped those with serious emotional disturbances. But that's not why we are gathered this hour in worship. We are here because of WHO Jesus was - or better yet, WHO He is today. It is His very nature that has brought us together.

Remember that line from Emerson,

"Though we travel the world over to find the beautiful, we must carry it with us or we find it not!"

All that Jesus taught, He embodied. His very nature was a wonderful "mix" of love, of truth, of righteousness, of compassion.

And, of course, that was easy because of who He was, and this moves us to the final point of this meditation.

EASY BECAUSE OF WHO HE WAS

Easy because of who He was. Simon Peter was on the right track that day long ago up in Caesarea Philippi. It was Peter who finally answered that searching question of Jesus, "And who do you say that I am". "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God" was what he blurted out. And that is our answer as well. The Christ. The One sent from God. The Lamb that was slain before the foundation of the world. Our Lord. Our Saviour. Our Master. Put it in to whatever words you wish to. They all carry the conviction that as much of God was "in Him" as can possibly ever be in a human being. "God was in Christ" was the way that Paul put it in one of his letters.

William J. Bausch tells a story that says it as well as it can be said. The story begins by saying that God created the heavens and the earth and everything in them. He created them by His Words. And God said, "Let there be light" and there was light! This happened with everything. God was proud of His work and He was especially proud of the man and the woman He had carefully fashioned.

But the devil was jealous and angry. And one day when God was enjoying His precious creations - the man and the woman - the devil slithered up to God and asked Him why He liked those strange human creatures so much. When God opened His mouth to speak, the devil quickly and craftily put a "bond" upon God's tongue with the result that God could not speak, not even one word! And since God's creative power was in His words, the sly old devil had bound the power of God. God was in trouble.

The devil, they say, laughed at God and proceeded to corrupt the man and the woman that God had so beautifully fashioned. Ages went by and the devil came back to scoff at the silent God and to mock Him. God responded to all of this by holding up one finger. One finger. "One?" asked the devil. "Are you trying to tell me that you want to say just ONE WORD?" God nodded. The devil thought to himself,

"I suppose that even God could not do much with one word"

And so the devil removed the bond from the tongue of God. And this allowed God to speak His one Word with a quiet whisper. He spoke it for the man and the woman. It was a word that gathered up all the forgiveness, all of the love and creativity that God had stored up in His great heart during this long silence of ages and ages. He spoke the word - the one word. It was "Jesus". And that, my friend, is the Word that has changed everything!

CLOSING

Remember how John begins his Gospel account,

"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God...and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

Yes, the word was Jesus. That is who He is and that is why we come to sing His praise and try to serve Him in our daily lives. And Jesus said, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter hit the nail on the head with his answer. "The Christ, the Son of the Living God". Who do you say He is. Your response makes all the difference in the world, for:

He is the standard by which we measure our lives.
He is the embodiment of all that He taught.
He is the Word of God become flesh.

SHALL WE PRAY

In the quietness of this sanctuary on this Labor Day weekend, speak to each of us reminding us that Jesus is still our Saviour, our Lord. Our master. And let our lives reflect this in all we say and do and are. In His name we now pray. Amen.

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