St. Aidan’s Episcopal Church

Fourth Sunday of Easter

Acts 9:36-43

Psalm 23

Revelation 10:22-30

John 10:22-30

Plain Talk

If ever there was a piece of scripture that seems to speak directly to sophisticated, may I say, skeptical hearts of 21st century, while seeming as obscure and ambiguous as it did in the 1st century, this is it. As Jesus walks into the temple at the Festival of the Dedication, or as we know it, Hanukkah, the people are gathered around him, pleading for some plain talk about whether or not he could be the Messiah. Give it to us straight, Jesus. Are you, you know, the One?!

We can relate to the ancient people’s needs for straight answers. In our own time, unless one is unendingly naïve, one is automatically careful to try to sort out truth from fiction when the talk from the top seems convoluted or roundabout, rather than to the point. Sometimes they call it diplomacy, sometimes they call it spin, and sometimes, somebody, somewhere either wants, or doesn’t want, to stir the population to think one way or another until eventually, everybody is confused and sorting out truth from fiction is beyond anyone’s capacity to accomplish.

That’s the world for you, and the kind of worldly problem the people were having as they gathered around Jesus, asking their questions. They were asking worldly questions, formed from worldly perceptions, and asking them to the very One who had been telling them time and time again that he was not of this world.

One can’t help wondering that if this exchange had taken place in 2022, whether Jesus would have responded with the observation that the questions were offensive, and things would have shut down instantly. And, maybe he was offended, as he contemplated the meaning of all that was about to happen to him in Jerusalem.

Whether in the year 30-something, or 2022, nothing much has changed. Asking for plain talk about anything beyond normal human comprehension can be highly misinterpreted by the one to whom the answer is given, while at the same time be highly offensive to the one to whom the questions are directed.

When the world wants to engage in plain talk about the things of God, the world has a problem. The problem has to do with the world’s understanding of God and all that God is, and our understanding of all that God is, is frankly, anything but plain.

When we hear someone, or even ourselves, speaking about God with absolute certainty, we can be certain that what we are hearing or saying is not about really God at all. We can all speak with confidence about what we have learned, and what we know about in the world, and any aspect of life in the world that our minds can comprehend. We can even quote the scriptures with accuracy. All of of the world. But God is not of this world, and we cannot comprehend God.

God comprehends us. God knows us and gets us. We try our hardest to get God and to comprehend God, but to say we do either is to show either great arrogance or deep naivety. All we can do is keep trying to understand and to know and to realize who or what God is. In return, we inherently understand that God wants us to know, understand and comprehend more about God.

Some of our greatest discussions among the faithful have to do with trying to understand what God means. We have to be careful that our desire for plain talk about God doesn’t leave us intent on finding the meaning of scripture to the extent that when we think we have an answer and we can check a box.

Understanding God won’t work by checking boxes. Bible study is far less about finding out the meaning of God, and far more about entering into, experiencing and participating in the rich stories of human lives revealed in scriptures, which hold within them multiple meanings. Holy Scripture does not have a secret code to be deciphered and cracked open. There is nothing plain about God who, when asked how God should be addressed, answers, “I AM WHO I AM.”

Jesus reminds those gathering around him at the temple gates that he has already given them the plain truth of who he is through all he has said and done – his works. The answer regarding who he is should be plain enough. And therein lies the distances between the way the world thinks and perceives and the way of God’s knowing. The world likes titles like Lord, King, Emperor or Messiah. Each sends a message to the world that this new leader will well and truly fix things forever more. Every time we vote for a new political leader, or choose a new doctor, or find a new home, or any such example, don’t we too, secretly hope that this leader, this doctor, this home will bring us the opportunities of happiness and peace we seek?

Jesus understands this, and ignoring the question about the title of Messiah, returns again to his example analogy of shepherd and sheep. The sheep know their shepherd and trust the shepherd. Not because they have delved into his background, read his credentials, or indulged in any kind of intellectual discussion or discernment with or about him, but because they have experienced the shepherd and his way of being. In the same way, we can think of a child trusting a parent to lead in the way they always do. The trust and knowing come not from reason or intellect, but from experience.

It is not intellect and sophistication of thought through which Jesus is revealing himself to the people of his own time and to us, it is through our trust in his words and actions and our experience of him that we come to recognize him as the One we follow.

This doesn’t mean we must ever stop studying our scriptures or thinking about the meaning of Jesus’ words. We must continue to work through our thoughts and questions, allowing those thoughts to grow into even more profound questions that invite deeper and more profound study. To love God with all one’s heart, soul, mind and strength is to continually engage one’s heart, soul and mind in the discernment of our faith and our journey through this world while working always to adhere to the way of God.

As we delve deeper and deeper into the study of God’s way, we become increasingly conscious of our human propensity to slide into too much reliance on the intellect as the smartest way to understand God. Most faithful Christians would agree that God is beyond all human knowing. Even so, arguing about the word of God can get our thinking even more convoluted regarding how we describe God rather than simply allowing ourselves to experience walking side by side in the footsteps of Christ.

While there is no doubt about the importance of using our minds and intellect in our pursuit of deepening understanding of our faith, we must, today more than ever, return to the kind of personal and collective experience of God, as did the early church, knowing all the while that this experience will always be beyond our knowing and understanding, and certainly beyond our ability to describe it.

One of the reasons that the early church grew so rapidly in a highly resistant culture, was not because suddenly the people, Roman and Jew alike, were intellectually won over by dogma, but because they shared in the experience of the living God.

Loving God with heart, soul and mind, needs the very strength that Mark, Luke and Matthew add to the commandment, to get us out of our heads and into our hearts. Perhaps one way for us to understand this concept is to think of something we have seen, or somewhere we have been that seem simply too difficult to fully describe. You can think of places you have seen, or conversations that held you fast, or any aspect of creation that captivated you: a hummingbird hovering inches from your face, or a bald eagle teaching its young to fly and hunt. The first flower of Spring. A birth. A sunset or sunrise on the side of a snow-covered mountain. The list is endless, and you will have many entries to add to the list.

How many times have you tried to describe the feelings that rushed through your heart, soul and mind, as you experienced any or all of these and more? How did you manage to capture the experience, the colors, the smells, the light of that moments so that you could describe it in words, in plain talk, if you will, to those waiting to hear about your experience? When we try to tell the story, it seems difficult to feel the same sensations of knowing, of complete awe, that filled us as we stood within an overwhelming moment of experience that we inherently knew and recognized could only be of God. It is in these moments, even if we have only experienced a mere glimpse of something like this once in our lives, that we begin to understand what Jesus is saying to the people of to us today. It is in these moments we not only see God’s works, but we recognize God’s work of creation and recognize, too, our connection, our oneness with God.

Jesus said to the people begging him for plain talk answers, “I have told you and you do not believe, read “know me.” The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. I know them and they follow me….” Once there, once believing, once following in faith, once “knowing,” nothing can separate us from God. As the Father and I are one, Jesus said, if we believe, then we are one with Jesus.

It is fine to be fond of creation, to be comfortable in the world that has been created for you, but to be one with me, says Jesus, to believe in me, you must experience that other dimension that is beyond your understanding or ability to put into words. God offers the glimpses of glory, those flickering recognitions of perception into that which is beyond our worldly knowing or understanding.

God only knows, we have our differences and harmony is difficult to achieve, but Jesus isn’t talking about that. Jesus is teaching us to reach toward our unity with God, and to experience awe-inspiring moments of divine understanding, brought to us through nothing less than divine eloquence. It is in these moments, we stand as one with God. It is in these moments that our knowing of God is astonishing.

Jesus wants us to get out of our heads and into our hearts so that we can be one with him. Not in the future, not in another eternal life, but now.

The divine concept and the divine context of Jesus’ words are about unity in love. Not emotional human love, or sentimental love, as in I love my mother, my dog, trees and boats, but the kind of love we explored at the women’s retreat two weeks ago, the kind of love we call Agape. One of the Greek words for love, Agape, wherein we are conscious at all times of being surrounded by love, comforted, cared for, needing to share that love with others, or for the needs and welfare of others. In plain talk, simply sharing the gift of God’s love for us and all God’s gifts to us in body, mind and spirit. Agape. One.

We proclaim our desire for unity with Christ as he desires unity with us each week when we say the words which cannot describe the how or when, but only the desire for experience: “Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you,,,,[[1]](#footnote-1) and may we “be filled with thy grace and heavenly benediction, and made one body with him, that he may dwell in us, and we in him.”[[2]](#footnote-2) One.

In the psalmist’s words as best as he can describe, “Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us, and we are his: we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.”[[3]](#footnote-3) One.

The plain talk for Christians united in The Way of Christ, is to affirm our belief in our Creator, giving thanks for life eternal in God, and for God’s unalterable love and assurance that, no matter what the world and its future holds, for as long as we continue to experience glimpses of God’s glory, we are one with God and nothing or no one can snatch us away.

Amen

Written to the Glory of God

E. J. R. Culver+

May 5, 2021

1. BCP Holy Eucharist 1, 2: p 355 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. BCP Holy Eucharist 1: p 336 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Psalm 100:3 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)