

Sermon for Christmas 2 2010

One of the things I like about the Episcopal church is that Christmas lasts for 12 days. Growing up we knew it was bad luck to leave your Christmas tree up after New Years Day, but now I continue to send out Christmas cards and Christmas until January 6th. But we start talking about the life of Jesus when at age 12 he visits the temple in Jerusalem and astonished the elders with his wisdom and his learning. But the elders like his parents did not recognize his prophetic authority. In one of his first public lectures in his home town they said he speaks as one with authority. "It sounds like he knows what he's talking about." But it was not until his crucifixion that we are told, a centurion looked all about him and then back up at Jesus on the cross and said this man really was the son, the Christ of God. In effect Jesus really did have and speak with authority.

But Paul was the first theologian to define what it meant to be the Christ of God and Paul called him a human sacrifice to God, a payment to God or the Devil for our sins so that we all might be saved and go to Heaven when we die. And that was what the church taught until a Baptist preacher named Walter Rauschenbusch said it was what Jesus did and what he taught was what made Jesus important for us. "What Jesus taught and did was how we should live together - peacefully and productively in this life." It was the beginning of what we now know as social Gospel.

No one is disputing the message of John that whosoever believes in Jesus has everlasting life. But we now believe that you can't really believe in Jesus Christ the prophet unless you care about the poor and the suffering human

beings all around us. Our generation has some doubts about a Heaven with streets of gold and endless bliss, but most of us have no doubts about a divine call to respond to those who cry for our attention. Because on every page of the Gospels, Jesus responds to those ask for his mercy.

How is it possible that people believed that all his miracles and concern were only to demonstrate his divinity? When Elijah called on the Lord to send down a fire to consume the sacrifices of the Philistines it was to demonstrate that Elijah was one with authority to command God. But when the people asked Jesus to show them a miracle to prove his authority, Jesus told them, “No. If you do not believe what you see now, you want believe if I do another magic show for you.”

The scriptures say that when word got around that Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, the Jews decided he was a threat to the tradition and they began to plot for his assassination. For them the tradition and the authority of tradition was more important than the charity, and love of God.

They forgot that the tradition of the Torah was first to do mercy, love justice and walk humbly with God. Jesus did not invent social justice he reminded the people and us that to love God was to love God’s children.

Around 1900, a preacher named Charles Sheldon wrote a book called *In his steps*. He asked a simple question “What would Jesus do?” Sheldon said if you would walk in Jesus steps you would ask yourself, “What would Jesus do?” In 1990 someone recalled that question and started a new movement with bumper stickers and a lot of jewelry with

emblazoned with the letters WWJD. That jewelry is still for sale, but you wonder if anybody ever takes the slogan seriously. Sheldon meant for people use it as a compass for getting through this life. Very simply when you are confused about which way to go, what to do in response to the conflicts that confront us that we ask the simple question “What would Jesus do?” Could that really be a compass telling us which way to go? I think if I were a Congressman wondering which way to vote on things like health care for the poor, I might ask myself, “What would Jesus do?”

One time when time when Marie Antoinette was told that the people had no bread she said, “Well let them eat cake.” One time when I was having coffee with a doctor we heard the operator page him and I asked him if he was going to answer his page, he said, “Let them eat cake.”

I think he was serious.

I don't believe that is what Jesus would do.

Amen