

Identifying Jesus

From the Gospel: St. Matthew ix. 1. ff.

1 And he entered into a ship, and passed over, and came into his own city. 2 And, behold, they brought to him a man sick of the palsy, lying on a bed: and Jesus seeing their faith said unto the sick of the palsy; Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee. 3 And, behold, certain of the scribes said within themselves, This man blasphemeth. 4 And Jesus knowing their thoughts said, Wherefore think ye evil in your hearts? 5 For whether is easier, to say, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and walk? 6 But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (then saith he to the sick of the palsy,) Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thine house. 7 And he arose, and departed to his house. 8 But when the multitudes saw it, they marvelled, and glorified God, which had given such power unto men.

We all acknowledge that we live in an age where this matter of identity — “who am I, and who are you?” — is in crisis. Gone, it seems, or at least severely compromised, is the nucleus of family and community that provided the context for each of us, together with others, to learn who we are, where we belong, and what sort of significance can be attached to our lives. Instead, we have been handed an armful of technological wonder. We relate through the make-believe medium of the internet, allowing us an enormous sense of control over the parameters of these relationships: their frequency, their depth, their longevity. It is as easy as a mouse click. We can manufacture a persona — a way of presenting ourselves to the world — which we can contrive, change at will, manipulate, retool, or whatever we may feel like doing, with the real self safely hidden way back in the dim reaches of a little room with a keyboard, or anywhere at all with an i-phone. Anonymity is the byword. And when we do meet in person, interactions are so blasé and fraught with inoffensiveness and cool-speak — “you know, it’s like, all good” — any danger of self-revelation, of the possibility of something as embarrassing as a passion or a conviction appearing, is effectively and gratefully avoided.

But all of this starves the soul, because the question of who I really am, and who you really are, remains unanswered.

In the gospels, there is another kind of identity crisis constantly at work, but the crisis is not due to the artificiality of the identification, but rather to its exact opposite: coming to terms with the life-altering, all-consuming, ultimately inescapable Person of the Son of God. The question of His identity constantly hovered around Him:

-John the Baptist queried: *Art thou he that should come? or look we for another?* (Luke 7:20b)

- *...whom makest thou thyself?* demanded the unbelieving Pharisees (Jn. 8:53) And we hear this same refrain at His trial: *Art thou the Christ? tell us.* (Luke 22:67).

Paradoxically, absolutely accurate identification was left either to His disciples, who figured it out through love and devotion, or to demons, who knew through craven fear exactly who He was:

-*We have found the Messiah, which is , being interpreted , the Christ.* (John 1:41), cried Andrew to Simon Peter, his brother.

-Later in the Gospels, in a famous moment: [Jesus] *saith unto [His disciples], But whom say ye that I am ? And Peter answereth and saith unto him, Thou art the Christ.* (Mk. 8:29)

-During a frightening encounter with a man possessed with hordes of devils, we are told: *And, behold , they cried out , saying , What have we to do with thee, Jesus, thou Son of God? art thou come hither to torment us before the time?* (Mt. 8:29)

Our Gospel today is only more evidence, but this time it dramatically combines an attesting miracle with an implication that was worse than scandalous to the ears of the learned Jewish leaders who were present. The scene described is a vivid, emotional picture: the devotion of concerned friends for one among them who is very ill, the warm tenderness of the Savior who heals, and the hateful and jealous presence of His ever watchful enemies. There are two parallel accounts of this instance elsewhere in the Gospels (Lk. 5:18-26, Mk. 2:3-12), both of which reveal that the companions of the *man sick of the palsy* [a paralytic] were so earnest in reaching Christ that they tore open the roof of the home He was in, in order to lower the sick man down to be within Christ's reach. Their *faith* moves His heart, but instead of first pronouncing a physical healing, he utters a word of infinitely greater importance, not only for the paralytic but for every single person who comes to Jesus: *Son, be of good cheer* [or, *of good courage*]; *thy sins be forgiven thee.*

Why these words? They seem almost out of place. The mindset regarding physical illness especially typical of that time regarded disease as a direct consequence of sin, a form of divine retribution for it. The paralytic would doubtless have been in bondage to the notion that his severe handicap was in proportion to his sins. But the pronouncement of absolution by the Lord not only relieves the sick man of the guilt that his condition and his sins are linked in an unforgiving equation, but grants him the most important grace of all: a healing of his soul. Pain and disease may separate us from comfort, pleasure, liberty, and all the enjoyments of life, but sin separates us from God, who is the Source and continual Fountain of every good thing. Peace of soul may indeed coexist with even great physical suffering, but a soul without the peace of divine forgiveness of sins, no matter how well situated, is never fully at rest. The paralytic receives two healings, but they are granted in order of priority, a fact we do well to remember.

But just as the roof of the house was brought down by the zealous friends of the sick man, the Pharisees proceed typically to bring the house down upon themselves: *And, behold, certain of the scribes said within themselves, This man blasphemeth .* A parallel account renders it:

Who is this which speaketh blasphemies? Who can forgive sins, but God alone? (Lk. 5:21b).

They were utterly taken aback by Christ's words, which, if they had not been accompanied by evidence, would indeed have been far worse than presumption. Had they *not thought evil in their hearts*, they would have avoided the public exposure they were about to receive as Jesus demonstrated His authority not through mere words, *easier to say*, words that any man could utter if he so chose, but through a miraculous act that established His right to stand in God's stead, forgiving sins:

But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (then saith he to the sick of the palsy,) Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thine house. And he arose, and departed to his house.

Alfred Edersheim, considered a foremost 19th century authority on the Old Testament, himself a Jew who became a Christian and eventually an Anglican priest, puts it this way:

“And so it was the thoughts of these Scribes, which, as applied to Christ, were ‘evil’ — since they imputed to Him blasphemy — that gave occasion for offering real evidence of what they would have impugned and denied. In no other manner could the object alike of miracles and of this special miracle have been so attained as by the ‘evil thoughts’ of these Scribes, when, miraculously brought to light, they spoke out of inmost possible doubt, and pointed to the highest of all questions concerning Christ. And so it was once more ‘the wrath of man which praised Him’ [Ps. 76:10]!”

On this single occasion, a man's sins are forgiven, he is healed of paralysis, the Scribes and Pharisees once again publicly reprovved and humiliated. and the general public offered another unmistakable demonstration of the Christ's divinity: *But when the multitudes saw it, they marvelled, and glorified God, which had given such power unto men.*

But how will the identity of Jesus be undeniably reaffirmed in our own day? It shouldn't surprise us that He is constantly subject to misrepresentation. We're all aware that He is called just about anything and everything other than the incarnate Son of God, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, “God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten and not made; of the very same nature of the Father” (from the Nicene Creed). But we are also painfully aware that most these days have lost any reference points whatsoever to any of the standard affirmations of who Christ is. This 21st century world has drifted so far from the Church and the Faith that they can barely be discerned on its cold, barren horizons.

What, then, are our peers left with? Just you, and me. We are in essence the only means of validating the identity of Jesus Christ to a world which has become tragically estranged from that which was once far more familiar, and taken for granted. Through lives aglow with the Holy Spirit and lived out in loving and self-sacrificial service, using every opportunity to demonstrate Christian grace and virtue, we replicate the miraculous presence of the Savior who healed the sick and raised the dead.

We must do those things which others cannot do, in order to prove that we are in possession of something which the world can never by any means provide them. Isn't that the definition

of a miracle, really? The friends of the paralytic forced themselves into the presence of Christ. They knew there were no other options. We long to see people earnestly pursuing the Lord through our churches. We'd be glad if they came through the door, not to mention the roof! Will the liturgy, the Prayer Book, and the whole gamut of tradition, unattached to Christian lives, bring them in? No. They seek contact with Christ. They are looking for Him, and He will be found only within us. What must we do? We must love, serve, and sacrifice. We must model Christ consistently in our speech, our deportment, our choices (today's Epistle, Ephesians iv. 17 ff., is an excellent source of direction). We must be visible proof that the anger, frustration, depression, and listlessness that are the real descriptors of our times are not beyond the healing power of God.

Then once again will *the multitudes see it, and marvel, and glorify God, which has given such power unto men.*

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.