

A Proper 18  
4 September 2011  
RCL Matthew 16.28 (Gospel for A Proper 17)

### Did Jesus Make Mistakes?

This sermon is a week late. Or perhaps a better way to put it is that I saw two sermons in last weeks bible readings and this is the one I didn't do but that I've been thinking about ever since.

Perhaps you won't mind if today we do a little bible study and theologizing?

What has intrigued me for a week is a statement of Jesus that is difficult to understand as an infallible statement of God considering the historical circumstances. Remember, last week we heard Jesus say, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom." (Matthew 16.28) "Son of Man" is a title that Jesus uses to refer to Himself, so He is saying that at least some of those listening to Him will not die before they see Him coming in the fullness of God's kingdom. Two thousand years later all His hearers are dead and Jesus has not yet returned to establish the fullness of God's kingdom (at least as far as most of us can see). Have you ever wondered about this statement? Was Jesus wrong? What gives?

Let's add to our inquiry another statement of Jesus that is in error. In Mark 2.26 Jesus, referring to an incident in the Old Testament, says this: "[David] entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions." You can read the incident for yourself in First Samuel 21.1-6. Jesus is talking about sabbath observance, but the point we want to hear for our purposes is that he identifies Abiathar as the high priest when this happened. That's a mistake; Ahimelech was high priest at this point; only later, when David was king, did Abiathar become high priest. So, did Jesus make a mistake?

Let's look at one more incident that seems to be at odds with our general understanding of Jesus and His teaching. Remember the incident when a non-Jewish Canaanite woman came to Jesus and asked Him to heal her daughter? He seemed a little rough in His reply of denial: it is not right to take the children's food and give it to dogs. She quipped, yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the table. Jesus had said that He had been sent only to the Jews, not the gentiles, but He healed her daughter anyway. (Matthew 15.21-28). Has Jesus changed His mind? Was He wrong in His attitude before the woman came to Him?

These incidents raise the question: can we trust Jesus and His teaching? Could He ever be mistaken? If so, how do we tell which teachings to believe and which to discount if they are in error? If Jesus was God living among human beings in human form, how could Jesus make a mistake? All fair questions.

Let's start our theological thinking by asking the question: what was the work of Jesus? He did a lot of things in His earthly life: He healed the sick, He taught, He confronted injustice, He ate with His friends and with outcasts, He laughed, He scolded, He prayed, He gathered followers, He was afraid, He died, He lived again, and so on.

But what is His work; what is the main thing God wanted of Him; what encompassed all the activities of His life into one whole? Our theological thinkers say that it is to unite human beings with God in an unbreakable union that raises humankind (and perhaps all of creation) into an intimate, joyful closeness to God that is beyond natural human capacity; it is what we call salvation. Quite a mouthful, isn't it? Let's repeat to get it clear in our minds: the work of Jesus is to unite human beings with God in an unbreakable union that raises humankind (and perhaps all of creation) into an intimate, joyful closeness to God that is beyond natural human capacity; it is what we call salvation.

There are lots of facets to this work: forgiveness of sin, healing of wounds, fulfillment of life possibilities, enlargement of human capacity to include something of divinity, and more. But the main work is as we have described.

What were the tools, so to speak, that God employed for Jesus' work? We can think of three elements we should distinguish. One is the person who does the work. Who is the person who looked out of the eyes of Jesus, just as we can ask who is the person who looks out of your eyes or mine. The answer is that Person is God, or more precisely in Christian thought, one of the three Persons of God, the one we call Word, Son, Pattern, Wisdom, and lots more. The second tool in the uniting of divinity with humanity is the nature of God Himself, that is, what makes God God. This nature includes characteristics such as all-knowing, all-powerful, all-present, all-forgiving, all-loving, all-self-sufficient, and so on. The third tool in the union is human nature, what makes a human being a human being and not an aardvark or a zebra. This human nature includes things like a body with its dna, a soul, a mind, a will, limited knowledge, limited power, limited presence, limited sufficiency, limited capacities all around.

Now, this is where things get a bit dicey. We don't have any other experience of something or someone like Jesus. Other than Jesus, we've never encountered someone who is both divine and human, so we can't quite work out how such a one operates. How is Jesus divinely all-knowing and humanly somewhat ignorant? How is Jesus divinely all-powerful and humanly weak? How is Jesus divinely all-sufficient and humanly totally dependant? How is Jesus as Divine never less than the fullness of Himself as God and at the same time humanly possessing His existence only moment by moment, and growing in time?

As we look at the sketchy stories of Jesus in the gospels, I think what we see is a real, limited human being acting on and through the foundation of divinity, humanity allied with divinity, neither one cancelling out the other, but working in a teamwork that honors both realities. All of this seems to be beyond human imagining; it certainly is beyond my imagining, though I catch glimpses of what it means. Frail human efforts are supported and confirmed by divine presence and approval.

So where does that leave us? Can we trust what Jesus says and what He does, or not? How do we distinguish the human frailty from the divine assurance?

The answer to that last question is that we have to think about and pray about and love about the Person we know as Jesus Christ and do that throughout our lives. Throughout our lives we grow in experience and wisdom and those human qualities will reveal more and more what Jesus is about. We need to ask questions. We need to puzzle out possibilities. We need to be imaginative. We need to be humble. Sometimes we even need to be angry. It's all part of how we know God living among us in Jesus.

Can we trust what Jesus says and what He does? Yes, emphatically, when we consider what His work is. He has succeeded magnificently through His life and His death in uniting human life to divine life and in the process raising humanity to heights of living experience that are divinely eternal.

In accomplishing that work, Jesus was and is a real human being. So He was mistaken about the immediate return of Himself to earth to bring in God's kingdom. He was mistaken about who was high priest when David ate the bread in the Temple. He was mistaken in His early understanding that He was only for the Jews; He grew into a larger understanding before His death. He got tired. He got sick. He got impatient. These human qualities need not disturb us. They are signs of His real humanity. For me, in this regard, a passage out of Luke's gospel takes on great weight. It's the gospel writers observation after Mary and Joseph found the teen-age Jesus talking with the teachers in the Temple: "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor." (Luke 2.52) Jesus increased. He developed, He got better, as a human being.

What we have to decide to trust for ourselves is: Did Jesus accomplish the main work that God gave Him to do? Did Jesus unite you and me and everyone to God so closely that we can never be separated? Did Jesus ensure that eternal life is for you and me and all, and that eternal life (beginning even now!) is joyful and fulfilling beyond our wildest dreams. Will we trust the love of Jesus? Will we trust the obedience of Jesus? Will we trust the leadership of Jesus? Will we trust the call of Jesus, the call to belong to God, the call that is not only from the human man but from God also?

That's what our work is.