



## CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

I speak to you today as a sinner to sinners, as the beloved of God to God's beloved, as one called to bear witness to those called to bear witness. Amen.

About three weeks ago I gave a sermon entitled, *Is Michigan Football A Cult?* And perhaps not so strangely, it got a little bit of a pickup on the social media. A lot of people have taken a look at this. And I was kind of excited about that. It's always fun when people look at it. And I received an email this week from a longstanding parishioner. He is someone who I admire greatly. He has background in philosophy and political science, a PhD, and he said to me, I know what you are doing. You are using Robert Bellah's idea of civil religion.

And he's right. I was using Robert Bellah's idea of civil religion, which is that in any collective, there is a kind of religiosity. There's a kind of aspiration. There's a kind of ritual. And the important thing in life is to not confuse that very natural impulse to create religion and create a kind of sacramental machinery with the gospel of Jesus Christ, which is always greater and always more important, which addresses us as God speaks to us through Jesus.

He said to me, I really loved the civil religion, but when you bring up Jesus, I get totally lost. I can't follow it, and I find myself disengaged. Now, this is not the first time I've had these kinds of conversations with Episcopalians. Episcopalians can go to church day in and day out for years and then suddenly be struck by the fact that they can know Jesus. And in the past, I have sometimes blamed them. You're here all the time. How do you not know it's about Jesus? Look, our sponsor. You participate in the Eucharist, you sing the hymns. And in the past, sometimes I've blamed myself. What have I been doing to not communicate the gospel more clearly? What do I need to do about myself? What do I need to do about how I teach?

But this last week, instead, I found myself moved with compassion because this person was being so honest with me. He had been born in this church, raised in this church, had come to Sunday School, was participating in the youth group as he was a young person, and yet Jesus was somehow a stranger to him. And this caused me to think a great deal, and I want to ask the question today. I want to ask three questions today. Who is Jesus? Who is Jesus for you? Who is Jesus for us?

These are the questions we have to ask, and we have to answer them because everything hinges upon them. If we don't know who Jesus is, everything we do in this church is in vain. Everything that we have tried to accomplish is in vain. Everything that we have tried to do is no better or worse than any other type of civil religion. We need to know Jesus. We need to know Jesus individually, and we need to know Jesus corporately. That gospel has to somehow permeate everything we do.

And Americans have a tendency, when it comes to Jesus, to make Jesus into their own image. We're like people who go looking for depth in a well and see our reflection in the water below us and think that we have found that depth when we've only found the reflection of ourselves. And so the church has built within its practices ways to know who Jesus is and to know who Jesus is for us, and to know who Jesus is for each one of us. And that is we read the scriptures. And to answer the question, who is Jesus? I invite you to reacquaint yourself with the scriptures. And if there is a piece of scripture that confronts you, or triggers you, or bothers you, or fills you, take note of it because it's often in those kinds of de-centering moments that the truth of Jesus is expressed.

And we come together on this altar and celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation. We participate in the body and blood of Christ. And that is another way we know Jesus. We know Jesus intimately, sacramentally, through the meal that he started with His apostles, in which He said, this is my body. This is my blood. We are to know Jesus in that sacramental mystery.

And finally, we know Jesus by knowing each other, by meeting each other in the struggles we share, and the joys that we experience together, and the work that we do and the love that runs through us. We have been told by scripture, Paul says it well in 1 Corinthians right around the time he's talking about the food before idols, that we have become the body of Christ. We see Jesus in each other.

And in today's gospel, we're given an incredibly important way of learning who Jesus is for you and me and for us. In the Gospel of Mark, it is the only gospel that actually has embedded in it a kind of statement about who Jesus is. It's found on the first verse of the first page of the gospel. It begins completely abruptly, as Mark likes to do, with a complete economy. He says, the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Mark is unafraid to call Jesus the Son of God.

And in our reading today from Mark, we have the fundamental way in which we begin to recognize the implications of what it means for Jesus to be the Son of God. He speaks with authority. The word in Greek is *exousia*. It's the root of the word exude. Power and authority comes from Jesus. Mark only uses that word when he's talking about Jesus, and it's most often only used in the scriptures

when it's referring to God's power and authority as the creator, preserver, and redeemer of all existence.

So when Mark says that unlike the scribes Jesus taught with authority, this is making a huge claim for us to notice. That authority is from Christ and that authority that Christ expresses is the same exact authority that God operates with. This is what it means to say that Jesus is the Son of God. It's to say that Jesus is the perfect revelation of God. And yet there is within it a kind of embedded invitation to know Jesus in a different way, because that authority becomes real in our lives the extent to which we accept that invitation by Jesus to relationship.

Let me see if I can tell you what I mean by this. There is in the Gospel of Mark a kind of knowledge of love. By that I mean, what sets Christianity apart from, say, Buddhism, is that I can know Jesus in a way that I cannot know the Buddha, that anyone can know the Buddha. To know the Buddha is to know an enlightened soul that found his way to a path of knowledge that is open to anyone provided they could have the kind of knowledge that the Buddha developed through meditation and reflection and the practice of compassion. But to know Jesus is to actually know Him as He is, to know Him as intimately as you and I know each other. That is the promise of Christianity, that you'll know Jesus through love. That personal relationship will transform you. Christ will live in you through the Holy Spirit, and you will be alive. So to accept Jesus's authority is not simply to bow before Jesus, not simply to worship Jesus, it's to be in living relationship with Jesus and to know Him and to be comforted by Him.

Years ago, I was talking to a veteran of World War II and he told me his story. He was on the beach in Iwo Jima and he was hiding behind a berm. The bullets were hitting all around him and he was convinced he was going to die, and he had a vision, came out of nowhere. He saw Christ on a cross and he saw himself hanging on each branch of that cross, on the cross section. And his own legs were dangling and everything else was darkness except for that Christ. And he stopped for a moment while everything was going on, and he held on in his mind's eye to that Christ who kept him alive and told him he was beloved. The Christ of relationship, that is what it means to ascribe authority to Jesus, to live in relationship with Jesus, to sense the authority of Jesus's voice.

The second thing I want you to see in today's gospel is that there was this incredible experience of astonishment. [*Ekplesso* 00:12:51] is the Greek. They were astonished when they heard that authority. That to me is a challenge to us today. When was the last time you were astonished by what you heard in church? When was the last time you were astonished at your faith? When was the last time you took an incredible leap of faith and found in it God holding you by the hand? Usually in our context, it happens when you are faced with death or disease or addiction or something that brings you to the end of your rope. And this was true

even in Jesus' time. This is why the demonic person, the person who was experiencing possession, knew who Jesus was.

But that astonishment is not merely for those of us who have reached out in the most difficult times in our lives and found God. That astonishment is God's promise to you. So my invitation to us today as we answer, who is Jesus? As we ask, who is Jesus to you and me? Who is Jesus to us? My invitation today is for us to reacquaint ourselves with that astonishment. Let us take steps together in this next year. Let us move forward in faith together this year. What can you do in your faith life that will be a new direction, a new moment, something that you will tentatively and fearfully and faithfully walk forward in? That is the challenge of this 2024 for us.

I finish today with a simple passage and a reminder to us that we are standing on the shoulders of great people. Not just the great people who built this church, and they are great, and not just the saints among us, and you are great. I have never been prouder of a group of people than I am of this congregation. I mean, the people who from year one of Christian history stepped forward in faith, they were astonished. They followed the authority of Christ, and they have given us this legacy, this faith, this love, this spirit, which continues, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

It's on page 10 and it's from Ignatius of Antioch. This is a letter he wrote as he was making his way to his death and martyrdom. But for me, the archives are Jesus Christ. The inviolable archives are His cross, death, and resurrection, and the faith, which comes through Him. By these things I want through your prayers to be justified.

Now, I want to say one last thing about the archives. What he's meaning is the things about him that matter most. The thing he wants to be remembered by, the deepest level of his identity, the thing that he holds onto with all his might so that his feet dangle as he is going to his death is Jesus and His death and resurrection and His cross. This year as we move forward in faith, may each of us know that archive. May that archive include us and count us, and may we count on it, may we know that authority, and may we all be astonished.

Amen.