

Here is a piece on the Fourth of July that I love. “Planning committees are conferring for the family Fourth of July picnics and deciding who will make the fried chicken and who will make the pies, the tough ones, and who will make coleslaw or bring the pickles. Fried chicken is a true test of a cook – it’s your senior term paper, the test that separates the summa cum laudes from the drones and the dullards. Anybody can slap ground beef on a grill, but to fry chicken so that the result honors that chicken’s life and sacrifice is no easy thing. Some families just haul in a bucket of takeout, which is okay if you are giving a birthday party for a small child, but for the Fourth of July it seems sort of sad – to put this sodden, greasy, depressing food in front of those you love when with a little effort you could have produced something distinguished. What if Thomas Jefferson hadn’t bothered to write the Declaration of Independence himself? What if he just downloaded a bunch of stuff he found doing a search on independence – actually it was about indolence and pendants, the kind that hang around your neck, but close enough, and he just slapped it together and they all signed it – John Hancock and Franklin and Washington and Madison and John Adams, and they said, ‘Let’s go snarf up some greasy chicken and maybe buy a gallon of potato salad.’ It wouldn’t have been the same country.

“Potato salad. Don’t get me started. People who are asked to bring potato salad to the picnic and instead stop at a convenience store and get some plastic tubs full of mushy potatoes, salad dressing, and mustard to give it that eerie yellow color. Why insult us? Do you think we’ve never had real potato salad and we can’t tell the difference? Do you think we’re not Americans and don’t know potato salad? Do we look Canadian to you? Is there something Icelandic about us? Potato salad. No big mystery about it. It has hard-boiled eggs, fresh chopped celery, chives, green onions, real mayonnaise, maybe a little sour cream, plenty of dill, and on top you spread some sliced eggs with a sprinkling of paprika. The great potato salad makers of the world are passing away, and you and I should emulate their art lest this country slide into barbarism and ignorance and decay. Standards must be upheld....

“Every child has the right to real potato salad and to hold a sparkler in his or her little hand and wave it around. What magic, to trace your little arc of light against the dark. Surely there have been thousands of men and women who gave their lives to art, to music, to the gaiety of language, who felt the first stirrings of artistry when they helped Grandma make a potato salad, a great potato salad that had texture, had some crunch, and the green onions working with the egg yolks and the paprika and dill and the richness of mayonnaise, which cries out for accompaniment with a fried drumstick, still warm with a crackly skin and flaky meat. Oh, this is art, to take the humble potato and the stupid chicken and ennoble them with the craft of cooking – and is this not the meaning of our country, to take what is common and make something beautiful of it? To stand on the lawn in the twilight and wave your torch and draw big loops of light and slashes and make bold, brilliant strokes? HAPPY FOURTH OF JULY! (LIFE AMONG THE LUTHERANS, Garrison Keillor, p. 156-157)

OK, now down to some preaching! The gospel of Mark, the first one written, the one that gave us the art form of the gospel, was all about answering the question “Who is this Jesus?” And through all of the various sayings and stories and healings, Mark is giving us his answer. Today we hear that Jesus is, in addition to being a healer, exorciser, person who could call disciples, He is also a prophet. But the big question of Mark’s gospel – and for all of us – is this: Was Jesus truly God? There is no doubt whatever that He claimed it. Those who assert, “Jesus was just another preeminently holy moral teacher,” haven’t a theological leg to stand on. On Palm Sunday, the people of Jerusalem cheered Jesus through the streets; the following Friday morning, that same crowd shouted, “Crucify Him!” Something dramatically decisive must have caused that

change. The gospels tell us what it was. When the high priest challenged Jesus to say if He was “The Messiah, the Son of the Blessed God,” Jesus answered forthrightly, “I am.” (Mk 14:61-62)

There are only 3 options: He was a madman, like someone claiming to be Napoleon or Elvis, or a charlatan working the crowds, or what He claimed. But there is nothing in what Jesus is reported to have said and done that suggests madness; in fact, it shows Him stark raving sane – saner than most of us dare to be. He earned nothing; He had no home; He depended on other’s kindness for His food; He died naked. Which leaves one option (adapted from GOD: THE OLDEST QUESTION, William J. O’Malley, p. 132-133). And the reason why we are all here. He is God.

But that leads to further difficulties. If Jesus was God, did He have the use of the divine knowledge in the womb? When Joseph took Him into the carpenter shop, did He just pretend He didn’t know a thousand better ways to make a chair? More seriously, in the garden of Gethsemane, if Jesus had the full use of divine knowledge, He would have known He would make it – after 3 days. Worst of all, at the end, when He cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” was He just quoting Psalm 22 to impress the crowd? Was He faking doubt and near-despair?

More profoundly even than that, if Jesus was FULLY human, He must have known doubt. That is precisely what separates us from animals on the one side and God on the other: uncertainty. What’s more, full humanity is achieved only slowly, by growing, by surmounting unexpected obstacles. It would be rankly unfair to ask us to fashion our lives on a man who knew everything that was going to happen in His life before it happened. To accept, for example, a Jesus who was both human but not confused by sexual desires is not only impossible but an insult to the thoroughness of the incarnation. Nor will the problem be solved by some theological sleight of hand that postulates that Jesus sort of kept one intelligence separate from the other. No, we deal with what theologians call the ‘scandal of the incarnation’ every time we are serious about Jesus fully human and fully divine, and it will forever remain a mystery. (Adapted from o’Malley, BECOMING A CATECHIS: WAYS TO OUTFOX TEENAGER SKEPTICISM, p. 75-78) As one of my professors was fond of saying: “If you maximize Jesus’ humanity you maximize His divinity. It will always be a mystery, so relax – you are NOT going to be the one to figure it all out!”

Second, here are some pieces of an answer as to who Jesus is – for me, John Durbin, which I hope might resonate with you.

For me, Jesus is a man who was deeply in touch with His humanity, His manhood, though He is God’s son. He was a man who experienced the same human longings and passions as we do, though He never sinned. Down-to-earth, He was sensitive to human feelings. He was compassionate and not reluctant to show emotions of joy, sorrow, tears, and anger.

Jesus was a teacher. He was not sophisticated. He often preached in parables using images and realities with which the people were familiar. He never hedged, never avoided the ‘hard sayings,’ but took people where they were. He was not upset if at first they did not understand Him or even walked away from Him.

He was a person of integrity. There were no contradictions in His message, His life, or His ministry.

He was a patient man. He was not given to panic. He was stable. The one exception was with the self-righteous who He called hypocrites and white-washed tombs. He wasn’t much into piety because it so often seemed to be a cover masking something missing. He was patient even with those who maligned Him,

knowing that in the end, the truth would prevail. He was able to convince others by the sheer power of His personality and message.

He was a man who understood that suffering and death were the key to ultimate success, His resurrection. The same is true for us, although we generally pout or complain when we suffer and do just about everything we can to avoid death or at least postpone it as long as possible.

He was a lover. He constantly talked about love. When asked which was the greatest commandment, He answered: 'You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these 2 commandments.' (Mt 22:37-40). He invited people to share His love and be in intimate friendship with Him. This love would also connect people with His Father. (adapted from Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, CHURCH, Spring, 1997, Vol 12 #1, p. 5-6)

Finally, when C.S. Lewis was asked what we are to make of Christ, he responded that it was not a question of what we make of Him – but what He intends to make of us. And so a true story to conclude. An army Lieutenant went out in the dark of night to rescue a wounded man in his platoon trapped in no-man's land in Vietnam. The soldier was saved, but the Lieutenant was fatally wounded in the effort. Sometime later the officer's parents invited the man their son had died to save over for dinner. The evening was a disaster. The man came drunk and was obnoxious, rude, and filled with off-color stories. As their guest left, the father closed the door behind him in disgust and the mother dissolved into tears, saying, "Just think, our beloved son died for somebody like that." (adapted from Alex Gondola, LECTONARY HOMILETICS, Aug-Sept 2007)

That's the story of Jesus Christ. He died for you and me – and not only when we are at our best – but at our worst too. So what will He make of us? We will answer that with our lives. Amen.