

19th Sunday after Pentecost 2011

“Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? Is this not the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother Mary? And his brothers James, Joses, Simon and Judas? And his sisters, are they not all with us? Where did his man get all these things? And they were offended/scandalized at him. . “ (Matthew 13: 54-56)

Why? Why were Jesus’ listeners in his home town offended, scandalized? What do you think?

I think there is something about Jesus that we frequently forget or overlook- that in his own day, people encountered him as a “wisdom teacher” of some kind, and this proved to be rather unsettling for them. We tend to treat Jesus within the framework of one of two categories- as either a prophet or in some metaphorical sense as a priest. But there was a third category in the mid-Eastern context, a category related to, but different from, both the prophets and the priests- those who were “teachers of wisdom”, those who taught the ancient traditions about the *transformation* of human beings, about what real wisdom looks like. These “wisdom teachers” were not confined to Judaism, but could be found throughout the world of the near and far East. Within the history of Israel, the authors of Hebrew wisdom literature such as Ecclesiastes, Job and Proverbs fit into this category. And when the people of Jesus’ own day encountered him, they were struck by the fact that this local village boy seemed to embody in some way this wisdom tradition.

We probably need to pause for a moment, though, and reflect for a bit on how different this is to what goes on in our own day, in the way in which we meet Jesus or present Jesus to others. Very often, our story line goes something like this- Jesus is the eternal Son of God, incarnate of the Virgin Mary, who died for our sins, was resurrected from the dead, and now sits in glory at God's right hand. All true. All fine and good. But it is very different from how people first met Jesus. You see, they didn't know any of our story-line. They first encountered Jesus not as savior, not as eternal Son of God, not as risen from the dead. They encountered him as a teacher of wisdom, as one who was speaking about what human life looks like when it has been transformed by God. And this encounter with Jesus as a wisdom teacher either pulled them towards him or pushed them away from him- it was the repulsion side that we hear about in today's reading.

Very often, it seems to me, we get ahead of the story when we try to speak about Jesus today. We want people to get to the end of the narrative first, get to the salvation piece, without first allowing or enabling people to meet Jesus, the teacher of wisdom. We Eastern Christians should know better than this, because Jesus the Wisdom, the Sophia, of God, plays such a predominant role in our theology, our spirituality, our liturgy, and even in the naming of our churches, like the great "Agia Sophia", the great church of the Holy Wisdom in Constantinople. The cry "Wisdom, let us attend!" echoes within our liturgy, especially around the reading of biblical texts.

But we too forget this ancient way of thinking about and approaching Jesus. And we begin to think and to act as if believing certain things *about* Jesus- that He is Son of God, crucified for our transgressions and the conqueror of death- is enough. But

believing things *about* Jesus is never enough. It's the encounter with him as the wisdom of God that has the capacity to transform us and transform our lives which is *foundational*. When we treat Jesus simply as an object of belief and of worship- which is our great temptation- we can, in effect, keep him at arm's length, unable to confront us with that wisdom of God which will inevitably upset our lives and turn our thinking upside down.

But back to the question with which I began: why were the people scandalized/offended by Jesus? I think because two things came together in him which were very hard for them to understand. On the one hand, there was something very familiar- he was one of their home-town boys; they knew him; they knew his family; they knew where he came from; they knew how he had grown up. And on the other hand, he seemed to embody a wisdom that came from elsewhere- "where does he get all these things?" they ask. How does one of our kids act like a wisdom teacher? How can this happen? They can't put together both the familiar and the amazing. They're not offended because Jesus has made claims for himself or because he has told them that he is the "savior". They are offended because in the parables he has been telling them, they sense a wisdom, the origin of which they cannot figure out. And so they are scandalized.

Jesus has been teaching in the form of parables- this is precisely what evoked the response of the people in his hometown- parables that catch you up short, parables that force you to think about things you would often rather avoid, parables that challenge conventional religion and conventional beliefs in a very radical fashion. One

of the hallmarks of wisdom teachers was their use of pithy sayings, and puzzles, and parables, rather than prophetic pronouncements or divine decrees.

Jesus spoke to people about profound realities, about God, and about God's Kingdom and about how this Kingdom was coming here and now into this world. But when he talked about these things he talked about them in images and words that were ordinary, images and words that were not theological or ecclesiastical. When he wanted to talk about these profound realities, he spoke about fields and seeds and trees and weeds and treasures and fish and nets.

And he spoke about these things in such a way as to raise timeless and deeply personal questions about the transformation of human consciousness and human life: What does it mean to die before you die? How do you go about losing your little life in order to find a bigger one? Is it possible to live on this planet with a generosity, abundance, fearlessness, beauty and compassion that mirrors the Divine Life itself? How do you forgive everyone and everything and live like the God who sends rains on both the good and the bad? These are "wisdom questions", questions about the transformation of our lives, and they are almost the entire concern of Jesus' teaching.

It seems to me that one of our greatest failures in proclaiming the gospel over the centuries is that we have wanted to jump ahead to the tail end of the story without giving people a chance to meet Jesus the teacher of wisdom, Jesus the Wisdom of God. But now, maybe, we have, through God's great providence entered that time in our history when telling people *about* Jesus, *about* his work of salvation, is not enough, will no longer suffice. What may now be necessary is a return to the Jesus we meet in the

gospels, a return to Jesus the Teacher who embodies and confronts us with that Wisdom of God which can transform our consciousness and change our lives!