

**+ John 7:40-43 + Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up? +
+ 2nd Sunday after Christmas + 4 January 2009 +**

It seems rather odd to still be talking about Christmas on January 4th. Christmas Eve and Day have come and gone. New Year's Eve and Day have come and gone. Most people have already taken down their decorations, but here we are still in the midst of the Christmas season. In fact, the Christmas season continues until Tuesday, which is the day when we celebrate the Epiphany of our Lord—the revealing of the Light of the world to the world with the visit of the wise men.

So here we are with one more opportunity to marvel at the Word made flesh. As we bring this Christmas season to a close, it's important for us to be reminded of the real Jesus. You see, at this time of year, it's tempting to miss Jesus for who he really is and why he came. Most people will admit that a child named Jesus was likely born in a stable in Bethlehem 2000 years ago, but few will admit that that child was and is the true God and Savior of the world. Few know the real Jesus, and we wouldn't know him either, if not for his Word. As we take a closer look at John 7, let's ask and answer the question, **WILL THE REAL JESUS PLEASE STAND UP?**

To know the real Jesus, we need to first ask and answer, **"Who is he?"** That question was also on the hearts and minds of the Jerusalem crowds. Jesus' popularity was peaking, while opposition from the religious leaders was starting to gain steam. Jesus had already performed his first miracles, including the feeding of a crowd of over 5000 with five loaves of bread and two fish. He had healed thousands and even raised the dead. He preached with an authority unheard among the rabbis, because he didn't base his authority in some rabbinic school, but spoke as God himself.

His popularity had grown to the point that it was difficult for him to go to the city of Jerusalem without being crushed by the crowds. Still Jesus made his way down from the northern region of Galilee to Jerusalem to celebrate the ancient Feast of Tabernacles and commemorate Israel's forty years of wandering in the desert. On the last day of the feast, Jesus proclaimed, **"If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him."** These were bold words. He was basically claiming to be the source of eternal life for souls left thirsty by temptation and guilt and sin.

So who was this Jesus who made such bold claims? The crowds started to wonder, and our text allows us to listen in on their discussions. Most people in the crowds knew at least a little Scripture, and most were familiar with the different promises about the coming Savior.

"On hearing his words, some of the people said, 'Surely this man is the Prophet.'" About 1500 years before, the great prophet Moses had promised the coming of an even greater "Prophet". He had foretold, "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him." This Prophet would be greater than Moses, who had received God's Law and led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. This Prophet would proclaim God's will and teach with an authority like no other. That certainly described Jesus.

Another group made an even bolder claim, **"Others said, 'He is the Christ.'" Basically, they claimed Jesus was more than just "the Prophet". He was God's Anointed One come to deliver God's people from the burden of their sins. He had come to be a blessing to all nations and was the fulfillment of all those promises going back to Adam and Eve. Over and over, Jesus had proven that he was, indeed, God's Anointed come to save the world from its sins. With divine power, he healed diseases, cast out demons and raised the dead. He accomplished what only God himself could accomplish, and he fit every prophecy to a tee.**

...But the discussion soon turned into argument between those who believed Jesus to be the Christ and those who objected. Jesus' popularity was such that the crowds knew where he hailed from or at least where he grew up. Jesus had grown up as the son of a poor carpenter and his wife, but there was always a question about the timing of his birth. Jesus had also grown up in the backwater town of Nazareth in the backwater region of Galilee "up north" from the city of Jerusalem. In the eyes of many, Nazareth and Galilee didn't compare to the great holy city of Jerusalem.

So those with objections about Jesus asked, **"How can the Christ come from Galilee? Does not the Scripture say that the Christ will come from David's family and from Bethlehem, the town where David lived?"** They questioned Jesus' home region, family line and hometown. Sadly, even though most knew a little Scripture, they didn't know it well enough to put all the promises together. They missed the real Jesus.

No one really knew Jesus, but no one had a problem ripping apart his lineage or hometown. It seems no one ever asked about his birthplace, which was Bethlehem. All simply assumed he came from Nazareth of Galilee. Even so they forgot the promise to Galilee that God made through his prophet Isaiah, ***“In the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles... The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.”*** They remembered Micah’s promise about Bethlehem, but forgot that the Messiah would come as a humble shepherd, not a glorious judge.

They questioned Jesus’ lineage. Some even later questioned if he was legitimate child, but no one ever inquired if his lineage was directly from David as promised. These objections kept them from knowing the real Jesus. They objected to his humble and lowly nature, his lack of pomp and glory. They heard the Word, which he proclaimed, but didn’t listen to it. They didn’t realize that the Word of God stood before them in the flesh.

So do we know the real Jesus? It’s tempting to get caught up in our society’s view of Jesus. He seems so accessible, but that Jesus leaves us with as lifeless a Christ as the one in the crèche. The real Jesus is more than a cute, cuddly baby whose birthday we celebrate in the middle of winter. He’s more than a great teacher who gives us wise sayings to remember as we peel the days off our 365-day calendars. He’s more than a model for a good life or a hero who comes to bring outward peace and prosperity for a happy life. The real Jesus is the Word made flesh. The real Jesus is the promised Messiah, the Christ, the Prophet, the Son of David and David’s Lord.

This Jesus does not come to us in a grand display of glory and power, but in humility. He comes not in terrors as the King of kings, but as the gentle Friend of sinners. In the early 4th Century, a North African theologian named Athanasius had this to say about Jesus, ***“The Lord did not come to make a display. He came to heal and to teach suffering men. For one who wanted to make a display would’ve come to appear and dazzle the beholders. But for him who came to heal and to teach the way, he didn’t come merely to dwell here, but to put himself at the disposal of those who needed him...”*** Jesus came to heal, not to judge, to put himself at our disposal, not dazzle us with his glory. When we realize that about the real Jesus, he becomes much more accessible than the Jesus our world expects. To know the real Jesus, then, is truly a miracle of God’s grace!

So did you notice how we could positively identify who Jesus really is? Where did we go to find that out? We didn’t take an opinion poll or ask a panel of scholars or even give our best guess. No, we simply went to the Word. We went back to the prophecies of old to find out who the real Savior is. Only in the Word of God can we know the Word made flesh. Only in the Word of God can we know the truth about the real Jesus.

The Christ Child, though, doesn’t want us to merely hear the Word, but he wants us to listen to it, to make it our own, to live and breathe and eat the Word of God. That was the problem with the Jerusalem crowds 2000 years ago. They heard the Word, but didn’t take it as their own. ***“Thus the people were divided because of Jesus.”***

That’s the reality of standing on the side of truth, of knowing and following and trusting in the real Jesus. Only through his Word can we know who Jesus really is, but most will object to that. Therefore it’s all the more important for us, young and old, to get to know him even better. It’s all the more important for us to listen attentively to his Word, by which the real Jesus holds us to himself, because people are still divided about Jesus out there, and that divide is widening.

In spite of that, we look back through the Word and see the real Jesus. There in the Bethlehem manger, we see the real Jesus, who came to bring us peace with God. We see the real Jesus, who came to travel the highways and byways of Palestine, proclaiming the good news of his forgiveness and pouring out the water of life to countless thirsty souls, including our own. We see the real Jesus, who came to reveal himself to Jew and Gentile as the Light of the world, the Water of life, and the Good Shepherd. We see the real Jesus, who came to suffer our blows, our punishment, our death, and be placed in our tomb. We see the real Jesus, who came to defeat death once and for all to open our graves and the gates of heaven. We see the real Jesus, the son of Mary and Son of God, who came to ascend to the highest heavens to rule all things for our good. We see the real Jesus, who now comes to us through Word and water and bread and wine for forgiveness and our salvation. We see the real Jesus, who will come in glory to bring us to be in the real home of heaven with him.

In a world of uncertainty, give thanks that you know the real Jesus, and no one can take that away from you. Why? Because in the Word you have everything you need to know about the Word made flesh for us. So celebrate the real reason for the season—the real Jesus! Amen.