

Lifted up

HN/SS 01/05/05 am

Reading: Numbers 21:4-9, John 3:27 . I Corinthians 15:1-28

Study Text: John 8:25-30

Sing Psalms: 34:1-9, 34:10-15, 70, 121

The Jews did not like what Jesus was telling them. He told them ‘if you do not believe that I am, if you do not believe that I am sent by the Father and that I have come to give life, then you will remain in your sin’. ‘You will remain in your sin and you will die in your sin’. How did they respond to the truth? Jesus spoke only the truth. How do people respond to the truth of the gospel when it is preached today?

They respond in different ways of course. Some respond positively – they listen and believe. But many respond negatively. They refuse to listen and refuse to believe. Pride in their hearts leads them to respond negatively.

Firstly some will just walk away. They will vote with their feet as we say – and as we see. They will not listen any longer to the Word of God. ‘We do not have to stay and listen to you’ they say – we will go where we can hear what we want to hear. ‘We will go and listen to a dynamic preacher’ they say. One of the greatest curses upon the evangelical church today is the lack of commitment of the people of God to the ministry of the church. Many treat the church like a supermarket – they come to get what they want and move on.

‘Sinners in the hands of an angry God’ was one of the most famous sermons preached by Jonathan Edwards. He read it. Martyn Lloyd Jones hardly ever raised or lowered his voice. He did not want to be known as a dynamic preacher. He wanted people to come and hear the word of God, not the words of a great preacher. People today come to be entertained – or else take a nap. They are not willing to put the effort into listening to the word of God.

The Jews could have walked away from Jesus when he warned them that they would die in their sin. But that would not have stopped him preaching. He had crowds listening to him, crowds thirsting for life – even as the Pharisees thirsted for his blood. He said *other sheep I have that are not of this fold, them also I must bring and they will hear my voice* (10:16).

Secondly some will want to argue because they know more than the preacher. The Pharisees kept coming to Jesus again and with questions to trick him. They were experts in the law and the traditions. They could quote Moses. These things were so fixed in their minds that they could not see the wonderful light that was shining in their midst. They were so bound by the letter of the law that they could not see, they could not recognize the one to whom the law and the Prophets pointed.

Let the little children come to me... for of such is the kingdom of God. Assuredly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it (Mark 10:14,15). Children ask questions but they ask to learn; they do not ask to try and impress others of their great knowledge. We have already heard the Jews saying he is not the Christ, based on a false application of Scripture. And we still see such confident but ill-informed exegesis today.

People take hold of the command ‘love your neighbour as yourself’ – it is often the limit of their Biblical knowledge. Then they argue ‘why then do you not allow women priests, why do you not allow homosexual bishops’ and so on. You must allow anything in the church if you love people as the Bible says.

A little knowledge can be a dangerous thing as they say. Yet a little knowledge with humility can save – knowledge that Jesus was sent by God, that he speaks the truth and that he gives life to those who believe. All other knowledge is of no avail without this wonderful light of the gospel.

Thirdly people will respond to the truth that convicts them by seeking to undermine the character and integrity of the speaker. Who does he think he is to be telling me I am a sinner! Look at his life! And so they will get busy digging up dirt on the man’s life. Such a response may work with a man but not with Jesus, the sinless Son of God. Yet this is what the Jews tried to do.

The question

Their question *who are you* literally ‘you, who are you’? We might paraphrase as ‘who do you think you are’? They had already questioned Jesus’ integrity when he declared *I am the light of the world*. They demanded witnesses – and Jesus gave them witnesses. But still they would not listen. Their hearts were full of pride and becoming harder and harder.

Beware brethren ...lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin (Hebrews 3:13). Is this not what was happening to the Jews? But it was not the sin of Sabbath breaking or sexual immorality was it? What was their sin? Self-righteousness and false piety. They were upright men in their own eyes and indeed in the eyes of the world. But the light that Jesus shone upon them revealed what was really in their hearts. It is a sobering thought is it not – what is really in the heart of all the good living people around us? Beware – the sins of some men go before them – of others they follow.

The answer

Jesus was not put off by this question. If it was not sarcastic then it was a strange question coming from those who had been listening to Jesus tell again and again where he was from and who he was. There is none so deaf as those who do not want to hear – right? But Jesus took their question at face value and persisted in revealing to them just who he was.

His answer is not easy to translate from the Greek, but what we have here in our version conveys the sense of what Jesus probably meant. The difficult word is ‘beginning’ – translated ‘at’ or ‘from’ the beginning. What beginning? It makes sense to say from the beginning of his ministry. He was regularly up in Jerusalem for the Jewish feasts – his presence and teaching was evident from his first visit when he cleansed the temple declaring ‘this is my Father’s house’ (John 2). In ch.3 he spoke about being from above and being sent by God the Father – and the same in ch.5 and again in ch.7. And still they could ask – *who are you*? Don’t be still asking this question on your deathbed!

Jesus had many things to say and judge concerning them – but it was difficult to move ahead and teach them when they refused to believe him. Jesus spoke the very words of God, he spoke things that he heard from the Father – he spoke the truth. His message remained the same. No amount of questioning, no amount of undermining or personal attack would change his message. How tragic to see men change their message to satisfy those who don’t like to hear the truth.

I speak to the world said Jesus. Even as he spoke to the Jews, the chosen people of God, he reminded them that the truth he brought from the Father was the truth for the whole world. It was only after Pentecost that the truth was taken out to the whole world, but these words of Jesus make it clear that the worldwide spread of the gospel was in view from the first.

Lift up the Son of Man

Who are you they asked. 'I am' said Jesus. You must *believe that I am he. When you lift up the Son of man then you will know that I am he.* What did Jesus mean? John spoke of Moses lifting up the snake in the desert (3:14). Jesus was referring to his being lifted up on the cross. Lifting up speaks of exaltation also. He would ascend into heaven and be exalted at the right hand of the Father. But it was by the cross that Jesus revealed supremely just who he is. It was at the cross that his obedience to the will of God was ultimately tested. It was at the cross that his love for the world, his love for you was ultimately revealed.

Then you will know that I am he. When you have crucified the Lord of glory then you will know who he is. What tragic words Jesus spoke. Remember what remorse came over Judas after he betrayed Jesus (Matthew 27:3). And the Jews also, who thought they had removed the trouble maker, found themselves without a dead body. Yes it is true that all people will one day acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord. The question is will it be **now** or will it be **then** when it is too late.

Jesus was not shaken by the thought of being lifted up, by contemplation of the cross. He was assured of the ongoing presence of his Father. *He who sent me is with me. The Father has not left me alone.* Jesus did not live for a moment but that the Father was with him – his words from the cross notwithstanding (Matthew 27:46). There was a wonderful unity; there was oneness, between the Father and the only begotten Son.

What about adopted sons of the Father? Those who believe in Jesus are called adopted children of God. Can they have such assurance of the presence of God? Well yes they can. God promises that he will not leave or forsake those who are his (Hebrews 13:5). If you doubt that then you are not trusting God as you should. Doubt is not pleasing to God.

Such assurance, far from being presumptuous, is in fact honouring to God – provided it is based on a true faith and love for the Lord. Jesus said *I always do those things that please him*, that please the Father. Can you say like Jesus, *the Father has not left me alone, for I always do those things that please him?*

Rev. Dr. Dennis K. Muldoon