

Sermon Sparkler for Lent Two

This might be one of those Sundays where you remind your congregation of the adage, “The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.” Specifically, that the Judaism(s) of Jesus’ day was varied. For a myriad of reasons we often read (and preach) the Gospel with the unspoken question, “who is the good guy and who is the bad guy?” And more to the point, we cast the Pharisees as Jesus enemies (Isn’t their name an insult meaning a religious hypocrites in common parlance?). After all, the reader might reason, Jesus argues with them, and shows them up all the time, and in some accounts they speak against him in Jerusalem—therefore, they must be the “bad guys.”

We would be mistaken to draw such a conclusion, after all Jesus argues with them... That’s what interpreters of the Law do! For that matter, they also eat with him, ask him for his opinion about the religious questions of the time and he answers them often from within the framework of debates between the schools of Rabbi Hillel and Rabbi Shammai.

In today’s reading, one of the Pharisees warns Jesus about a plot by Herod! Jesus responds by insulting Herod, this dangerous politician (just look at his family tree and all the stumps around him). John can attest that you can lose your head over that kind of thing!

Again, Jesus points to the three days, saying that the third day will “end his work.” He is pointing to the completion of his ministry that comes with the resurrection.

What am I getting at here? Luke’s Gospel, and the Gospels in general, use the Pharisees as a foil for the least, last, and lost, and that’s fine on a literary level, but on a historical level our congregants may miss the reality that our Lord is a Jew among Jews and that his teachings were neither the center of Jewish thought nor a complete aberration from Jewish thought. On an interpretive level we may unintentionally bolster long repeated Anti-Semitic tropes by following Luke’s literary device.

But, in today’s reading we have the space to open up and correct that, we have the Pharisees clearly caring for Jesus’ safety (or at least recognizing his fate is tied to their own as far as Herod’s wrath is concerned). And we can also affirm that Jesus is part of a larger conversation and a larger community in a particular historical time and place; this is good news! He came in the flesh! In the complex cacophony of relationships and cultural moments and arguments and politics and movements, wrestling with *real* problems of a *particular* time... yes particularity and messiness, that’s where we find our Lord. Not pristine and other-worldly, but in this world as it is. Thank God!

- ✎ How would your congregation react to the idea that Jesus might have been seen, at least by Herod, as himself a Pharisee?
- ✎ How can you get your congregation to understand Jesus’ presence in his time and culture and context to be good news for our time? What responsibilities does Jesus’ really being present in his context leave our congregants with, as they live in our particular context?