

JESUS – THE KNOW-IT-ALL July 5, 2009

Holy Trinity and Parkside Churches

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It is hard for us to realize that the early days of Christianity were filled with controversy over who Jesus really was. The controversy was highlighted this past week at Chautauqua by Elaine Pegels in her lectures on the “Gnostic Gospels”. These were gospels found in Egypt about 40 years ago. Scholars have known about them because references had been made to them in church literature, but it was assumed that they had all been destroyed. They were controversial because of their content, and were outlawed by the early church Fathers and the emperor Constantine.

However, they do provide insight into the varying points of view in the early church as it tried to discern who Jesus really was. Some of the questions surrounding Jesus were: Was he the Messiah or not? Was he fully human, or was he a god? Was he a rebel or was he a pacifist? Was his mother always a virgin? What really happened at the crucifixion?

Over the centuries there have been arguments back and forth on most of these questions. Church Councils made certain decisions and declared that they were definitive for the faith. Popes have made pronouncements about them, but there are those who get really upset over the idea that the Pope can speak for God.

There is a lot of misinformation about when the pope speaks for God which is known as “papal infallibility”. The Pope only “speaks” for God when he does so “ex cathedra” which literally means, “from the throne” – the throne being Peter’s chair.

The doctrine has only been in existence since the late 1800’s – and it has only been used three times. Once to establish it. Once to declare the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception that most people also get confused about.

The Immaculate Conception was not that Jesus was born of a virgin, but that his mother, Mary, was born without sin. The reasoning was that if Jesus was to be pure, he could not have been born with the stigma of original sin, so his mother had to be pure.

The third proclamation was the Assumption - which was the doctrine that Mary rose bodily into heaven. This was a logical step to take because the cause of death is original sin, and if Mary was born without original sin, she couldn’t die. The tradition was that when she was taken into heaven to become “the Queen of Heaven” they found a rose in her place. So in art, a rose becomes a symbol for Mary.

However, the doctrine of the virgin birth became controversial when the question was raised about her remaining a virgin. The definitive work on the subject is, *THE BIRTH OF THE MESSIAH*, by the Roman Catholic scholar, Raymond Brown. He clearly reasons that such a doctrine doesn’t hold up especially when you read passages such as the one we have in today’s gospel where Mark mentions Jesus’ brothers James, and Joses and Judas and Simon, and says the neighbors ask, “Are not his sisters here with us?”

Those who like the idea of Mary being a perpetual virgin claim that his “brothers” were either Jesus’ cousins, or that they were Joseph’s children from an earlier marriage. Although, Joseph could have had more than one wife – but that’s going a little too far for piety to prevail.

For the record, Luther was quite devoted to Mary and he liked the idea of her perpetual virginity.

These questions concerning Jesus’ birth link up with the issue of his divinity. Having Jesus being born of a virgin makes it easy to classify Jesus as divine. But, in reality, these issues of Jesus’ divinity being connected to his birth are a stretch. They are a stretch because Jesus is affirmed as having messianic qualities by virtue of an unusual birth in only two of the gospels – Matthew and Luke. And these vary a lot. In Luke we have the angel

talking to Mary and Jesus is born in a manger. In Matthew the angel only talks to Joseph, and he takes Mary home to have the baby.

Mark's gospel starts out with Jesus being baptized, and it is at this point that Jesus is proclaimed as God's son by a voice from heaven.

John doesn't mention an unusual birth either; he puts Jesus' divine nature in the context of the cosmos – before time. Remember how John's gospel begins, **In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God – all things were made through him – and the word became flesh and dwelt among us.**

And then there is Paul's letter to the Romans, which was written years before any of the gospels. In it Paul says that Jesus was born of the seed of David, and he was proclaimed the Son of God at the resurrection.

And then there is the role Jesus was to play in politics. Was he a pacifist or a rebel? Interestingly, the Bible overall has about as many references to the sword as to it does to love! But it seems evident that Jesus comes down hard on the side of love, not the sword. And yet, Christianity has this long history of claiming the sword as its weapon of choice instead of love. Still, there is little question about where Jesus stood, and what he taught.

And then there is the role of Jesus as a teacher. It appears, as we read in today's gospel lesson, that Jesus' wisdom was one of the main claims to his authority coming from God. He astonished those who heard him.

And, of course, Jesus healed. We read in the lesson that Jesus could do no deed of power in his hometown, except to heal a few sick people.

And, remember, Jesus realizes that “prophets are not without honor except in their own house.” This is a little like the observation that “behind every successful man there is a surprised woman.” Those who are close to us see us in a different light from those on the outside. And Jesus realized that he was no exception.

So here we have some of the issues that have surfaced in the faith and which are still around. And how do they affect our faith?

Well, that really depends on where your faith is coming from. If it comes from dogma, you are going to have a few problems if you are a thinking person.

And this isn't to say that dogma doesn't have its place. Dogma reflects the struggle the faith has had over the centuries in defining itself and setting boundaries. Remember the creeds didn't come first – the faith did. The creeds became necessary when the community found that people were pushing the envelope a little too far.

For instance, the phrase in the creed that Jesus was “born of the virgin Mary” wasn't put in there to affirm Jesus' divinity, but his humanity. There was a heresy that claimed Jesus was wholly divine with no human dimension. The heresy even claimed that the crucifixion involving Jesus' suffering didn't really happen – that it was an illusion. Thinking like this h. Jesus was fully human and fully divine.

No, your faith doesn't come from the dogmatic formulations of history. It comes from your experiencing the presence of God in your life, and from the support you get from the community of faith, and in the breaking of the bread, and in the healing power of love.

And the real test of your faith is not in what you say you believe, but in how that belief affects your behavior. Remember John saying that **he who says he loves God but hates his brother is a liar, for how can a person love God whom he has not seen but hate his brother whom he has seen.**

And again, **“By this will all men know that you are my disciples – if you have love for one another.”**