

Third Sunday of Easter, May 3, 2009
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SHEPHERDS AND COWBOYS

The shepherd is a frequent image in the Bible – from the 23rd Psalm to Jesus being called “the good Shepherd”. And even though that image is a product of an agrarian society it still rings true for us. I often wonder why.

How many of you have ever seen a real shepherd? Fortunately, I have been in the right place at the right time to have seen one, and I should report that they don’t wear long dresses and sandals– they wear blue jeans and sneakers.

Still, even though we live in an urban society – in which a shepherd is more foreign than an ox-drawn plow – the image rings true and it gives us a cozy warm feeling.

I suppose that if we did want to bring the image of Jesus up to speed, we could refer to Jesus as the good cowboy. After all, cowboys are still out there rounding up stray calves, and moving the herd in the right direction – although with the demise of cigarette advertising we don’t see them posted on billboards anymore. And cowboys have to protect their herds just as the shepherds did. The shepherds carried crooks, and probably cowboys carry guns in case a mountain lion or a wolf comes along.

So we know what a cowboy looks like – we may not know what he smells like – but we have all seen enough cowboy movies to have their image in our memory bank. But, for some reason or other, the cowboy just doesn’t cut the mustard as far as being a surrogate for the shepherd. Maybe Miss Kitty has something to do with it – I don’t know.

However, Jesus is still seen as the good shepherd and we all know what we mean when we say that.

But when it comes to some of the popular images of Jesus, they don’t seem to stay the course. Too often it isn’t the human side of Jesus that gets emphasized, it’s the God side. I’ve noted before that the church has had to deal with more heresy related to people trying to make Jesus too divine than too human.

As Robert Capon noted in his excellent little book, “Hunting the Divine Fox”:

Almost nobody can resist the temptation to jazz up the humanity of Christ. Often, people like to see Jesus in the role of Superman. Remember how Superman used to be described on the radio, faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. It’s superman! Strange visitor from another planet, who came to earth with powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men and who, disguised as Clark Kent, mild-mannered reporter who fights a never-ending battle for truth, justice and the American way. Jesus is seen as meek and mild but with secret souped-up, more-than-human insides. He bumbles around for thirty-three years, nearly gets himself done if for good by the Kryptonite Kross, but at the last minute, struggles into the phone booth of

the Empty tomb, changes into his Easter suit and, with a single bound, leaps back to the planet heaven. (P.90)

Capon then points out the human race was, is and probably always will be deeply unwilling to accept a human messiah.

We don't want to be saved in our humanity; we want to be fished out of it. We crucified Jesus, not because he was God, but because he blasphemed: he claimed to be God and then failed to come up to our standards for assessing the claim. It's not that we weren't looking for the Messiah; it's just that he wasn't what we were looking for.

Our Kind of Messiah would come down from a cross. He wouldn't do a stupid thing like rising from the dead. He would do a smart thing like never dying.

And you know how this worked itself out historically – Christianity just couldn't let Jesus alone – he had to become the conquering hero. Remember how the Roman Emperor, Constantine, made Christianity the state religion and then used the image of the cross to conquer the world. And then there were the Crusades – and the killing of tens of thousands in the name of Jesus. And now some people kill in the name of Allah.

But, Jesus did not come to bring a sword – he came to bring peace. And that is what makes Jesus so hard to accept. He is so out of keeping with the role of gods. There is no end to the number of gods who can do powerful things. There are gods of war, and gods of thunder and lightning. There are gods of the sea. There are fertility gods.

It's easy to find a god to defend your cause, and if you can't find one, you twist and turn your god so that he can do your bidding.

There is a passage in I Cor. Where Paul says that **Jesus crucified is a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness for the Greeks.** (1:23) As far as the Jews were concerned, the Messiah was not supposed to die. As far as the Greeks were concerned, a god who suffered was a contradiction in terms – gods don't suffer – they're in charge!

So here we are with this Jesus – a Jesus who doesn't fit the mold. At least he doesn't for many. And so many try to make Jesus into something else – they want him to be the great fixer. But when you do that and you meet up with problems that can't get fixed, you're in trouble.

But there is one strain of Christianity that seems to have gotten the message about Jesus better than most, and that is the African –American community. And the “Spirituals” have captured who Jesus was in songs like, **Nobody knows the trouble I've seen – nobody knows but Jesus.** And, **Sometime I feel like a motherless child.** Jesus was not only the Son of God; he was also the Lamb of God. And when he was on the cross, Matthew and Mark tell us that Jesus cried out, **My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?**

But Jesus wasn't forsaken– and we know that - and that is why we know that we aren't either because he knows what it's like.

Nobody knows the trouble I've seen – nobody knows but Jesus.