

“Who Is Jesus?”

Sermon/Talk by the Rev. Daniel W. Hinkle
(Based on Nicky Gumble’s “Questions of Life”)
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Funny Story

A missionary working among children in the Middle East was driving her jeep down a road when she ran out of gas. She had no gas can in her vehicle. All she could find was a potty chair. She walked a mile down the road to the nearest gas station and filled that pot with gas. As she was pouring the gas into the tank of her jeep, a large Cadillac occupied by wealthy oil sheikhs drew up. They were absolutely fascinated at seeing her pouring the contents of the potty chair into the jeep. One of them rolled down the window and said, *“My friend and I, although we do not share your religion, we greatly admire your faith.”*

Jesus Existed

Some people see becoming a Christian as a blind leap of faith – the type of faith that would be needed in expecting a car to run on the usual contents of a potty chair. There is indeed a step of faith required. It is not a blind leap of faith, but a step of faith based on firm historical evidence.

I am told that in an old communist Russian dictionary Jesus is described as *“a mythical figure who never existed.”* No serious historian could maintain that position today. There is a great deal of evidence for Jesus’ existence. This comes not only from the 4 Gospels and other Christian writings, but also from non-Christian sources. For example: the classic Roman historians Tacitus (directly) and Suetonius (indirectly), and the Jewish historian Josephus, all write of Jesus. So, there is evidence outside the New Testament for the existence of Jesus. Furthermore, the evidence in the New Testament is very strong.

Sometimes people say, “The New Testament was written a long time ago. How do we know that what they wrote down has not been changed over the years?” The answer is that we do know, very accurately through the science of textual criticism, what the New Testament writers wrote. Simply put, the more texts we have, the less doubt there is about the original.

Scholars have all of 66 documents by such ancient writers as Heroditus, Thucydides, Tacitus, Livy’s Roman History, and Julius Caesar’s “Gallic Wars.” “Veni. Vini. Vici.” The problem is that all 66 of these documents are copies and none can be dated before the year 900 A.D.

But, we do have over 24 thousand manuscripts of the New Testament, parts of which date back to as early as 130 A.D. So, there is overwhelming evidence for the existence of Jesus and the accuracy of the surviving texts. In fact, we have more evidence that Jesus existed than we do for someone like Caesar.

Who Is Jesus?

So, it's clear that Jesus existed, but the important question is, "*Who Is Jesus?*" Martin Scorsese once said on television that he made the film "The Last Temptation of Christ" in order to show that Jesus was a real human being. Yet few people would doubt that Jesus was fully human. He had a human body; He was sometimes tired and hungry. He had human emotions; He was angry, He loved, and He was sad. He had human experiences; was tempted, learned, worked, and obeyed his parents.

What many say today is that Jesus was **only** a human being – although a great religious teacher. Our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters say this and that he was even a prophet. So, what evidence is there to suggest that Jesus was more than just a wonderful guy, or a prophet, or a great moral teacher? Well, there is a lot of evidence, evidence that supports the Christian contention that Jesus was and is also the unique Son of God. Indeed, he is God the Son, the 2nd person of the Trinity.

What He said about Himself

Teaching Centered on Himself

Jesus did not go around saying, "*I am God,*" yet when you look at all He taught and claimed, there is little doubt that He was conscious of being a man whose identity was God.

One of the interesting things about Jesus is that so much of his teaching centered on himself. He said to people things like, "*if you want to have a relationship with God, you need to come to me*" (John 14:6). It's through a relationship with Jesus that we encounter God.

The human heart has a deep hunger. The famous psychologists of our time have all recognized this. Jesus said, "*I am the bread of life*" (John 6:35). In other words, "*If you want your hunger satisfied, come to me.*" Many people are walking in darkness, depression, disillusionment, and despair. Perhaps you are one of these folks looking for direction. Jesus said, "*I am the Light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the Light of life*" (John 8:12). Many are fearful of death. Jesus said, "*I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die*" (John 11:25,26). So many of us are burdened by worries, anxieties, fears, and guilt. Jesus said, "*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest*" (Matthew 11:28).

Jesus said to receive him was to receive God, to welcome him was to welcome God, to see him was to see God. A child once was drawing a picture. His mother asked him what he was doing. "*Drawing a picture of God,*" he said. His mother said, "*Don't be silly. No one knows what God looks like.*" The child replied, "*Well, they will by the time I've finished, won't they!*" Jesus in effect said, "*If you want to know what God looks like, look at me.*"

Indirect and Direct Claims

Jesus said a lot of things which, although not direct claims to be God, show that he regarded himself as being in the same position as God. He claimed authority to forgive sins (Mark 2:5). Another extraordinary claim that he made was that one day he would judge the world. Not only would he be the judge, he would also be the criterion of judgment. What happens to us on the Day of Judgment depends on how we respond to Jesus in this life (Matthew 25:40,45). Jesus directly claimed many things about himself, too. He claimed to be the Messiah, the Christ. And most importantly, He claimed to be God the Son, God made flesh.

So, how do we test his claims? There are three logical possibilities: If his claims were untrue, either he knew they were untrue, in which case he was an imposter, and an evil one at that. That is the first possibility. Or he did not know, in which case he was deluded, indeed, he was mad. This is the second possibility. The third possibility was that the claims were true.

The friend and colleague of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, was the famous British, Christian scholar who wrote the Narnia stories. Lewis put it like this:

“A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic...or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse...but let us not come up with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

What evidence is there to support what he said?

His Teaching

So, was Jesus the Son of God, a madman, or something worse? Let's take a brief look at the evidence. We'll begin with his teaching. Jesus' teaching is widely acknowledged to be the greatest teaching the world has ever known. It is the foundation of our entire civilization in the West. Many laws of England and North America were originally based on the teachings of Jesus. We are making progress in almost every field of science and technology. We travel faster, communicate faster, and know more. Yet, in nearly two thousand years no one has improved on the moral teachings of Jesus Christ.

Could that teaching really have come from a madman or a con man?!

His Works

Sometimes people say that Christianity is boring. Well, one thing is for sure, it wasn't boring to be around Jesus! He loved to party and even turned water into the best wine so that the wedding party could go on. He performed untold numbers of amazing miracles. He healed the blind, the dumb, and the lame. He even raised some from the dead. Jesus said that the miracles he performed were themselves evidence that *“the Father is in me, and I in the Father”* (John 10:38).

Surely, these were not works of an evil or deluded man?!

His Character

The character of Jesus has impressed millions who would not call themselves Christians. Christians know him to be *“a man who exemplified supreme unselfishness but never self-pity; humility without weakness; joy but never at another’s expense; kindness but not indulgence. He was a man in whom even his enemies could find not fault and where friends who knew him well said he was without sin. Surely no one could suggest that a man with a character like that was evil or unbalanced?!”* (Gumbel)

His fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy

Jesus fulfilled over three hundred prophecies spoken by different voices over five hundred years. These included 29 major prophecies fulfilled on the day he died. If Jesus had been a con man, how could he have worked it out that he fulfilled all these prophecies, including the place where he was supposed to have been born?!

His Resurrection

The physical resurrection from the dead of Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of Christianity. There is much evidence that it really happened. First, there is the empty tomb itself. Perhaps the most fascinating remarks about the empty tomb are made in John’s Gospel account, in particular his description of Jesus’ grave clothes. When Peter and John went into the empty tomb, they saw that the grave clothes were left behind *“like the empty chrysalis of a caterpillar’s cocoon”* after the butterfly has emerged. It was as if Jesus had simply passed through the grave clothes. Not surprisingly, John saw and believed.

The second bit of evidence concerning Jesus’ resurrection was that he appeared to so many people. He appeared to his disciples on 11 separate occasions and to more than 550 additional people.

The third bit of evidence is the immediate effect his resurrection had. It had a dramatic impact on the world. The Church was born and grew at a tremendous rate.

Finally, Christian experience down through the centuries to our own time proves the truth of Jesus’ resurrection. Countless numbers of people have experienced the risen Christ. I can number myself among these people. Millions of people all over the world today are experiencing a relationship with the risen Christ.

So, the evidence that Jesus rose from the dead is very extensive indeed. A former Chief Justice of England, Lord Darling, said, *“In its favour as living truth there exists such overwhelming evidence, positive and negative, factual and circumstantial, that no intelligent jury in the world could fail to bring in a verdict that the resurrection story is true.”*

And our Gospel story for today is another instance of evidence concerning who Jesus is. So, we see that there are only three realistic possibilities – 1st Jesus was and is the Son of God; 2nd He was a madman; or 3rd He was something worse. When one looks at the evidence it does not make any sense to say Jesus was mad or evil. The whole weight of his teaching, his works, his character, his fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, and his

conquest of death make those suggestions ridiculous. On the other hand, the evidence does most certainly support Jesus' own consciousness of being a man whose identity was God.

C.S. Lewis sums it up like this:

"We are faced then with a frightening alternative. The man we are talking about was (and is) just what he said or else a lunatic or something worse. Now it seems to me obvious that he was neither a lunatic nor a fiend; and consequently, however strange or terrifying or unlikely it may seem, I have to accept the view that he was and is God. God has landed on this enemy occupied world in human form."

So...What do you think? Who do you say that Jesus is? And will you follow him today?