

PREACH

the Word

Vol. 7 No. 4

March/April 2004

Greetings IN THE NAME OF OUR KING!

Mel Gibson's movie about the death of our Savior, *The Passion of Christ*, opened in many theaters on Ash Wednesday. An abundance of controversy has surrounded the film, primarily centered on charges that the movie will arouse anti-Semitic feelings. Whether or not the film would even make it into theaters was also a question, as most of the major studios and distributors didn't want to touch the controversy with a ten-foot pole. The Pope has screened *The Passion* and has given his approval of it being "deeply moving, worth seeing for all people, and not anti-Semitic" (catholicnewsagency.com). At a private screening in Chicago, 4000 people, including many evangelical Christian leaders, were required to show a personal ID in order to get into the movie. Yet some Jewish leaders managed to sneak in anyway. After being criticized by a coalition of Catholic and Jewish religious leaders, Gibson has sought to build a grass-roots support network of American clergy. The film will be rated "R" for its graphic depiction of the crucifixion. Controversy, controversy, controversy...

On the one hand, it's refreshing to hear various groups argue about the historical accuracy of Christ's death. For we know well that some have reconstructed history in such a way as to question whether the crucifixion ever took place, or took place in the way the Gospels describe it. In a strange way, the controversy is also comforting to us in that we see again our Savior's words fulfilled, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth, but a sword." What John observed multiple times in his Gospel God's people are still observing today: "The people were divided because of him." Seeing people riled up over Christ only strengthens our conviction that Jesus is exactly who he claimed to be, the Son of God our Savior.

On the other hand, however, we whose blessed task it is to preach the Word can't help but feel that all the fuss about *The Passion* misses the point. There is much discussion and debate about some historical details in the movie, but



who is talking about the purpose and meaning of Christ's death? Is knowing the historical facts of Scripture tantamount to saving faith? Of course not.

But we, brothers, have the wonderful opportunity and the awesome responsibility to "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes," from our Lenten pulpits this season. Rooted in the Spirit's own Word, may we lead those entrusted to our care into the depths of Lent, letting them clearly see not only the truths that the Savior died but, more importantly, why he died and what this death means for them and all people.

And then let us lead them out of the forty dark days into the bright sunshine of Christ's resurrection morning. One pastor from Florida who saw *The Passion* confided to *The Washington Times*, "Frankly, it made me kind of sick." Too bad that the film ends where it does. But what joy is ours to proclaim that the most historically accurate version of all—God's inspired Word—doesn't end there. No, in fact quite the opposite; the story—the history—never ends for those who are buried with Christ by baptism into his death; we will rise with him to glory everlasting.

God bless your proclamation of his Word during these holy days of Lent and Easter.

- KCW

PREACHING GOSPEL TEXTS

Mark A. Paustian

“Hi. My name is Mark.”

(Hi, Mark.)

“It’s been two and a half years since I told a story about my kids in a sermon, since I had an “insight” and went looking for a text, since I...”

Yes, I’m being a little tongue-in-cheek, but the contrition is sincere. Please don’t misunderstand. When it comes to personal illustrations or series preaching or alternative homiletic formats, my purpose is not to take away anyone else’s Christian freedom but only to come into a better use of my own. If there’s a rebuke here, it’s meant for me. I’ve been climbing the mountain of excellence in preaching for 15 years now—or trying to—and the irony is finding at the summit a seminary classroom where we all learned to be textual, to be exegetical, to be disciplined, to look deep inside the text and not miss what’s there, to preach the law *as if there were no gospel*, and then the gospel *as if there were no law*, to reveal Christ and not ourselves, and to expound unflinchingly the truths and purposes of God as they emerge from an agenda-free study of his Word.

His thoughts are not my thoughts.

And if there is among us a wholesome desire to tap the power of story in our story-hungry culture and to communicate in the irresistible medium of narrative...let’s sate ourselves preeminently in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, in the perpetual novelty of that new and unheard of thing God did in the universe when his own feet touched the earth. Let’s not dream that we have yet exhausted that supply.

Ah, me, to preach on the Gospels of our Lord.

Where to begin? Let’s agree that there’s no need to pretend when it comes to exegesis: in every case our skills have only grown since seminary. There is still every reason to begin our meditation over a Greek New Testament. Though the grammatical terms and categories don’t come so easily to mind as they once did, to a man we would all notice and be stunned by the “I Am” that echoes off the walls of the high priest’s chambers. None of us would miss the four “alls” hiding in the Greek of the Great Commission—*all* authority...*all* nations...*all* things...*all* the days. How will I introduce law content into a sermon on John 3:16? Basic word study. Trace the meaning and uses of the word “kosmos” that figures so prominently in the fourth gospel; it could break your heart. Remember how a perfect tense verb can steel the soul, to think of such things as were once—and forever remain—written, said and done. Or take the latent power of a simple future indicative, that if we remain in Jesus and his words remain in us, we “will bear fruit.” Not we might. Not we can. We *will*. There’s no need to show off—“I know Greek and you don’t”—that blinding insight into sanctification would certainly make itself felt in your message.

We want to know Christ. To this end, I habitually turn to Edersheim’s *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* whenever I preach on a Gospel text. This source has become invaluable for helping me to see Jesus as a *first century Jew*. Here is no myth—in a particular time and in a particular place; *it happened*. God came near, and this in fulfillment of Hebrew prophecy in finger-print-like detail. The instant you see the thoroughgoing Jewish-ness inherent in the Gospel accounts, such as in the endless pharisaic quibbling about Sabbath restrictions, you see that very Jewish-ness transcended by Christ.



“Stretch out your hand.”

In Edersheim is the delight of gaining an ever clearer picture of that life and of those times – how two human parades likely met on the steep road leading up to Nain; to see through rabbinic eyes a rabbi touching a leper; to ponder the way a Jewish man would typically kiss the doorframe of his home and whisper, “*God bless our comings and our goings*” whenever he left the house, whether to go to the market or to the synagogue...or to save the world.

Not to be overlooked are the twin classics of Richard Trent, *Notes on the Parables/on the Miracles of Our Lord*, whenever my Gospel text happens to take in one or the other. Trent has never once let me down in terms of making some vital and stirring connection with the text that I would otherwise have missed. Something alive and waiting is hidden in the shell of every story Jesus told. As a narrative, the seed finds purchase in the mind. It is remembered. And though, for a time, the disciples don’t understand, one day, *they do*. “*But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him...he ran to his son.*” In CS Lewis’ metaphor, the successive details in the story – this happened, then this, then this – are the net in which something is caught that is not successive – what forgiveness is, or grace, or hope. “*The kingdom of God is like...*” what? In the net of Jesus’ parables – the prodigal and the pigs, the robe and the ring – we find out. We are let in.

And in the Gospels’ miracles are the unmistakable signposts pointing inexorably to the undiminished deity of Christ. Prof. Richard Balge once posed the question, “Do we still have miracles in the Church today?” And the answer was undeniably yes, because we still have *these* miracles by divine inspiration, and to

Christ they are *still* pointing. There's more nuance and meaning in his wonders than meets the eye. How in the world did, "I saw you under the fig tree," instantly create such a mature Christology in Nathaniel? How are we, with our "leafy show of religiosity" all undone by Jesus' withering of a fig tree? What of the heartening fact that his sole miracle of judgment landed on a soulless tree? In the miracles of Jesus we see him always doing, in his words, "what I see my Father doing," for the Father has been healing bodies and bringing many fish from a few since time began. In the miracles of Jesus lurks the stuff of heaven, for the way things are *there*—no one is sick, no one hurts, no one dies—were breaking into here where we struggle and cry for a little while. And the way things will be *then* are all promised and contained in a moment outside a tomb, when he said, "Mary."

In these magnificent texts both Law and Gospel constantly poke the surface. We set our days besides those of Jesus, we drag our natural lives into this light, and who does not wither at the comparison? Jesus is always spiritualizing the law—lust is adultery and hatred is murder—making so painfully obvious the fact that we are hopeless lawbreakers. Jesus is always showing us our sins not as aberrations but as the poisonous fruit revealing an ugly tree in dreadful, desperate need. The law is implied in the big, bold facts of incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, in the very realization that such things *had* to be, else we are lost.

As to "text color," we need only let certain words and phrases of Jesus float to the surface of our sermon by sheer repetition; such is his genius. "If you being evil know how to give good gifts to your children..." I'm sure I would repeat "you being evil" a dozen times in a sermon on that text. "You, being evil, must strive to cast yourselves always in the best possible light." "You, being evil..." and there are no end of law applications to fill in the blank, until... you, being evil, are ones that God remembered, reached for and saved. Gospel sources of text color are even better.

"Leave her alone," cries Jesus, coming to Mary's defense when her jar and her heart spilled out. He had been saying he was going to die, and someone finally heard him. "She anoints me for my burial." Here lies the beauty of this story—that what Jesus said to Judas he would say also to the devil. And he would say it also to hell.

Leave her alone.

The gospel is found in every letter of the Gospels and in the spaces in between. You could comfort me on my deathbed with the woeful thundering of Jesus in Matthew 23 (though it might not be your first choice). Hear the shrieks of the God-Man torn open, "Woe to you... how will you escape being condemned to hell." Thus the Lion of Judah roars in the temple courts during Holy Week. Where is the Gospel? This Jesus is my righteousness. His response to those Pharisees, as to everything else in his life, is flawless perfection. And I, this gentle coward, *having no righteousness of my own*, reach for the one who is what I am not, that he might cover me like a robe by faith. As to the gospel in the Gospels, remember that every word, ever deed, every move of Jesus, whatever else it might mean, is also that alien righteousness, his active obedience in the stead of you and the people you preach to.

Next we come to that third of the space in the Gospels given to the suffering and death of God's Son jutting up from the landscape of

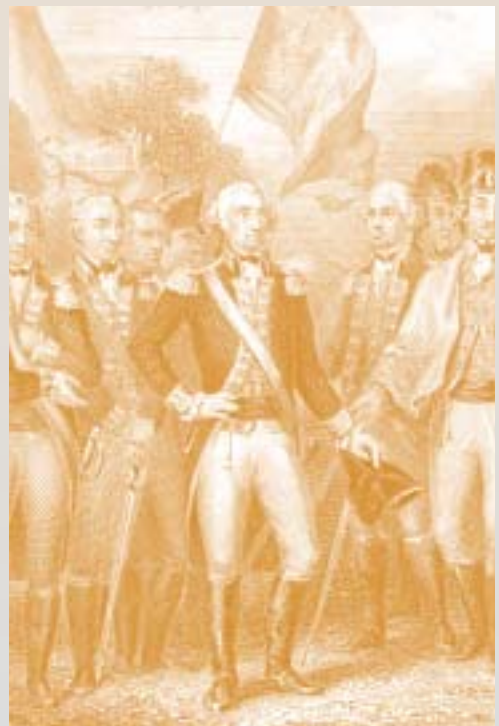
Continued on page 4

CAN YOU USE THIS?

Suggested Use: *Lent*

Point of Illustration: *To illustrate how Christ set aside his glory to come into a world of proud, arrogant sinners and humbly went about accomplishing the work his Father sent him to do.*

During the American Revolution a man in civilian clothes rode past a group of soldiers repairing a small defensive barrier. Their leader was shouting instructions, but making no attempt to help them. The rider asked him why he wasn't helping. The soldier retorted with great dignity, "Sir, I am a corporal!" The stranger apologized, dismounted, and proceeded to help the other exhausted soldiers. When the job was done, the rider turned to the corporal and said, "Mr. Corporal, next time you have a job like this and not enough men to do it, go to your commander-in-chief, and I will come and help you again." The rider was none other than George Washington.



Continued from page 3

human history. I like Curtis Lyon's observation that "Jesus died for me," and "You are forgiven" are wonderful phrases for their simple eloquence. Only notice how quickly the words pass. For their part, the four Gospels take their precious time, enough time for the natural way we think and live to be disrupted. Enter the agonizing details of Jesus' passion and the chilling verse that has Jesus "knowing everything" that was coming upon him. Read these exhausting narratives with full comprehension, *knowing everything*, if you can stand it, from the sweat flowing like blood to the Roman spear making sure he was good and dead.

And so... you are forgiven.

As to application, the *nuda verba*, the Scripture unadorned by style or tortured relevance, cannot fail to apply to the lives of the people at your feet who need simply to hear from their gracious God. Only ask about each Gospel account, "For what jagged-edged question in such a world as this does this text supply the answer? For what human need is this account about Christ the satisfaction... if we only believed?" Knowing your people as you do, for the hours spent in their kitchens and living rooms, the answers will certainly come.

As to promoting the sanctified life of believers, it is in these Gospel texts that the siren call to be "imitators of God as dearly loved children" becomes most meaningful to us. How am I to imitate omnipotence? How will I act omnipresent? But there stands Jesus, the "fullness of the Godhead in bodily form," "the exact representation of his being," and he takes the children in his arms and blesses them. In the peace of my forgiveness, in the strength God provides, this I can do. Here in Christ the world received, in Philip Yancey's phrase, it's first "long, slow look into the face of God." We are drawn close to our Father, ever deeper into his very heart, if we've only seen the Son.

The great preacher of sanctification, Martin Luther, commented, "Thinking must be turned a new direction. Christ must be thought of if you are to say, 'Christ lives in me.'" Christ must be *thought* of. But how?

"In the beginning was the Word..."

Ah, me, to preach on the Gospels of our Lord.

Prof. Paustian teaches English at Martin Luther College

FLORILEGIUM

In medieval times, monks would send around "circuit letters" to the various monasteries in each administrative district. In turn, each monastery would add snippets of the latest news from their regions to the letter so that by the time it arrived back at its source, the single letter had "gathered" (legere) a number of "flowery" (flora) bits of news into a bouquet of information (florilegium). Here is our own arrangement of quotes for the preacher, plucked from various sources.

Readers are invited to contribute their own quotes to the editor for upcoming editions.

"Preachers are transformers for God's power unto salvation. That is why the transformer needs to be in the peak of condition, in good running order. God's method is not exclusion (God without man); nor is it co-operation (God plus man); rather, it is transformation (God through man)."

"Preaching the Creative Gospel Creatively" by Francis Rossow CPH, 1983

"A faithful Leader, not to hazard all through ways of danger by himself untried."

Satan speaking of Christ in Milton's Paradise Lost IV.933 ff.

"What keeps a man from being a pulpit orator is being a pastor."

M. Franzmann, Seminar 8 March 1971

"God is so good that he in no way permits an evil unless he knows (or can) draw good from it."

R. Hoenecke, OGH Vol. 2, p. 30

"Man only likes to count his troubles, but he does not count his joys."

F. Dostoyevsky "Notes from Underground"

"'Pectus facit disertum,' that is, true oratory is a matter of the heart."

Walther, Law and Gospel, p. 53

"It requires no great wisdom to live only among the godly and do good, but the keenest judgment is necessary to live with the wicked and not do evil."

Luther (Sermons, Vol. 8, p. 339)

QUESTIONS? COMMENTS?

If you have any questions or comments about

Preach the Word, feel free to contact this year's editor directly at wesselkc@mlc-wels.edu

PREACH
the Word

Preach the Word is published bimonthly by the WELS Commission on Worship
2929 N Mayfair Rd, Milwaukee WI 53222-4398 414/256-3265
FAX, 414/256-3899 • <brygerlach@aol.com>
<www.wels.net/worship>

Keith Wessel, editor <wesselkc@mlc-wels.edu>
Wayne A. Laitinen, managing editor <wlaitinen@newulmtel.net>