

# **Lenten Luncheon Reflections 2009**

**Tuesday, March 10, 2009**

## **Jesus as Rabbi and Teacher**

### **Prayer:**

Gracious God, as we gather here this day we give you thanks for all that you have taught us through the words and the actions of Jesus Christ your Son. As we think about his teachings and his example so we pray that you will help us to appreciate even more all that he has taught us and shown us of your love for us and for the whole world. As we pause again during Lent to reflect on that great love help us who bear the name of Jesus to reflect that love more and more each day in our words and in our deeds, for we ask these things in his name and for his sake.

Amen.

Today as we gather here to continue our Lenten theme of looking at some of the names and titles of Jesus I would like to invite you to reflect on some of those names and titles as they are found in the hymn of Isaac Watts which our choir is using as our Introit for Lent. The words of the hymn, "Join all the Glorious Names," on the sheet contain five of the twelve verses of the original hymn of Isaac Watts in which he highlights some of the names and titles of Jesus. Since his work in England in the seventeenth century, Watts, himself, of course, is known as the effective pioneer of congregational hymn singing in the English language.

Today as we sing stanzas 1 and 4 of his hymn on sheet I would invite you to think about all that these various names and titles for Jesus mean to you. Our appreciation is extended again to Lou Wilkinson for playing for us today.

In the particular words that we have sung Isaac Watts does not refer to Jesus by what for many is one of his most familiar titles in the Gospels. On forty-four occasions he is identified as "teacher." On forty-eight occasions Jesus is

described as teaching. On fifteen occasions it is said of Jesus, “having taught.” There are also indirect references to Jesus as teacher when on thirteen occasions he is called, “Rabbi,” and on seven occasions he is called, “Master.” All these titles make very clear that a key aspect of the ministry of Jesus was that of teacher. Still today, of course, there are many people who do not even claim to be Christians who would affirm the value of his teachings.

The title, teacher, is second only to Lord as the most used title for Jesus in the Gospels. The Hebrew word, “Rabbi,” that is also used of Jesus means “Teacher.” The rabbis were scholars who gathered students, or disciples, who lived with them and traveled with them. There is no evidence that Jesus himself had been a student of any other rabbi. We do recall, though, the way in which at the age of twelve Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem to learn from the teachers there. Luke tells us that after searching for Jesus for three days his parents, “found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.” (Luke 2:46-47). This is the only account given in the Gospels of the childhood of Jesus. From then on we are told nothing of Jesus until he emerges from obscurity in Nazareth to be baptized by John in the River Jordan. After his baptism and temptations he began to act like a traditional rabbi of his day by gathering his learners to accompany him. Jesus and his disciples became a community of teacher and learners, or followers, sharing meals, traveling together, celebrating religious holy days together, and living together. The disciples served their teacher in various ways by getting food for him, protecting him, rowing or sailing the boat, procuring the donkey for his entry into Jerusalem, and preparing the Upper Room for the Passover meal.

As we would expect the disciples address Jesus as teacher. But the religious authorities address Jesus as teacher three times as often as do the disciples. In fact the scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees who were most familiar with the Scriptures

and the Law addressed Jesus as teacher on almost every occasion when they encountered him. On several occasions they also asked questions of the disciples about their teacher. Clearly these teachers also recognized his authority even though they may have questioned his interpretation of the Law and saw him as a threat to their own authority. At the beginning of the third chapter of John's Gospel we see this very clearly when we read, "Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." (John 3:1-2). As we saw last Sunday early in his ministry according to Mark the crowds in the synagogue at Capernaum also recognized the difference of his teaching when we read, "they were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes." (Mark 1:22). As I mentioned Sunday probably his authority was seen in the way in which he spoke directly rather than being like their scribes who would always say, "as Moses said," or as Rabbi so and so said." Such a distinction is seen especially in what is termed the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel where in the sixth chapter we frequently read that Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said ... but I say to you." Jesus, of course, recognized that the authority with which he spoke was not his own. On one occasion Philip, one of the disciples, said to Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." (John 14:8). The response of Jesus highlights how often even the disciples failed to recognize who he was. Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? [10] Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. (John 14:9-10)

On another occasion we find Jesus presenting this challenge in another way. This incident is found in Mark 10:17-22: As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a

man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" [18] Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. [19] You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.' " [20] He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." [21] Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." [22] When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

In this passage, of course, we find that Jesus does not deny being good, and he does not deny being God. But he asks the young man if he really understood the implications of what he was saying. Jesus is in effect saying, "In calling me good you are really calling me God." Are you willing to live with the implications of that?" The challenge of Jesus to this young man was, of course, just too much for him. What Jesus says to him, though, highlights the role that Jesus saw for himself as a teacher. Jesus is not concerned to share information and to teach knowledge. Jesus is concerned to teach what it means to live as one of his followers and as part of the kingdom of God. It is for this reason that his teaching still presents a challenge to people today as it prompts us to ask like that young man am I willing to live in the way in which Jesus is suggesting I should live. In his own day and still today there are many who are ready to call Jesus a good teacher who taught great principles and morals. But for Jesus that was never enough. He was always prompting people not simply to know what he was teaching but to live out what he was teaching, because for him this was the way in which God would have people to live and to relate to God and to one another.

Jesus made this teaching, of course, very clear not just by his words but also by his example. This is clear in the familiar story recorded in John 13. This story is set by John right before the arrest and death of Jesus on the cross. John 13:1-5: Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. [2] The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper [3] Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, [4] got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. [5] Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.

John 13:12-17: After Jesus had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? [13] You call me Teacher and Lord--and you are right, for that is what I am. [14] So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. [15] For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. [16] Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. [17] If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

On that same night John tells us that Jesus told them, (John 13:34-35): " I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. [35] By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Once again Jesus was reminding them, and is reminding us that the most significant thing about calling him, Teacher, Rabbi, Master, is not how much of his teaching we claim to know, not even how much of his teachings we can share with

others, but rather how much we allow his teachings to be seen in our actions. It is in this way he says that people will come to see that we are his disciples, his followers, people who claim the name of Jesus.

His words remind us that we seek to live out his teachings because we have heard through his words, and most of all, have seen through his actions that he loves us, indeed, more than loves us has shown us how much God loves us. In one of my daily devotionals recently I was reminded of the words of Henri Nouwen when he wrote, “God’s love for us is everlasting. That means God’s love for us existed before we were born and will exist after we have died. It is an eternal love in which we are embraced. Living a spiritual life, as a follower of Jesus, calls us to claim that eternal love for ourselves so that we can live our temporal loves – for parents, brothers, sisters, teachers, friends, spouses, and all people who are part of our lives – as reflections or refractions of God’s eternal love. No fathers or mothers can love their children perfectly. No husbands or wives can love each other with unlimited love. There is no human love that is not broken somewhere.

When our broken love is the only love we have, we are easily thrown into despair, but when we can live our broken love as a partial reflection of God’s perfect, unconditional love, we can forgive one another our limitations and enjoy together the love we have to offer.” (Henri Nouwen *Bread for the Journey*, March 4. Harper San Francisco, 1997)

These words remind us that we can seek to love one another as Jesus has loved us only as we remember and claim that love of which Jesus our Teacher, Rabbi, Master has taught us not only by his words but also by his deeds. A hymn that comes originally from Ghana invites us to claim that love of which Jesus spoke and that love by which he lived for our own lives. Since the hymn is really a prayer it will be our concluding prayer today. We will sing stanzas 1, 4 and 5 of “Jesu, Jesu, Fill Us with Your Love.”