

Who is Jesus?

Depending whom you ask, the answers would vary. If you asked Jews, they would say he might have been a prophet, but certainly not the Messiah or the Son of God. For the Jews, the Messiah is yet to come. If you asked Muslims, they would answer he was certainly a prophet, but not God. If you asked Christians, they would say Jesus is the Messiah, a person of the triune God, God the Son. The Christians would probably deny that Jesus was a prophet, for Jesus could not be God and a prophet at once.

But time and again, what we are seeing in the Bible is that people believed that Jesus was a prophet. And that view seems to agree with whom Jesus perceived himself to be: Luke records Jesus referring to himself as a prophet, when he was rejected by his own hometown people (4:24).

Tantalizingly, Jesus never actually came out and told the world that he is God. He has

never been recorded to have told anyone that he was the incarnate God or the Son of God. Instead, he called himself "son of man." It is John's Gospel, which was written near the end of the first century, that comes nearest to elevating the person of Jesus to the divine:

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (Jn. 1).

Yet John never captured Jesus actually announcing that he was God. The closest that came was when Jesus said, "I and the Father are one (Jn. 10:30)."

Certain Christian groups tend to interpret the verse to mean that Jesus was claiming that he is God. Although Christians would love to hear it, Jesus *never* plainly said that he is God. This saying of Jesus, therefore, is rather the statement that he and the Father stand as one in principle of things, but not that he declared he is God, or referred to the future Doctrine of Trinity which was to be formulated almost three centuries later. To call the verse as the

proof that Jesus called himself God is stretching the fabric of the Christian doctrine to threadbare theology.

So, who is Jesus?

The contemporary people thought, as they appear in the Gospel of John, Jesus was the prophet who was prophesied to come, only *after* they witnessed the miracle of five barley loaves and two fish, and filled themselves with the loaves and fish. This is quite different from having the faith in Jesus as the prophet. People decided that Jesus was the one prophesied in the scriptures, because they experienced the miracle. That would allow the suspicion that people would not have believed that Jesus was the one prophesied in the scriptures, *if* they did not eat the loaves and fish. And Jesus certainly was not in any hurry to prove himself to the people who he was. If he were, he would have been claiming loudly who he was and what he could do from the beginning of his ministry, in order to prove

himself. The Gospels do not allow us any room for suspecting such a motivation in Jesus.

What we are seeing in John's Gospel is not how people come to have faith in Jesus; instead, what we are seeing is how the minds of the people worked. People saw what they wanted to see in Jesus, and that caused them to believe that Jesus was the prophet. They could not be more mistaken.

Traditionally, prophets were the ones who bore the bad news. The prophets always told people how badly they were doing, how that made God upset, and God was going to kick their pants hard, unless they repented. Those were the real prophets. The false ones were the ones who stayed in king's palace, got paid by the king, and prophesied what the king wanted to hear. They flattered the king that he was going to be the military success; they assured the king that God was on his side.

The real prophets told the exactly the opposite. That is why the prophets were hated, and the prophets lamented their own predicaments, because their prophecies turned the whole nation against them. But they had no other choice: they had to say what God told them to.

Now people were filled with the miraculous loaves and fish, they began to think: how wonderful it was to have a guy who could multiply five barley loaves and two fish into enormous amount of food, enough to feed five thousand! Better yet, how great it would be to have a guy like this as their king! It would solve all kind of problems: no more fiscal deficit, no more grocery bills, no more beggars, etc. Hunger would be a thing of the past! And what's more, we have not yet seen everything this guy could do. Who knows what the guy is capable of doing with, say, the dollar bills?

There is a huge difference between having faith in Jesus and having faith in what Jesus can do

for us. The latter evaporates sooner than a block of dry ice under the desert sun, once people are convinced that Jesus was not going to do what they wanted him to do. We see that phenomenon every time, shortly after the elections.

When Jesus realized that people intended to make him their king, Jesus withdrew into the mountain by himself. The modern people would have taken the opposite direction: they would have gone into the city and held the press conferences, announcing their presidential candidacy. But Jesus headed to the mountains all by himself.

Here is a man who clearly understood who he was and who he was not. Jesus clearly understood what his calling was, and he resolutely rejected any attempt of the people to make him whom he was not. Jesus clearly understood what God's will was. Even if being a secular king backed by the popular movement was no doubt a considerable temptation, it did

not shake him in his commitment to his calling.

When we were children, everything was possible, and we enjoyed the potential of becoming anyone whom we wanted to be. As we grew older, we came to realization of who we were, what were our talents, and what were our limitations. The choice of becoming whom we could be became narrower. Even when we have become somebody, we may be of the feeling that that is not who we were meant to be.

That is not all: the forces around us want us to be someone whom we do not wish to be, and hold us hostage. To be someone whom we want to be, we may have to pay a great price.

In today's society, it could mean the following: to be the person whom we are meant to be could cost us jobs. It could cost us the financial loss. It could cost us a social standing, the influence, or the clientele. The forces around us do not permit us to be free to be who we are meant to be.

Before we speak our minds, we have to think about the consequences, such as our spouses and kids. The forces around us want us to be of certain kind of persons.

We know that those who speak their minds pay the price, and we may be or may yet not be prepared to make such sacrifices. Maybe, the truth must wait, others should endure longer, or we must remain patient. That is because, sometimes, the price we are asked to pay is too great to indulge in the freedom of being whom we are called to be. That is because speaking our minds could cost us dearly. That is the struggle any modern faithful must face, just as any ancient faithful did. We know them as prophets and martyrs.

Who among us are the prophets and martyrs? We do not know. If the biblical story is any reference, those prophets who bore the bad news which no one wanted to hear remained true to who they were by speaking up. Jesus walked away from the

potentially brilliant career and fantastic success. Such would be, no doubt, a very difficult decision for any regular person to make. But that decision determined who Jesus was.

What, then, determines who we are we? Who we are is determined by our choices and action. We do not know who we are, until the moment the challenge strikes us, and we have responded to the challenge. Our human identity is determined by our choices and action.

Maybe, Jesus intentionally did not tell people who he was. Maybe, he understood that one's true identity is not defined by one's own assertion. Jesus wanted to wait until his choice of action spoke on his behalf, and let his choices define who he was. And those choices were very public and visible ones.

In a way, just as Jesus did not try to define who he was, it is futile to insist who I am, or who I am not. I will never know who truly I am, until the moment I have

been challenged, and have made the choice of action in response to the challenge. And if I make a consistent choice for the given challenges, then that pattern of action will cement who I am.

Prophets and martyrs—no one is born to be prophets and martyrs. Prophets and martyrs are made by choice of action. God calls each one of us to a life. We do not really know what our lives would be like, until we come to the point when we must make a decision to accept God's call or reject it. If we respond faithfully to God's call, and live our days as God intended for us, and choose our action as God intended, then we ourselves become the prophets and martyrs.