

Sermon for Sunday, August 21, 2005:

*Who do you say Jesus is?*

There is a story about a poor guy who died. Much to his surprise he was sentenced not to heaven, but to Satan's domain. Before he was admitted, however, he was interviewed by Satan himself.

"It's pretty bad down here, isn't it?" asked the man.

"Not at all!" said Satan. "You're surrounded by people who know how to enjoy! Each day we have a theme. Monday, for example, is Party Day! We party around the clock. Tuesday is Alcohol Day! An open bar, take all you want! Wednesday is Tobacco Day! The finest Havana cigars, all the best cigarette blends."

The guy begins to brighten up. He says, "I'm sold. Let me in!" They let him in the gate and he promptly falls into a fiery pit where he is prodded by a nasty looking thing with a pitchfork. "Hey," he cried, "what happened to those Theme Days?" "Today is Thursday," Satan giggles with glee. "Thursdays we tell lies!"

I guess if you expect Satan to tell you the truth, you are in for a rude surprise. Yet, there are millions of people who have chosen to believe in Satan's lies, accepting them for truth, especially when it comes to answering the most important question of all:

"Who do you say Jesus is"?

For the next three weeks I want us to consider this question because it is only when we can, with assurance, affirm that he is the Christ, the Son of the Living God that we can live as people who want to follow Him as disciples.

For two thousand years Satan has been the mastermind behind all of the lies that have been spread about Jesus and accepted by billions as the truth. In the passage we read today, Jesus puts this question to his disciples. It is significant to notice the positioning of this question in Matthew's Gospel. It is right toward the end of Jesus' three-year ministry. People have had time to see and hear him, as of course have his disciples. Just as he is about to set his face to Jerusalem and the Cross, Jesus stops for a while with his disciples in Caesarea Philippi. This is significant. This town was on the east-side of the Sea of Galilee.

It was a center of Baal worship. Baal was the Canaanite god that the Jews often chose to worship instead of the Lord God of Israel. In fact, there were 14 different temples to the god Baal in Caesarea Philippi. We often think that the only exposure to religious faith that the people of Jesus' time experienced was the Jewish faith. But Jesus was from Galilee, a province in the northern part of Palestine where there were still pockets of people who pursued other gods beside Yahweh. Caesarea Philippi was one of these places that still included Baal worshippers.

In Caesarea there was also an elaborate marble temple that had been erected by Herod the Great. This region was governed by Philip the Tetrach one of Herod the Great's three sons. Philip was sixteen years old when he started to govern the region and he ruled for 37 years. He married the woman we have come to know as Salome, the daughter of Herodias. Salome is the girl who danced at the infamous scene in which Herod Antipas, Philip's brother, was duped and seduced into beheading John the Baptist. Caesarea Philippi was also a centre where people worshiped Caesar as a God himself.

You might say that the world religions were on display in this town. In other words, there were multiple gods that people could worship--both sacred gods and secular. Set in that context, Jesus' most famous question takes on new meaning. He was asking the disciples to clarify their theology.

Who do people say the Son of Man is?

and

Who do you say that I am?

His disciples replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

You can speak of Jesus as prophet, holy man, teacher, or spiritual leader, and few will object. But speak of Him as Son of God, divine, of the same nature as the Father, and people will line up to express their disapproval.

A billion Muslims will say: "Prophet, yes. God, no!" Jews scattered around the

world will say: "Teacher, yes. Messiah, no!" Liberal Protestants and religionists of various stripes will say: "Exemplary man, yes. Divine, no!"

And it is here where the devil's lie has so often been believed as the truth. Jesus is represented in a way that distorts and changes the picture presented to us in the four biblical gospels, Acts, the Letters and Revelation of St. John.

Recently, this lie has been presented most convincingly in an exciting read called *The Da Vinci Code*. According to *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Da Vinci Code*, published in April 2003, is the biggest selling adult hardback fiction book of all time' It has sold millions of copies, been translated into dozens of languages and is currently being turned into a Hollywood film, starring Tom Hanks. I am two thirds of the way through Dan Brown's novel and can understand why it is so popular. It is well written and has enough plot twists to keep you riveted. However woven into this masterfully told story is a deception that, for the unknowing, is so convincingly told that you would conclude upon finishing the book, yes Jesus was a prophet and a great man but he was not the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

*The Da Vinci Code* is a thriller presented as a historical novel; it is fiction and yet seeks to convince the reader that it is based on fact. The conclusions reached are preposterous, but for many it is persuasive.

### **What is the central premise of *The Da Vinci Code*?**

Through its characters, *The Da Vinci Code* asserts that almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is false. It claims that:

- The Catholic Church has kept the true facts about Christianity hidden through force and terror
- Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene (who was the head apostle)
- The Holy Grail is not, as commonly believed, the chalice used at the Last Supper but the womb of Mary Magdalene who bore Jesus' daughter, Sarah
- The descendants of Mary Magdalene and Jesus became the kings of France.
- Jesus was not the Son of God
- He was a mortal prophet - a great and powerful man of staggering influence who inspired millions to live better lives
- Jesus was a radical feminist

- The pagan emperor Constantine proposed a motion to upgrade Jesus to a deity at the Council of Nicaea in 325 ad
- At the Council of Nicaea Jesus became the Son of God by a narrow vote, but that prior to that, no one believed him to be divine

The argument is that the earliest Christian records do not match up with the Bible and that Constantine collated the Bible as we now have it. The book claims that Constantine commissioned and financed a new Bible, which omitted those gospels that spoke of Christ's human traits and embellished those depicting him as godlike. According to *The Da Vinci Code*, Constantine rejected dozens of other 'gospels' and rewrote the four that are in the Bible today. It claims that thousands of 'gospels' were burnt or outlawed but that some survived including the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi documents.

*The Da Vinci Code* suggests that the church has been hiding the real truth about Jesus and that this is the greatest conspiracy and cover-up of the last 2,000 years.

It claims that rumours of this conspiracy have been whispered for centuries in countless languages, especially through the media of art, music, literature and, most dramatically, in the paintings of Leonardo Da Vinci. The book alleges that the secret remains protected to this day by a clandestine brotherhood, the Priory of Sion, of which Da Vinci was a member and the grand master. In summary, the book suggests that Christianity as we know it is a gigantic fraud.

To quote the book:

*Some of the gospels that Constantine attempted to eradicate managed to survive. The Dead Sea Scrolls were found in the 1950s hidden in a cave near Qumran in the Judean desert. And, of course, the Coptic Scrolls in 1945 at Nag Hammadi. In addition to telling the true Grail story, these documents speak of Christ's ministry in very human terms. ... The scrolls highlight glaring historical discrepancies and fabrications, clearly confirming that the modern Bible was compiled and edited by men who possessed a political agenda - to promote the divinity of the man Jesus Christ and use His influence to solidify their own power base.*

Dan Brown's error is easily recognized by those who know anything about the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi documents. Sir Robert Teabing, the

character in the novel who refers to himself as an expert in early Christianity is the person who refers to the Scrolls as gospels. They are not.

These writings were found from 1947 onwards near Qumran. It was a community on the east side of the Dead Sea, south of Jerusalem. They contained three things:

1. All of the Old Testament books except Esther. For example, the oldest copy of Isaiah by 1,000 years
2. Biblical commentaries on Old Testament books, psalms and hymns
3. Sectarian material belonging to the Qumran community itself.

It is true that delays in publication led to conspiracy theories that the Scrolls contained information that would undermine Christianity. However, it is no longer possible to assert this as there is no textual evidence to support the claim. All the Dead Sea Scrolls have been translated into English and can be purchased at any good bookshop. These are not Gospels at all. There is no mention of Jesus, Paul or John the Baptist. They contain very interesting background information about the New Testament, but bear no direct relationship to it. Far from being the earliest Christian records, they are not Christian records at all, but the records of a Jewish sect known as the Essenes.

### **What about The Nag Hammadi documents:**

In 1945 two peasant farmers in Upper Egypt came across a jar as they were digging. They smashed the jar thinking it might contain gold. Inside they found papyrus codices. One of the farmers, Muhammed Ali, wrapped the books in his tunic, got on his camel and carried them back to a tiny hovel in his hamlet. When the documents eventually came to light, they were found to be fourth century Coptic papyrus manuscripts. There were twelve codices (ancient manuscripts) and eight leaves from a thirteenth century codex. They contained forty-five separate titles written in Coptic which had been translated from Greek.

It is from the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Mary Magdalene and the Gospel of Philip, three of the manuscripts found at Nag Hammadi, that Dan Brown makes his claims that Jesus was married to Mary and the other deceptions I mentioned earlier.

*The Da Vinci Code* suggests that prior to 325 ad no one believed Jesus was divine and that it is the Nag Hammadi documents that speak of Christ's Ministry in very human terms. In fact the very opposite is the case. These gospels tend omit Christ's human traits and embellish to make him more 'godlike'. The New Testament assumes the full humanity of Jesus

The New Testament writers dealt very firmly with anyone who suggested that Jesus was not fully human as we see in 1 John 4:1-3:

My dear friends, don't believe everything you hear. Carefully weigh and examine what people tell you. Not everyone who talks about God comes from God. There are a lot of lying preachers loose in the world.

2 Here's how you test for the genuine Spirit of God. Everyone who confesses openly his faith in Jesus Christ--the Son of God, who came as an actual flesh-and-blood person--comes from God and belongs to God. 3 And everyone who refuses to confess faith in Jesus has nothing in common with God. This is the spirit of antichrist that you heard was coming. Well, here it is, sooner than we thought!

Therefore, the facts are the very opposite to those suggested in *The Da Vinci Code*. The New Testament does not omit the Gospels that speak of Christ's human traits - otherwise it would have left out Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

Further, it is not true to say that 'prior to 325 ad no one believed Jesus was divine'. Analysis of the textual families of the orthodox Gospels and comparison with fragments and quotations seemingly put their date in the first century, thus indicating that they are far earlier than the Thomas, Mary and Philip. The Epistles of St Paul are, of course, even earlier than the Gospels. Paul was a historical figure and contemporary of Jesus, and his letters date from as early as 48 ad. Paul writes for example, 'One Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came' (1 Corinthians 8:6) and, 'He is the image of the invisible God. By him all things were created' (Colossians 1:15-16).

However, we do not even need to turn to the New Testament to prove that Christians believed Jesus was more than a mere mortal long before the time of Constantine. In 112AD, the Roman governor Pliny records that 'Christians were in the habit of meeting regularly before dawn on a fixed date to chant verses

alternately among themselves in honour of Christ as to a God'." It is clear that the early church worshipped Jesus as God from the very earliest days.

Further, numerous church Father's living centuries before Constatine affirmed Christ's divinty:

- Ignatius ( 50-117] 'our God, Jesus Christ'
- Justin Martyr [100-165 'He was God'
- Melito of Sardis [died190] 'Being God and likewise perfect man'"
- Irenaeus (130-200) 'He is the holy Lord, the Wonderful, the Counsellor... and the Mighty God'"
- Clement of Alexandria (150-215! 'He alone is both God and man'<sup>2</sup>'
- Tertullian [160-225) 'for Christ is also God'.

Therefore it is totally untrue that before the Council of Nicea in 325 AD Jesus was viewed by His followers as *a mortal prophet... a great and powerful man, but a man none the less.* In fact Jesus had been regarded as the Son of God from the very beginning. The discussion at Nicaea was not about whether he was the Son of God or a mere 'mortal'. It was about whether he was the same substance as the Father or a lesser god. The vote was not 'relatively close'" but an overwhelming majority in favour of the orthodox creed.

Nor is it true to say that The Bible, as we know it today, was collated by the pagan Roman emperor Constantine the Great',<sup>32</sup> The emperor Constantine had absolutely nothing to do with fixing the Canon of Scripture The Canon was pretty well fixed by the fourth century - although it was more a case of the church publishing for the sake of clarity what it had [subject to minor variations] always believed to be true. Its kernel of the four Gospels and thirteen letters of Paul had come to be accepted by around 130 AD and was placed on the same footing as the Old Testament between 170 and 220 AD. By 170 AD sixty-one out of the sixty-six books of our Bible were already treated as sacred 100 years before Constantine.

Yes, the Da Vinci Code is a good read but it is full of the devil's lies and poor historical reasoning. Although it would answer the question "Who do you say Jesus is?" fallaciously, we with Peter can say "You are the Christ, the Son of the

Living". Next Sunday and the following we will consider the implications for us when believe this to be true.