

**OPENING:**

When I was teaching, a student once went to the Principal complaining about a fellow teacher. This colleague of mine taught English to the student who was complaining that the teacher was constantly comparing *every* character that they were reading about... to Jesus.

Sitting in the principal's office, the student said: "I just think it's too much. Every time we read a book, Mr. Philipson says that this character or that character is supposed to symbolize Jesus and it's getting old. I mean, I almost think that he is trying to convert us to Christianity."

The Principal listened and listened and then finally responded: "I hear what you are saying but there is one problem with your theory. Mr. Philipson is Jewish."

**CHRIST FIGURE:**

I can sympathize, though, with the student because I do remember thinking you could be safe, if you had no idea else what to say, by guessing on a test that "so and so" was supposed to symbolize Jesus in the way that he/she lived, and especially died.

That's how profound an effect that Jesus of Nazareth, his death and resurrection, have had on our culture, on our books, TV shows and movies.

A *small* sampling from the Wikipedia page on this subject reveals that the following are all "Christ figures":

from the classics of Literature: Sydney Carton from *A Tale of Two Cities*, Simon from *The Lord of the Flies*, Aslan from *The Chronicles of Narnia*

From Movies; Harry Potter, Superman, Neo from *The Matrix*, Spock from *Star Trek*, Obi Wan Kenobi from *Star Wars* and on and on.<sup>1</sup>

**GOSPEL:**

In our Gospel today, we get Jesus setting the stage for this, as he enigmatically predicts that the Temple will be destroyed, only to be raised up after three days. Like extremely poor students of language, his conversation partners, the religious leaders of the day, do not understand... they can only interpret his words literally. To be fair, neither do the disciples understand, they fail the midterm as well, it's only after Jesus was raised from the dead that the disciples "remembered" this.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [Christ figure - Wikipedia](#)

<sup>2</sup> John 2.22

“Ahh, the ‘temple of his body’”—the disciples must have face palmed after the fact.<sup>3</sup>

Later, of course, the disciples would ace the Final Exam by becoming the first (human) “Christ figures” in history—as they themselves would go on to find their martyrdom.

Peter, Andrew, Paul, Thomas, and our Patron Timothy, would all take up the cross and follow Jesus, dying only so they too would live forever as models to follow.

### **LENT:**

This scene in our Gospel of Jesus overthrowing the tables, the so-called “Cleansing the Temple” is my son’s favorite story in our Children’s Bible.

This one... along with the one when Peter cuts the Roman soldier’s ear off in the Garden.

You can understand why.

The scenes are dramatic, forceful and a little violent. In the Bible, there is a lot of TALKING, but here Jesus and/or the disciples let out a little steam.

I bring that up because we all want to follow Jesus and we definitely want to get to be able to be the hero and to be active agents in our discipleship and our salvation.

If you have been paying attention, however, my sermons this Lent have cautioned against that sort of thinking.

Lent One, it was the Super Bowl and we talked about how we want Jesus to do something, but instead there is the anticlimax of him going out to the wilderness, and how Jesus, on the night that he died, there is the anticlimax of... of all things deciding to wash each other’s feet and to break bread.

Lent Two, just last week, we talked about the magnificent/ strident hymn “Take Up Your Cross, Our Savior Said” but where it was Jesus who was doing the lifting, and that this year for Lent we were supposed to be giving up (period.) That we were supposed to be testing out what it feels like to know how we have failed in front of God. And to see where God meets us in the Wilderness, in that failure

Add in “Dust, and to Dust you shall return” on Ash Wednesday, reminding us of our mortality, and how all throughout the Lenten season we have been using Rite One, forcing us to maintain this penitential posture.

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<sup>3</sup> John 2.21

You might feel like there is this wet blanket that keeps getting put on all of us. If so, that's the point and... at the very least, it will make Easter, when it comes, all that much more joyful and celebratory.

## **WHIPPING**

So for this lesson, the easy takeaway, the easy way out, is for us to say "Look, even Jesus got angry sometimes. Even Jesus wanted to kick butt and take names." We want to find the equivalent of the money changers today and make a 'whip of cords' and start going to town.

The easy takeaway, the easy way out, would be to turn that anger on each other, and to maintain Lent as this season of mutual and self-flagellation.

Then we would take a look at the Church as an institution and say "look how modern-day Christianity, or the Episcopal Church, or even our blessed Saint Timothy's have brought the cattle, the oxen and the doves into the Temple." That we have carved out ATMs among the pews, or set up a "pay to pray" system.

There is probably blame enough to go around for that to be attractive, and even a just, option, but I think the energy should be directed elsewhere.

Fred Craddock writes that: "It is before God and not before the mirror that the penitent stands."<sup>4</sup>

Instead of righteous indignation at our enemies. Instead of our best efforts at self-improvement, instead of our New Years Resolutions disguised as Lenten pieties, Instead of the diet plan, instead of even our own wisdom and our knowledge so cherished and honed, God wants us, our very selves.

Another scholar puts it this way: "The text pushes us to imagine Jesus entering our own sanctuaries, our own cherished rationalizations, and driving us out in the name of God."<sup>5</sup>

## **CLASSICS:**

Bringing it back to the study of Literature and where I started.

For the Greeks and the Romans the paradigm was that you die gloriously and the hero lives forever.

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<sup>4</sup> Craddock, Fred B. *et al.* 1992. *Preaching through the Christian Year (Year B)*. Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 154-155

<sup>5</sup> Shupe, Paul C. "Pastoral Perspective" (John 2:13-22) in Bartlett, David and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. 2011. *Feasting on the Word*. (Year B, Volume 2.) Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 94.

God in the person of Jesus Christ flipped that script, Jesus died ignominiously and because of that we all live forever.

At funerals, I cringe sometimes when people say that so and so live on in our memories, or as long as we don't forget them they will love on in their hearts. I know what people mean when they say that, and there is nothing wrong with it.

But I am not Mr. Philipson, I **am** trying to convert you to Christianity: one should be saying: they are alive. By virtue of the passion and the resurrection, the Temple has been raised and it only took 3 days. And not just their memory, not just their inanimate spirit that somehow escaped this mortal coil. That's again, the Greeks, God Bless 'em, and their understanding of what happens when you die.

Rather, one's whole body and mind and soul is sitting their at the right hand of the father.

Most people will be forgotten, to be sure.

"Cemeteries are full of the graves of people no one remembers any longer." I have spent of my life in cemeteries trying to keep people's memories alive, that's why I love history." If the deceased are of value only if we the living can keep their memory alive, then we are to be pitied.

It's more important that God remembers, than that we do."<sup>6</sup>

That word "remember" is so pregnant with meaning, we use it so often and what it means is so transcendent that it's a whole another sermon.

## **CONCLUSION**

Regardless, the Jewish leaders fail the test, the Greeks fail the test, we Christians fail the test.

Rite I reminds us with the refrain: "And with thy spirit" Not something abstract, but your essence, your totality, your whole self. "A good soul"

Be there in spirit.

Jesus makes it easier to come to him.

He opens up that ability.

And has this weird thing about our hurts, our pains, our sores, our addictions and our neuroses.

He wants us to give those up to him and he will transform them. **AMEN**

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<sup>6</sup> Long, Thomas G. 2013. *Accompany Them with Singing: the Christian Funeral*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 97, 132.