

We see something rather bizarre in our Gospel lesson today. At least, I think it's kinda bizarre. It's definitely unusual by modern day standards. And it involves how Jesus conducts his ministry.

At this point in Luke, he's well into his ministry by now. He's gaining celebrity status every day. Every teaching and every miracle, every sick person healed and every demon driven out is causing more and more people to seek after him. And yet, surprisingly, they don't know who he is.

Angels know who he is. They announced it on the hillsides of Bethlehem. Demons know who he is. They scream his identity as he casts them out. Prophets know who he is. John the Baptist recognize him on sight. Even pagan magi know who he is. They travel for miles to worship before him.

But the people? They don't know who he is. And what I find so unusual here is that Jesus wants to keep it that way. Twice in our Gospel lesson, he shuts the mouths of the demons. Prevents them from yelling out his true identity.

And this is not just an isolated incident. In other parts of the Gospels we read of Jesus telling the very people that he healed not to say a word about him or what he did. "Tell no one, but go and present yourself to the priest," he tells the leper.

Now, I know Jesus is a humble guy. He's not in this for fame or celebrity status. But at the same time, a little bit of fame can be really helpful. I remember when I was on vicarage years ago, I did a service project for the community. And we were prepared to spend quite a bit of money on advertising in the local paper. But when the paper heard about what we were doing, they offered to do two articles in the middle of the Community section, free of charge. I was ecstatic and it helped make the event a huge success.

Publicity can be useful. And if Jesus had simply acknowledged the title of "Christ" or "Son of God" he could have all of Israel buzzing. Go from teaching 5,000 at a time, to teaching tens of thousands at a time. Get the Pharisees off his back. Get the attention of King Herod. Or even of Rome itself. He could have made every problem, every limitation, every opponent vanish with a simple, completely honest statement: I am the Christ.

But as effective as that might have been in some ways, it also would have been a huge headache in others. And I've seen this firsthand as well. Several times during my ministry, for example, I've had somebody call me asking if one of my members had died. That a rumor was going around that they had passed away.

And so, I immediately start making phone calls. Calling them. Calling their family members. Wondering why it feels like I'm always the last to know these things. Only to find that, no, they're not dead. They're perfectly fine. Somehow this rumor had started. And a lot of very well-meaning people had spread it, probably thinking that they were being helpful. When, in reality, it wasn't true at all and it just caused a lot of unnecessary heartache and frustration.

We often times think about rumor and hearsay and gossip as purely malicious acts, designed to hurt a person's reputation. And while that certainly does occur and is very, very sinful when it does, there are also plenty of times when untrue rumors fly with no harmful intent at all. Just out of sheer misunderstanding.

Jesus knew this. He knew human nature because he himself is human. And he knew that you can't drop a bombshell like, "I'm the Christ," or "I'm the Son of God," without creating a small mountain of rumor and hearsay and gossip. The very publicity that may have helped him almost certainly would have also hurt him. And Jesus wasn't going to have his ministry resting on flimsy rumor or untrue gossip. His ministry was going to rest on one thing alone: the authority of his message.

The authority to fulfill the very scripture he spoke. The authority to speak the kingdom of God into existence. The authority to tell a demon, "Be gone!" And it leaves. The authority to tell a sick old woman, "Be healed!" And she's healed. The authority to tell a dead man in the grave, "Lazarus, get up!" And he rises from the dead.

Jesus was not going to have his ministry defined by what other people thought about him. He was going to have it defined by the authority of his own words and his own actions witnessed by his own disciples and recorded in his own gospels. So that when people saw him, they would recognize him as the one and only Christ. The true Son of God.

And that simple recognition was important. Because without it, the people of Israel didn't recognize him. They couldn't recognize him. They were God's people, and yet they didn't know what God looked like. They didn't know what God looked like because they had never seen him before.

The image of God that had once been a part of humanity's very nature was gone. And when they looked at each other and when they looked at themselves, they didn't see anything Godly. And so when the Son of God showed up and looked them in the eye, they didn't have a clue who he was. Because they had never seen anyone like him before.

But that's why Jesus came. To show them who he was. To show them what God looks like. The God of all authority and all life and all love. The God who came to drive the forces of Satan out of this world. The God who came to restore life where there was death and creation where there was destruction. The God who came to sacrifice his own life so that we might have the image of God once again. So that we could look at each other and look at ourselves and say, "I know God is here because I recognize him."

I know God is here because I recognize his Word. I know God is here because I recognize his actions. I know God is here because I recognize the authority of his message. And I know God is here because he is doing amazing things.

The Son of God is still here. He is still doing amazing things. And he does them through his Church. This church. This church can do amazing things. I know it because I've seen it. In just the few years I've been here I've seen it. And I'll see it again. It's not a question of if. It's a question of when and how often.

Because you carry a message of authority. You carry a message that changes lives. You carry a message that raises the dead, and brings lost souls back to Jesus Christ.

And if that somehow wasn't enough, you have even more. You have hands. And feet. And hearts. And minds. And wealth. And resources. And all of those incredible gifts of God that give us tangible power to help those who need it most, both spiritually and physically.

As St Paul said in our Epistle lesson last week, we are the body of Christ. We are his hands and feet. His eyes and ears. We are bound together by his body and blood. Washed by his cleansing water. And working together to do his will.

And what is God's will? Well, we hear that part of Paul's message today: It's love. Because no matter what other gift God could give us, tongues and prophetic powers and understanding and knowledge and faith to move mountains, none of it matters if it isn't done in love.

Christ is what binds us together. Love for God and our neighbor is what gives us purpose. And the message of Jesus Christ is what gives us authority to change to the world.

Just as Christ traveled through Galilee teaching the people what God looks like through Word and deed, we too can travel through Boonville and through mid-Missouri and through all the world teaching people what God looks like through Word and deed. Speaking and acting with the authority of those who have seen God's Word at work in our own lives.

Showing this world a God of life and a God of love. A God who still drives out the forces of Satan. And a God who sacrificed everything for us and for them. This world doesn't recognize God. This world can't recognize God. But by God's power, they can see him in us. Amen.