

John 1:43-51
January 15, 2012

South Plains

Finding Jesus

When the heir to the British throne got married last year, his official title was:

His Royal Highness Prince William Arthur Philip Louis, Duke of Cambridge, Earl of Strathearn, Baron Carrickfergus, Royal Knight Companion of the Most Noble Order of the Garter.

Every one of William's names in his title carries some aspect of the history of the British monarchy. The Most Noble Order of the Garter celebrates chivalry all the way back to 1348. The same kind of history lies behind the four titles applied to Jesus in our reading this morning. John is putting all his cards on the table in this first chapter. The calling of Jesus' disciples, as important as it is, works as a device for listing the titles Jesus will fulfill in the rest of the gospel. In our nine verses, Jesus is called Rabbi, Son of God, King of Israel, and finally the Son of Man. In John's gospel, Jesus finds some of his own disciples; but when Nathanael appears, it is this disciple who finds Jesus with a little help from Philip who has invited him to "come and see."

I like the kind of evangelism that invites someone to "come and see," and find Jesus. Philip tickles Nathanael's curiosity by his claim that Jesus is the one

they've been waiting to find, the person who fulfills the promise of all those titles, in other words, the Messiah. On this day when we complete the calling of a new class of elders for South Plains, I want to encourage not only our elders, but every one of us, to experience Jesus' titles for ourselves. In other words, I hope we can find Jesus as our Rabbi, the Son of God for us, the King of South Plains as well as Israel, and finally, at the end of life, the Son of Man.

Again and again in the gospels, people call Jesus Rabbi, meaning teacher. My friend Jim wrote his dissertation about the power structure in a Virginia city. In order to do that, he needed inside information. A prominent leader in the city became his guide. Jim called this man 'his rabbi,' because he taught my friend where to look and how to recognize the real power brokers in the city. Even Jesus' enemies called him Rabbi because he taught them how to read the scriptures, how to recognize God's work in the most mundane circumstances, and ultimately how to respond to God's word. The learning curve for Christians starts by learning from Jesus. That's why Christian Education is the protein supplement, the multi-vitamin, the life blood of the church especially for adults. We all need to find Jesus as our Rabbi.

The second title, 'Son of God,' is probably the title for Jesus that comes first to mind for many of us. His son-ship is underlined by the Christmas story every year. However, calling Jesus the divine Son of God is

problematic for some folks today. Certainly it was for the Greeks who knew stories about their gods falling in love with a human being and producing a hero such as Achilles. That's not who Jesus is. The Jews accused Christians of blasphemy for suggesting that anyone was divine except the heavenly Father. And others have always believed we are all sons and daughters of God. True enough, but that's not what the gospels mean by applying this title to Jesus. Finding Jesus as the Son of God means discovering that the human being Jesus is exactly the one who reveals, discloses and embodies God as no one else.

It's easier, but more controversial, for us to understand Jesus as King of Israel. It's easier because we know about the power of kings. His political title is what got him in trouble with Pilate. Caesar and his minions were no more willing to concede power to Jesus than our own elected officials. Rabbi Jesus teaches what justice and righteousness mean even when it threatens our comfort and overturns the settled arrangements of society. King Jesus asks us to give up our privileged place in the world in order to make room for the least of these to prosper. When we call him 'Lord' we run the risk that he will demand change. Martin Luther King Jr. concluded that the "great stumbling block...toward freedom is not the White Citizens Councillor or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice."

Jesus applies the last title to himself, Son of Man. On the surface, this seems to mean that he is an ordinary human being. But for the Jews in Jesus' time, the words 'Son of Man' probably evoked images of the end of time, the coming of the kingdom of God. The Son of Man in the Old Testament was coming on the clouds of heaven to judge the world. When I think of the end of time, I have a very simple picture in my mind. I don't know what judgment will mean or what the new heaven and new earth will look like. What I know for sure is that the end of time for me personally will mean that I cross over from this world to the next. The crossing guard will be the Son of Man, Jesus himself. Whatever happens politically, whatever metaphysical changes take place in the world, whatever there is to learn about the new creation, it is the Son of Man who will guide us. He is the one who has been our teacher. We have worshiped him as God even when we were not entirely sure what it meant. And, we have promised obedience and we have received his forgiveness for our failures time and again. The Son of Man is our destiny in this world and in the world to come.

In the movie "The King's Speech," the official title of the King of England is George VI. The king has a problem. He stutters so awkwardly that he cannot make a speech. The speech therapist who works with his monarch to overcome his terrible speech impediment insists on calling the King by his nickname 'Bertie,' a terrible insult for a monarch. This infuriates the King at first that any ordinary subject would dare such informality. But, in the end it is the intimacy of their relationship,

teacher and pupil, that becomes the key to success. We have lots of appropriate titles for Jesus, including King. What makes our relationship succeed is the fact that our Rabbi, King and God, our Savior at the end of our personal time in this world has found us as Jesus. That's the name above all the titles by which we know God. And it's enough.