

## “The Life of Christ”

Acts 10:34-43

March 25, 2018 *Palm Sunday*

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This morning, I want to tell you a story, a true story as it happens; a story Christians know, but hardly ever hear in its entirety and so a story most believers would be hard pressed to tell well themselves if asked to do so. It is the story of the life of our Lord Jesus, his life from beginning to end; his biography, if you will, to the extent that it is possible to document his life from the facts that we have. We have just a sketch of a part of his life, leaving much out, in the summary Luke gives us of the sermon that Peter delivered to the fascinated group of people gathered in the home of Cornelius the Roman centurion. No doubt on that occasion Peter went on at length and added many details, including some fascinating details that we have no record of in the four Gospels. John, as you remember, reminds us that if the Gospel writers were to have recorded all that they might have said about the Lord’s life: his deeds, teaching, personal interactions and their own observations of him the world couldn’t contain all the books that would have been required.

### Text

- v.37 What follows, from v. 37 to v. 43 is, as has long been noted, in effect an outline of the Gospel of Mark. Mark’s Gospel, as you know, was really Peter’s Gospel. We are told that early and often by early Christian writers. Mark wrote it, but Peter was the source of its content and, for all we know, much of its wording. Mark recorded the account he had heard given many times in Peter’s preaching and teaching and perhaps Peter served as a final editor.
- v.39 By referring to the Lord’s death *on a tree*, which isn’t the natural way of speaking about the cross, Peter skillfully drew attention to the theological significance of Christ’s death. Hanging on a tree, in the Law of Moses, was the fate of those punished for their crimes. Jesus’ death was the death of someone being punished for great sin; not his sin, of course, but ours.
- v.41 Johann Albrecht Bengel, the brilliant German Lutheran commentator of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, commented on this verse: “his kingdom is a kingdom of *faith*, it must be spread *by witnesses*.” That is, it was necessary that the spread *of* the gospel happen in a way that was faithful *to* the gospel. The gospel is the offer of peace with God through *faith* in Jesus Christ and so it is faith that is required from the outset. Only a comparative few ever *saw*. Jesus could have showed himself to everyone but then his kingdom would be a kingdom of sight, not of faith.

As you know Jesus was born in or shortly before 4 B.C. The reckoning of the years from the year of his birth, as is our custom still today, was not introduced until the 6<sup>th</sup> century, so it is not surprising that they did not get it exactly right. Shortly after his birth his parents fled with him to Egypt to escape the paranoid wrath of King Herod who, thinking the baby a pretender to his throne, sought to kill him. After Herod died and enough time had passed to render safe their

return to Galilee, Joseph and Mary brought their infant son home to the tiny village of Nazareth where Joseph supported his family as a carpenter. Nazareth was so inconsequential a place that it is not mentioned in any surviving document before it is mentioned in the New Testament. It was a perfect place for the incarnate Son of God to grow up in obscurity. As the years passed other sons and daughters were added to the family. Fascinating as the question is, we are told nothing of the family life of Jesus. What was he like as the eldest son of his parents, as the brother of his siblings, as a boy in the village? How did he interact with his father as he grew older and no doubt began to help in the shop? So inevitable is this question that later writers filled in this blank in the Lord's biography with their own inventions, unfortunately fantastic tales of a boy working miracles before his childhood friends and so on. We are interested in knowing what perfect childhood and perfect adolescence and perfect young adulthood look like. But we are not told. We do read, however, that through this period of his life, Jesus increased in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man. Mysterious as that may be, even perfect people must mature! In heaven, no doubt, we will be deeper, richer people a thousand years in than when we began. What stories his mother Mary must have had to tell!

There is, of course, the one incident of the Lord's boyhood reported in the Gospel of Luke, the family visit to Jerusalem for Passover when Jesus was twelve. They went every year, but on this occasion the extraordinary character of the youngster was displayed in a way that astonished both the theologians in the temple and his parents. Perhaps that was the way of it in the boy's life: only from time to time did it become apparent how extraordinary the boy was. Joseph and Mary, remember, knew that their son was the Messiah. They must have watched and wondered – staring at their boy as he lay asleep or watching him interact with his brothers and sisters or listening to him talk – I say, they must have wondered when his ministry would take flight and what would happen when it did. We do know that Jesus suffered the loss of his father, no doubt much beloved father, when a young adult since Joseph makes no appearance at all in the Gospel records though Mary does. No doubt that loss left its mark and softened his heart still further and gave him still greater sympathy for the sorrows of others.

But nothing noteworthy happened, at least nothing that we are aware of, until he burst upon the scene at about 30 years of age. That in itself is remarkable. By far the largest part of his life was lived in total obscurity! Why Luke tells us that Jesus was *about thirty* and does not give us a more definitive age no one knows. In all likelihood, despite all his research, Luke was simply unable to be more precise. Luke tells us that Jesus began his ministry in the 15<sup>th</sup> year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, but we don't know whether he means to count the 15 from the beginning of Tiberius' co-regency with Augustus or the beginning of his own reign, a difference of some three years. Was it A.D. 25/26 or A.D. 28/29?

There was, of course, a reason why his public ministry began when it did. Jesus' ministry was preceded by the electrifying ministry of his cousin, John the Baptist, whose calling as the forerunner of the Messiah had been foretold to his parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, before his birth. John had got the attention of the entire nation with his preaching of repentance. Josephus, the Jewish historian born several years after the death of Jesus, bore witness years later to the terrific impact of John's ministry, his preaching of repentance, and his practice of baptizing his converts. He also repeats the account of the Gospels that not long after Jesus appeared John was arrested by Herod Antipas for his criticism of the king for having married Herodias, his brother's

former wife. The king arrested John in largest part because of his sense of offense, his unwillingness to repent as John was calling upon him to do. The people widely believed John to be a prophet, so when Jesus appeared and was baptized by John and when John proclaimed Jesus to be the one who was to come, the baton was passed from forerunner to the coming one himself, at least in the minds of the group of men who were to form the inner circle of the Lord's followers, Peter, James, John, Andrew and several others, men who were to become some of the principal witnesses of the Lord's life and work. As Jesus began his ministry, the ministry of John soon after came to its end with his arrest and then execution at the hands of Herod Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee. There was to be no competition between the two preachers of the kingdom of God! As John memorably put it, Jesus was to increase and he was to decrease.

The first chapter of Jesus' ministry, however, took place in suffering solitude as the Holy Spirit drove him into the wilderness where he fasted for forty days and endured the temptations of the Devil. A severe test at the beginning, whatever else its purpose may have been, sent him into his public work with confidence that he was ready to fulfill his calling as the Son of Man who had come to give life to the world.

It is not too much to say that *Jesus burst upon the scene!* John's effect had been exercised entirely through the force of his personality and the authority of his preaching. But Jesus was not only an equally riveting preacher, he began immediately to perform works of supernatural power that staggered those who witnessed them. John had done nothing like this! Jesus changed water into wine. He made lepers whole. In that day there was a saying that only God could heal a leper. Whatever the illness, he could heal it. He gave sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, set the lame upon their feet. It was a time of unprecedented demonic activity and Jesus, time and time again, demonstrated his power over the demonic realm by casting demons out of those who were possessed by them. It was breathtaking and all the more since the miracles continued month after month and year after year. Josephus, no Christian himself and more than 60 years later, was well aware of Jesus' reputation as a miracle worker. [Cf. F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable*, 104-112]

His teaching was also unlike anything the people had heard before. He brought God near to them as a loving and forgiving Father to those who trusted in him as well as the judge and punisher of sin. To people who came to him in faith He offered full and free forgiveness in God's name. He combined in a revolutionary way a confidence in God's love and grace with a more demanding summons to holiness of life than anything the scribes or Pharisees had taught. The result was that wherever he went he was beset with crowds of people. From morning to night, he had no time to himself. A man of prayer, he had to find time to be alone with God in the earliest morning when everyone else was asleep. He must have been almost constantly weary and often genuinely exhausted.

In teaching his disciples, in the earlier period of his public ministry, the Lord made a point of insisting that they make no public identification of him as the Messiah. He would give the same order to those whom he had healed. The crowds were ready to hear him say that he was the long-promised heir to David's throne, but from the beginning he was well aware of the hostility toward him on the part of the Jewish religious leadership. The people loved him and gathered in immense numbers to hear him and to catch a sight of some miraculous work performed by him.

The enthusiasm of the crowds may have been in many cases superficial, but it was enough to worry the religious leadership. It provoked their jealousy since they had, up to this time, held positions of unquestioned authority among the people. Jesus was threatening their privileged place. What is more, the Lord's loving attention to people they thought of as sinners and treated as outcasts – lepers, tax collectors, prostitutes, and the like – infuriated them. He was, in effect, rejecting their entire philosophy of life. How dare he? Perhaps it was his unexpected message that led to the confusion of his mother and the unbelief of his siblings throughout the public ministry. Their lack of support must have hurt him deeply. He came to his own but even his very own people did not receive him. He was a man of sorrows *because* he was rejected by men!

And so it continued for a period of time. How long continues to be a matter of debate. The Gospels certainly require a public ministry of two years, but it is possible that it lasted most of three. Most of that time he spent in Galilee, not in Judea or Jerusalem. He would go south for the feasts – the Gospels mention his attending a number of such feasts – but then would return to Galilee. Had he remained too long in the south the crisis that led to his death would certainly have come much sooner than it did. He would remind his disciples that his hour had not yet come, by which he meant that he was not yet ready to die for our sins.

A turning point of immense significance occurred on a mountaintop in Galilee, the next great turning point after his baptism by John and the commencement of his public ministry. Approximately a year before his death on the mountaintop in Galilee, in the presence of the innermost circle of his disciples – Peter, James, and John – the Lord was transformed and his clothes shone with light. That event, known in Christian history as the Transfiguration, was the revelation of the divine glory of the man Jesus of Nazareth. There had been anticipations of that revelation, hints of it, demonstrations of it – at least to those with eyes to see – but, here, for the first time it was given for men to know that the one who was Jesus of Nazareth the man was also the Living God. On that night Moses and Elijah appeared and talked to him about his departure from the world. It has always been a matter of conjecture precisely when and to what extent Jesus knew ahead of time how his ministry would unfold and how his life would come to its end. What did he know and when did he know it? How much did he know of what lay ahead when he was 15 or 21 or even 30 when he began his public work? We cannot say for sure. As a man he too had to live by faith and that meant that he had to cast himself on the will of his Father in heaven, whatever that will might be.

But there can be no question that after the Transfiguration, the Lord knew more precisely what was to come and when. We read in the Gospels that from that moment Jesus “set his face toward Jerusalem.” What is more, he began speaking to his disciples openly about what was to happen to him: how he would fall into the hands of the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem, be put to death by the Romans, and then rise again to life on the third day. As often as they heard him say this, the disciples neither understood nor believed what Jesus was telling them. It was a scenario entirely foreign to their expectation of what the Messiah would be and do. For them the Messiah was a conquering king, not, as John the Baptist had foretold, the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world.

Sometime during that last year, the Lord began making slow southward progress toward Jerusalem, with the intention of arriving near the capital before Passover. He visited the villages of Samaria,

usually carefully avoided by Jews traveling between Galilee and Judea – an anticipation of the eventual worldwide reach of the gospel – and also preached and healed on the eastern side of the Jordan River. During these months he took several steps that could not help but both advertise his approach to Jerusalem and further provoke the Jewish leadership that was already fulminating against him. For example, he sent out 72 of his disciples on a preaching tour, a tour in which they cast out demons and worked miracles, all of which created, as it was intended to create, a still greater stir throughout the land. News of all this, no doubt, was reaching Jerusalem day after day.

Several weeks before Passover he and his entourage – the twelve disciples and others, both men and women, who were part of his substantial circle of assistants – arrived in the environs of Jerusalem. During the Passover feast the population of Jerusalem, some 30 to 50 thousand souls, would swell to as much as three times its normal size and the roads that Jesus and his disciples traveled on their way to the capital were therefore filled with other Passover pilgrims. So it was that his healing near Jericho of the two blind men – we know the name of only one of them, Bartimaeus – created not only immediate excitement among those on the road who witnessed the miracle but would have been reported in the capital only some hours later. The capital was on pins and needles awaiting his arrival.

More astonishing still was the raising of his friend Lazarus who had died several days before the Lord's arrival in Bethany, a village only two miles from Jerusalem. It is clear in the Gospel of John that this miracle was the last straw for the Jewish religious leadership. They couldn't deny that a miracle had occurred – there had been too many witnesses – but they realized that Jesus' popularity and the people's excitement at the possibility that he actually was the long-promised Messiah and that his kingdom was about to appear posed a lethal threat to their public position, their theology, and their entire understanding of their life and future as Jews. It was the affair of Lazarus that settled them on the course of finding a way, any way to eliminate the Nazarene, though his immense popularity required that they tread very delicately. They could not act against Jesus in a way that would inflame public opinion *against them*. After that miracle Jesus apparently retired from public view for a few days, which only served to increase the people's curiosity and anticipation.

Those of you who have been to the Middle East can imagine the crowded bazaars, the narrow streets jammed with people, homes and dinner tables full with friends and relatives from afar and on everyone's lips talk of Jesus. When would he appear? What would he do? What would the priests and elders do? What would the Romans do? Some visitors from afar would express skepticism at the reports of his miracles. Those who lived in Galilee and Judea would point out that no one who was there had any doubt about what had happened. Could this be the King of the Jews, the Warrior Prince who would finally deliver Israel from the galling yoke of Rome? What would happen when Jesus arrived in Jerusalem?

Jesus, of course, kept the Sabbath Day holy as he had always done. He spent it in Bethany with the Twelve and his good friends Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. No doubt he understood how much he would need the refreshment of that day, knowing what the next week was to bring. He was a man alone, even among his friends, because no one understood what he had come to do or how the week was to unfold.

It was in this atmosphere of heightened tension and enthusiastic expectation that Jesus entered Jerusalem on that Sunday that is today throughout the world celebrated as Palm Sunday. As the Lord Jesus approached the city, down the road that descended the western side of the Mount of Olives, riding astride a donkey colt as one of Israel's kings might have done, surrounded by his disciples and welcomed by an ever-growing crowd of enthusiastic well-wishers, as happens in such situations, as the crowd became larger, so did the excitement and the noise. Soon "Hosannas" could be heard and then were taken up by the multitude. "Hosanna" was one of those OT words of exclamation and praise, which, in Psalm 118:25 is followed by this chant "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord." In our day we have witnessed immense crowds wildly chanting such things many times – from "Heil Hitler" to "We shall overcome" to "Allah is Great." And then one person laid down his cloak or a palm frond on the road before Jesus and soon everyone was doing it. The walk into Jerusalem had become a royal procession! Hadn't the prophet Zechariah spoke of this day?

"Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! Behold your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

And at that point Jesus finally threw caution to the wind, accepting the praises of the people, refusing the Jewish clerics' carping demand that he hush the crowd's "Hosannas." As often as he had told his disciples over the previous several years that his hour had not yet come, finally it had. He had told his disciples throughout the previous year that he was going to Jerusalem to die and by entering Jerusalem in that way he was as much as daring the Jewish leadership to do something about him. He had said that he would lay down his life of his own accord – that no one would take it from him – and here we see him putting his hand on the latch of the door to enter by his own will the house of sorrows. He knew the leadership would never stand still and surrender their power to him or acknowledge him to have been right all along! The time for restraint had passed.

The following days, the days that we remember and celebrate as Holy Week, Jesus taught in the temple. Indeed, it was on those days that he delivered some of his most memorable teaching, concerning the destruction of Jerusalem, the second coming of the Son of Man, and the Last Judgment. Lest the religious leadership refuse to act, he also publicly denounced the hypocrisy of the scribes and the Pharisees. He continued to heal the sick during that last week of public ministry. The final miracle of his public ministry was the healing of the ear of Malchus, the servant of the High Priest, who was among those who had been sent to arrest Jesus and who found him in the Garden of Gethsemane. Peter, in a foolish gesture of defiance, had drawn his sword and cut the poor man's ear off. Jesus put it back.

Having secured Judas' help in locating Jesus at a time when he would be alone, separated from the crowds, the religious leadership then secured the help of the Roman governor and had Jesus arrested. It happened in an olive grove outside the city where Jesus had gone with his disciples to pray and where the final great test of his life had occurred. He was taken from Gethsemane and, after a hastily convened trial, a sham of a legal proceeding meant to hide their true purpose behind the appearance of just cause, the Jews went to the Roman governor Pilate to secure Jesus' execution, as only the Roman authority could put criminals to death. Pilate, perceptive enough to know the real motivation of these men, attempted to avoid being made to do the will of men he

despised. But the Jews had provided a hand-picked crowd to represent the so-called “people” and on cue they clamored for Jesus’ execution. Throughout the affair, Jesus remained passive and made no attempt to rescue himself from this injustice perpetrated by a group of shabby, small, and morally bankrupt men. Finally, out-manuevered by the Jews, Pilate, a mediocrity like so many Roman governors, consented and proceeded to hand Jesus over to his soldiers to do what they typically did to their victims: mockery, torture, the humiliation of their procession to the place of execution, and then the crucifixion itself, a ghastly form of execution that inflicted the maximum amount of pain upon its victims.

On a rocky little hill outside the walls of the city Jesus was nailed to a cross and hung up between two other criminals who happened to be suffering the same fate and were apparently already in place. For the soldiers and passers-by, it was scene they had witnessed many times before; nothing so unusual. In Jesus’ case, however, his own behavior and nature itself conspired to produce a tremendous effect. Even the hard-boiled soldier in charge acknowledged that something extraordinary had happened. After a few terrible hours it was all over, the man Jesus crushed by the weight of the moral failure, the cruelty and selfishness of the entire human race, all of that sin now exposed finally to the holy wrath of God. And then it was that a few friends claimed his body and in grief lessened only by affection, gently laid him in a tomb.

And so ended, *or so it seemed*, the short but infinitely consequential life of Jesus of Nazareth with all of its impenetrable mysteries and its manifest certainties, its glorious heights and its unfathomable depths, its temporary tragedies and its eternal triumph. Such was the life, somewhat more than 30 years in length, that was to determine the life of every human being for good or ill, both in this world and the world that is to come; such was the life that was for vast multitudes of human beings to open the gates of everlasting life.

This great personality at the center of human history, this tender, patient, kind, merciful Lion of a man; this friend of sinners. This prophet, priest, and King. But also, this God incarnate, the creator of heaven and earth, who stands supreme above the life of this world. No wonder the fate, the destiny, the happiness or woe of every human being is determined finally by nothing else but by whether a man or a woman knows and trusts and follows this same Jesus Christ, who is God himself and now also man. He himself said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father but by me.” Of course not. His own personal history makes it impossible that anyone could come to God in any other way.