

Tell Us Plainly!

It was never a dull day in the temple when Jesus was in town.

Like many observant Jews, Jesus and the disciples made a point of returning to Jerusalem on commemorative feast days.

Feast days play an important role in the Gospel of John, which structures Jesus' comings and goings around seven of them.

And whenever Jesus went to the temple, a crowd followed him.

Who knew what he was going to say or do?

The Jews who were there gathered around him, saying, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly."

It sounds to me like a group of curiosity seekers who have been asking a lot of questions and getting a lot of parables in response.

Jesus was a storytelling rabbi — far more interested in formation than in formula

The setting for the question the Jewish crowd has is significant.

It is the celebration of the Festival of Dedication (more commonly known to us as Hannakuh), commemorating an event that had taken place 200 years earlier, when Judas Maccabeus heroically took back the temple from the Greeks, who had defiled it by butchering pigs on the altar and erecting images of pagan gods.

1 Maccabees chapter 3 tells us that Judas gathered the troops and told them: Prepare yourselves for battle and be courageous! Be ready early tomorrow morning to fight these Gentiles who have joined forces to attack us and

destroy us and our Temple. It is better for us to die fighting than to stand idly by and watch the destruction of our nation and our Temple.

In a surprise to everyone, including the Greeks, Judas' forces retake the temple, rededicate it, and maintain Jewish independence for the next 22 years.

You can imagine the crowds around Jesus mumbling to each other:
“Now Judas, *that* guy was a messiah. *He* spoke plainly. Saw the problem, took care of it. Bashed in some heads, retook what was rightfully ours. This guy is all stories and riddles. Mustard seeds? Treasure hidden in a field?
Come on Jesus, tell us *plainly!*”

As modern day readers we'd love to shake our heads at the impatience of the Jewish crowds, but I think deep down we'd like it more plainly too.

We love a sure thing.
Signed, sealed, delivered.
Mystery solved, on to the next one.
It's in our nature, what it means to be human.

We're all familiar with such attempts at “finding out what the Bible means”...The operative mind-set in such Bible studies is that Holy Scripture contains a coded message that can be cracked, if only one is persistent and has the right faith in God.

In 1970 the evangelist Hal Lindsey wrote a book called *The Late Great Planet Earth* in which he laid out plainly, why the second coming of Christ would come within the decade.

People were enamored, and the books sold 23 million copies.
What's even more wild, is that when the end did not come in the 70s, Hal Lindsey wrote two more books: *Satan Is Alive and Well on Planet Earth* and

The 1980s: Countdown to Armageddon, which also sold like hot cakes,
because that is how bad we want it plainly.

In 1993, a group of scholars, collectively known as the Jesus Seminar,
released a book called *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words
of Jesus*.

The book is an evaluation of over 500 statements and events in the Gospels
and the text is color coded.

Red indicates the scholars believed Jesus did say the passage quoted, or
something very much like the passage, Pink indicates Jesus probably said
something like the passage, Gray indicates Jesus did not say the passage, but
it contains Jesus' ideas and Black indicates Jesus did not say the passage—it
comes from later admirers or a different tradition.

An interesting project, but both of these approaches to scripture seem to seek
spiritual truth through the tantalizing path of “tell us plainly.”

--- writes:

Talking plainly about that which is inherently complex, or even beyond our
understanding, is misleading to the hearer and demeaning to the subject of
discussion...

“When a person begins speaking with unequivocal certainty about God, this
is a sure sign that the person is no longer speaking about God...

God grasps us, we do not grasp God.

Faith is not linear in its progression.

That is why we can celebrate the power of the resurrection on Easter and a
mere four weeks later be drawn into a text that asks Jesus to “speak plainly”
about who he is.

I came across a blog post by Debie Thomas that says it so well:
Most of the time, faith isn't a clean ascent from confusion to clarity, doubt to trust. It's a perpetual turning. A circle we trace from knowing to unknowing, from unbelief to belief. From "Christ is Risen," to "If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." I used to consider this sort of circling a sin or a weakness, but I don't anymore. It's what we human beings do. It's real life. So, if you find yourself asking Jesus to "speak plainly" into the circumstances of your life on this fourth Sunday of Easter, then you're not alone. If something in you feels suspended, taut, impatient for Jesus to rise again one more time into the particulars of your comings and goings, your nights and days — then welcome to the way of authentic faith. This is how it works.

Now, that is a lot of reflecting on the question and nothing yet on Jesus' response to that question! What do you say to this Jesus?

**you do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice;
I know them, and they follow me**

That seems harsh to our ears.

Must we join the belief club in order to belong? Will the right belief unlock the mystery of who Jesus is?

Or do we struggle to believe because we don't consent to belong?
Does our desire for independence and self-sufficiency hold us back from belonging?

Remember, we're talking sheep here. Kind of experts in belonging, pretty weak in reasoning.

Sheep don't have the intellectual capacity to know Jesus plainly as Hal Lindsey or the Jesus Seminar might approach it.

“The sheep know and trust the shepherd, not because they have gone through any sort of rational, intellectual discernment, but because they have experienced the shepherd and his “works.”
Jesus’ role and identity must be experienced.
And that is a different approach to knowing who Jesus is.

Again, Debie Thomas:

“Therein lies our hope and our consolation. According to this text, whatever belief I arrive at in this life will not come from the ups and downs of my own emotional life. It will not come from a creed, a doctrine, or a cleverly worded sermon. Rather it will come from the daily, hourly business of belonging to Jesus's flock — of walking in the footsteps of the Shepherd, living in the company of fellow sheep, and listening in real time for the voice of the one whose classroom is rocky hills, hidden pastures, and deeply shadowed valleys. If I won't follow him into those layered places — places of both tranquility and treachery, trust and doubt — I will never belong to him at all.”

Maybe, by refusing to “speak plainly,” Jesus was honoring human life for the incredibly complicated thing it is...Jesus came to teach us about truth, about love, and about eternal life. One doesn't simply profess belief in such weighty and mysterious things— one lives into them, questions into them, believes into them, grows into them. One wrestles — and even in the wrestling, belongs.

We are flawed creatures. We want certainty without risk. Truth without trust. A Messiah who will provide but not provoke.
That kind of “plain telling,” Jesus said, is not available. The only knowing that matters is an incarnational knowing. A knowing that happens *within* and *among* the fold.

It's why we're here. On Sundays that we feel like it and Sundays that we don't.

Fellowshipping with those we look forward to see every week but also leaning into the hard work of understanding those of the flock who are different, that follow the same Jesus, but who find hope and meaning in different ways, places, and images.

We work, worship, eat, pray, discern together.

Because that is how we come to know.

May we ever seek to know Jesus and may we never content ourselves that the knowing is over.

I close with a quote from Albert Schweitzer, a German theologian, pastor, and Nobel Peace Prize winner, whose book "*The Quest for the Historical Jesus*" which he wrote in 1906, paved the way for scholars interested in the historical Jesus, undoubtedly the Jesus Seminar among them.

A brilliant highly educated man, Schweitzer seems to have found that balance of seeking to know without seeking to know it plainly.

It is a quote my Bible professor printed out for us and I have carried it with me ever since:

"He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same words: "Follow me!" and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is."