

## BEFORE ABRAHAM

### 5<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY IN LENT

*John 8. 46-end*

Today's reading from John's Gospel comes at the end of a long argument between Jesus and the Pharisees. They are trying to get him to say categorically who he is, with the intention of then arresting him for blasphemy. They are pretty sure he can't be the Messiah, because he seems to come from Galilee and the scriptures have said that the Messiah will be descended from David. They don't know, as we do, that he was in fact born in Bethlehem, and his father was indeed of the house of David. Time after time they try to trip him up with words, but he is more than a match for them – and, of course, he knows the scriptures better than they do.

This is not an isolated incident, and one does wonder why Jesus spent so much time trying to convince them. Well, who were the Pharisees? They were a group of people who represented the intellectual elite. They studied the scriptures and purported to understand them. They were teachers and, to some extent, the self-appointed guardians of the Jewish traditions. They had the power of life and death in the community and they judged strictly according to the law. For the woman taken in adultery the punishment is death by stoning, though common sense says there must be a man involved who is just as guilty. When the disciples pluck ears of corn to chew, as they walk through a field, they are

condemned for 'working' on the Sabbath – and indeed, Jesus is criticised for healing the sick on the Sabbath. They know the scriptures but they do not know compassion.

These were the people Jesus was trying to bring on board. They were the leaders of the people, yet they had lost touch with the humanity of the Jewish tradition. If they could be brought to listen to his teaching and think about it carefully, they would see that he was not a threat to them – he was a reformer, certainly, and somewhat radical, but he was not a heretic or a blasphemer. (Curiously, both these words have fallen out of use these days. Perhaps they are no longer so important to us.)

But will they listen? In this reading Jesus quite clearly says, *If a man keep my saying, he shall never see death*. It is typical of their narrow, pedantic understanding that they seize on the word *death* and remonstrate, because all the prophets of their tradition have died, including Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, so how can Jesus talk about not dying?

Finally he says, *Verily, verily, I say unto you, before Abraham was, I am*. However, instead of considering the implications of that profound statement, they pick up stones to express their outrage. They are rational men, yet their minds are not open to new possibilities. They have waited so long for the appearance of the Messiah, yet they are blind to the signs when he does!

*Before Abraham was, I am.* For some reason it is easier for us to understand Jesus returning to his Father in heaven after his death and resurrection than it is to imagine him leaving his Father to take birth as a human. Yet here he tells us plainly that he and the Father are co-eternal – and if we think about that, it makes his sacrifice so much the greater. He didn't just die for us – he was born for us too.

*God so loved the world!*

The Revd Canon David Crawley

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