

Lent 5 (2026)

Jesus continues to fascinate and even to make money for secular publications.

As recent as March 4, 2025, He was featured on the front cover of a special edition of Time magazine, along with the title, **“Jesus, Who He Was, Who He Is. His miracles. His mission. His love”**.

Nor is it the first time Jesus has been featured on the front of a major publication. He appeared on the December 2017 issue of National Geographic. This time the title read: **“The Real Jesus: “What Archaeology Reveals about His Life?”**

These are just two random examples. Why the interest in someone who lived 2000 years ago?

What makes Jesus different from the other great men of history?

Who was Jesus, and why does it matter?

There have been many answers to this question.

Some will answer: a great teacher: a passionate prophet, a miracle worker; a friend of the downtrodden; one who believed so strongly in His cause that He was willing to die for it.

No doubt there is truth in all these observations.

Some adjectives that might be used to describe Him based on scripture include:

Compassionate, remember how He welcomed little children and rebuked those who tried to keep them from coming . . . remember

how He reached out and touched the untouchables: the lepers.

Forgiving, remember how He responded to the woman caught in the act of adultery. Instead of condemning her, He turned the spotlight on her accusers and said: **“Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.”** And then, after they had slunk away, He said to the woman, **“Go and sin no more.”**

Welcoming, remember how He befriended and ate with those the religious establishment of the day dismissed as sinners, tax collectors and the like.

It is possible to put all these images and adjectives together and to come up with a Jesus, meek and mild. We see this in some artistic depictions of Him.

But there is just one problem /// Today’s Gospel.

Here we find not a meek and mild Jesus but a fierce **controversialist** . . . someone who could hold his own in a debate . . . someone who did not mind calling out His opponents and exposing the falsity of their arguments . . . someone who believed in objective truth (so unlike many in our modern culture who believe in multiple ‘truths’, who are quick to affirm everything and everybody).

No wonder Jesus continues to command the attention of believers and unbelievers alike. He is a many-faceted character.

I want to turn now to this morning’s Gospel. Here, we find some further clues as to why Jesus continues to be pondered and studied.

Today’s Gospel opens with a question: **“Which of you convinceth me of sin?”** Put in the language of today, Jesus was asking: **“Who can find any fault in me?”**

As I have said in the past, I would not dare stand up here and ask that question. If I did, we might be here for quite a long time!

But the interesting thing that happened was that when Jesus put it to His severest critics, they could not come up with a single credible charge.

The same thing happened following His subsequent arrest and being brought before the Sanhedrin. According to Matthew 26:60, false witnesses had to be brought in.

Where I am going with this is that Jesus' **blameless character** is one thing that sets Him apart and causes those of every generation to want to know more about Him.

In addition to His blameless character, there is another thing that causes Jesus to stand out from the crowd. That is His **God claim**.

In today's Gospel, we find Jesus saying, **“Abraham saw my day and rejoiced.”** What did He mean by this?

Seemingly this: At some point, likely on Mount Moriah, when Abraham was preparing to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice, God's plan of rescue of the human race was revealed to the patriarch.

Abraham may even have had encounters in with the pre-incarnate Son of God, the One we know as Jesus, at various times in His life.

But Jesus' God claim gets even more specific when he says: **“Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am.”**

Those two words at the end say it all. Remember the story of Moses at the burning bush?

On this occasion, God reveals His name (or likely the meaning of it) to the great lawgiver. That name is Yahweh or **I AM that I AM**.

In today's Gospel, we find Jesus applying those same words to Himself, and the Jewish religious leaders understood all too clearly what He was saying. Their response was violent. They took up stones and began throwing them at Him.

The question we must ask is: **Is Jesus' God claim credible? Can He back it up?**

Even a cursory reading of the Gospels reveals that it is. Here we find Jesus doing what only God can do.

--He turns water into wine.

--He exercises power over nature by stilling the troubled waters on the Sea of Galilee.

--He multiplies loaves and fishes.

--He brings sight to blind eyes and strength to palsied limbs.

--He forgives sins.

--He raises the dead, both the physically dead and the spiritually dead.

And, in the end, His Father Himself validates His claim by raising Him from the dead on that first Easter morning.

No wonder Jesus remains a fascinating figure. Both His flawless character and His God claim set Him apart.

Let's turn now to where Jesus' claim intersects with where we are as individuals and as a church. I have two suggestions.

The first is that if Jesus' claim to be the Son of God is true, then we have a hope that no one else has, and one no one can take from us.

I once had a friend, an unbeliever, who would get in a crowd and say, **“I don't need Jesus Christ in my life.”** But in private, he would come to me and say, **“If I die, I have no hope.”**

Because we accept Jesus' words in John 14 as true -- **“In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you** –we have a hope and a certainty that my friend could not have.

But there is also a corporate aspect to Jesus' claim in today's Gospel.

If Jesus is telling the truth, if He is indeed the Lord of heaven and earth, then we have a message to proclaim and reason to be confident in our witness.

As we look out on the state of Christianity today, there is much to cause discouragement.

There are attacks from the culture without and there are divisions within.

Not only that, the pool of Christian knowledge and understanding in this country is very shallow. More distressing still, parents are not passing on the faith to their children.

Yesterday, I was in Clayton speaking to a gathering of the Thomason family, the family of the man for whom Thomason Hall is named.

Afterwards, I was seated across from a couple who are members of a small congregation in Trion. It was rather discouraging to hear them talk.

They have about 18 on Sunday morning. The Methodist church down the street has closed.

The comment that caught my attention was:
“If only the children and grandchildren of the old guard would attend.”

The couple further said that if the second and third generation do attend religious services, it is more likely a feel-good, non-creedal, entertainment-oriented church. No wonder the pool of Christian knowledge and commitment is so shallow.

If the cultural shift we see going on in this country continues and actual persecution comes, these people will not have the resources to deal with it. They will be like a plant with no root.

What then, are those who practice historical Christianity without hope? Should we throw in the towel and go home?

No, Jesus is risen from the dead. He can cause dry bones to live.

Go then into your mission field with great confidence. Remember people are still fascinated by Jesus. Capitalize on that fascination.

Tell them of the One who died and rose and is alive for evermore.

Proclaim the ancient faith of the church enshrined in the Creeds and enacted in the Sacraments.

Challenge the falsehoods of this present age.

Say the emperor has no clothes when he hasn't. ///

If people take up stones, so be it. God's truth abideth still and in the end will triumph.