



# TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*on the Branford Green*

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

## **Who Is This Jesus?**

**By The Rev. Sharon Gracen**

**Palm Sunday, April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2012**

This day is all about “who is this Jesus?” There were many different answers on that day. To the people on the street, he was a hero, his fame as a healer and exorcist had made him a crowd sensation. To others he was the promise of a return to the glory days of the reign of King David. To some he was the one around whom a revolution might come together and the Roman occupiers would be run out of town. To Caiaphas, the High Priest of the Temple – Jesus was a real problem. Caiaphas had made some changes concerning the ritual sacrifice which was the main activity of the Temple. All animals to be sacrificed now had to be bought at the Temple rather than brought from the farm or purchased in town. It was not a popular move for many reasons. Jesus had led a raid on the merchant activity and caused a real stir. Caiaphas’ longevity as High Priest depended on neutralizing the threat that Jesus posed.

To Pontius Pilate, Jesus was one more “jewish situation” that could make him look bad. Politically, Pilate was on shaky ground with the folks back in Rome and if it appeared that he couldn’t control his territory, he might well find himself worse than unemployed. Jesus unwittingly had created an alliance between Pilate and the High Priest of the Temple. The complicated politics of the situation, which involved the authority of the Temple and its treasury, conspired to seal Jesus’ fate. To these two unlikely allies, Caiaphas and Pilate, Jesus was something better dealt with quickly.

But what was it that motivated Jesus? Bruce Chilton is a Professor of Religion at Bard College, specializing in Early Christianity and Judaism. His book *Rabbi Jesus* has provided a very different view of who Jesus was. In this book, we find a Jesus committed to rectifying what he saw as corruption and exclusion in the Temple system of sacrifice and worship. Jesus and other rabbis of the day were drawn to the apocalyptic teaching of the prophet Zechariah who said that when the smoke streaming from the altar in the temple was right, when the furnace of sacrifice finally got hot enough, when the critical mass of faith was attained, God himself would descend upon Israel as “king over all the earth” (106). Jesus and others interpreted this to mean that the right to serve in the Temple should be opened beyond the small circle of priests in Jerusalem. Jesus as a Galilean, would never be acceptable to offer sacrifice to God in the holiest place on earth. Nor would any priests from any other part of the Jewish world. Nor would the gifts they might bring for sacrifice be acceptable. To Jesus, this situation that excluded so many was standing in the way of the Kingdom’s appearance on earth. His opposition to exclusion motivated his actions. It’s also what got him killed.



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Nearly two thousand years later, Palm Sunday, 2012 and what has changed? Actually, quite a bit. In the Episcopal Church, at least, the office of priest is open to anyone and we clergy are all equal, according to our ordination. I was able to celebrate the Eucharist at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in NYC when we went there with our youth group. Not all that long ago, that would not have been the case. The church will take up the issue of same sex marriages at our General Convention this summer in Indianapolis. If the Convention does not pass the resolution, I predict that there will be bishops who will move ahead on their own with equality in marriage for all. There may be squabbles, but there will be no crucifixions. Although, the constant death threats are one reason that Bishop Gene Robinson will be retiring early. For the most part, we are working hard on being as open and welcoming and inclusive as we can. But this is the Episcopal Church and not all denominations are prepared to be so inclusive.

The current conflict of who may be invited to receive communion is one that is not unlike the issue of Jesus' day. Our Prayer Book states that "all baptized Christians" may receive communion. The movement toward "open communion" welcoming anyone who feels called to the table is spreading fast. Our General Convention will also debate this topic and hopefully decide to remove any restriction. Many churches already practice open communion. Our bishop has asked all of us clergy here in CT to abide by the rules until we see what happens in Indianapolis this summer. That is why I no longer say our loud a blanket invitation, nor is it in our bulletin. However, none of you has taken vows of obedience to a bishop so I'll leave you to offer any invitation that you might wish to extend. I ask no questions at the communion rail. I believe that Jesus would not be in favor of any sort of exclusion. He offered radical hospitality at every turn so why should we not do likewise. Be assured that every voice in the church will have an opportunity to be heard on this issue. I love that about us.

Voices all over the world are silenced or ignored about really important things – they're not given a place at the table. Remember that panel testifying before Congress about birth control that had no women on it! Whether it's about education or reproductive health or war, the power to exclude dissenting opinion or a minority voice is never healthy. Dialogue takes longer than dictating and the outcome is not as sure but it's what leaves room for the work of the spirit.

Jesus didn't run from opposition to his vision – he accepted the consequences of his passion so that we might all know the extravagance of God's kingdom of love. He wasn't what a lot of people wanted him to be, any more than he will be whatever supports our own position. The best for us to understand is to walk with him through this week, to that last night with his friends that ended in his arrest, we call it Maundy Thursday, the night of the new commandment to love each other as he loved us. And then follow him on Friday to the cross with its pain and grief and through the emptiness of Saturday so that when we come to Easter our joy will have more depth, more insight and prepared to make more room at the table.