

Today I am going to be preaching on our movie of the month, *Jesus Christ Superstar*. The movie turned 50 years old a few weeks ago.

30 years ago, on the 20th Anniversary of the movie, Renee and I had the good fortune to see the movie *Jesus and Judas*, Ted Neeley and Carl Anderson, reprise their roles live on stage in Chicago. They were both approaching 50, but Ted was still able to nail the G above high-C during the Gethsemane song. It was awesome to see them live. As a bonus, one of Renee's favorite rock singers, former Styx front-man Dennis DeYoung played Pontius Pilate. In my opinion, Mr. DeYoung is incredibly talented and has a tremendous voice, but it also seems from a distance that he's something of a pompous prima-donna—thus I thought he was PERFECT as Pontius Pilate.

So, I'll be talking about *Jesus Christ Superstar*. But as a prelude, I want to touch briefly on our Gospel lesson. John ch11 and the raising of Lazarus leads right up to the events of *Superstar*. But in its own way, John is also asking some of the same questions as the 1973 movie musical.

Briefly in John 11, we see various people wrestling with who Jesus truly is, which is also a core theme of *Jesus Christ Superstar*. In John 11, we see the disciples wrestling with whether they and Jesus should go to Bethany since it is basically a suburb of Jerusalem. There is great danger there for Jesus.

But the disciples are also mystified as to why Jesus isn't going immediately to heal his good friend Lazarus who is ill. Jesus ends up intentionally waiting until Lazarus dies, and then arrives in Bethany 4 days after Lazarus's death and burial.

And Jesus' other good friends, Lazarus's sisters Mary and Martha, are both upset with Jesus when he arrives. They both greet him with the same accusation:

"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."¹

It's a pretty sharp and angry statement. It's basically, 'Lord, you had the power to heal him—why didn't you choose to use it?'

And yet, the Martha, also adds another statement. It starts with a "But..."

She's basically saying 'Where were you? I'm angry you didn't show. But...'

"But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him."² She's angry with Jesus. But she still values her relationship with Jesus. She still trusts him.

¹ John 11:21, 32

² John 11:22

And her trust is well placed. We see Jesus expressing strong emotion at Lazarus's death. In the shortest verse in the Bible, we're told that "Jesus began to weep."³ And the people around Jesus are not sure what to make of this. The tears show that Jesus deeply loved Lazarus. But some in the crowd also question why Jesus didn't show up and use his power to heal Lazarus before he died.

After that, Jesus does act with great power. Jesus commands that the tomb be opened, and then he commands the dead Lazarus to come out of the tomb. And Lazarus does.

Thus, we see a lot of varied and mixed opinions of Jesus from his close followers and from those observing at a distance. Who is this Jesus? What is the extent of his powers? What is his mission or purpose?

And at the end of chapter 11 in John, right after our Gospel lesson, the events portrayed *Jesus Christ Superstar* basically start rolling. The priests call an emergency meeting and decide that Jesus must die. And then in chapter 12 Jesus is anointed on the night before Palm Sunday. And then Jesus enters Jerusalem and Holy Week and the Passion begin.

Which brings us to *Jesus Christ Superstar*. *Superstar* was written by two men in their early 20's: Andrew Lloyd Webber the composer, and Tim Rice the lyricist. These two young men were at the beginning of their careers, long before they were both knighted, long before they started raking in Oscars and Grammys and Tonys, both together, and later, separately.

Webber & Rice decided to write a musical based on the Passion of Jesus. But they added a twist—they really tried to dig into Judas's character and motivations in betraying Jesus. The result was *Jesus Christ Superstar*, which they labeled as a "rock opera." But they couldn't get any real interest in Britain—theater producers thought the subject matter was too bizarre to stage.

So, in 1970 Webber & Rice recorded *Superstar* as a concept album. It fizzled in Britain. But the album was a huge, unexpected hit across the Atlantic in the United States. Given the huge degree of the album's success in America, *Jesus Christ Superstar* was officially staged in New York as a musical in 1971.

And then it was made into a movie which was released 50 years ago this month. In 1971, director Norman Jewison was in Yugoslavia filming *Fiddler on the Roof*. The actor, Barry Dennen, had a small role in *Fiddler* as Mendel, the rabbi's assistant. But he had also sung the role of Pontius Pilate on the original album of *Jesus Christ Superstar*. He talked to Jewison about how he should look at *Superstar* for his next project. Jewison decided to do it, and he cast Barry Dennen as Pilate in the movie as well.

³ John 11:35

One of the things I love about the 1973 movie version of *Superstar* is the way it is filmed in Israel. A busload of basically hippie actors rolls up to some dusty ruins and they unload props from the bus. And they stage the musical amongst the ruins. The costumes are both ancient and modern. Roman soldiers carry spears and machine guns, and wear camouflage pants with tank tops that are Roman purple.

Superstar places its focus on Holy Week, the last week of Jesus' earthly life. And Judas and Jesus are the two primary characters.

In *Superstar*, Judas is portrayed as disillusioned and questioning who Jesus is. From the opening song to the flashy 2nd to last song—which is also the title song—Judas is questioning Jesus.

In the movie's opener, the criticism is basically two-fold. First, Jesus is talking about his own relationship to God, and Judas doesn't like anything that suggests that Jesus is more than a man.

Second, Judas worries that the authorities will soon take notice. He sings:

*I am frightened by the crowd
For we are getting much too loud
And they'll crush us if we go too far*

Later, when a disillusioned Judas goes to the priests to betray Jesus, he sings,
*I came because I had to I'm the one who saw
Jesus can't control it like he did before*

And at the Last Supper when Judas departs to betray Jesus he says to Jesus,
*To think I admired you
For now I despise you*

Judas later repents of his betrayal and hangs himself in sorrow. And then Jesus is tried and condemned to die. And as Jesus goes to the cross, Judas sings the big, flashy, penultimate song of the show. It's the title song. And since Judas is dead, the script cryptically describes the singer as "The Voice of Judas." And this voice of Judas is asking the key 20th Century questions about Jesus. The chorus asks,

*Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ,
Who are you? What have you sacrificed?
Jesus Christ, Superstar,
Do you think you're what they say you are?*

And those are key questions that everyone must answer in the 20th and now 21st century. Who is Jesus to you? Just a regular man? Or something more?

Jesus Christ Superstar took a fair amount of criticism in the early 70's from a number of Christian groups for even daring to raise those questions. But that's unfortunate. A faith that can't stand up to some difficult questions is nothing more than a house of cards that can be easily knocked down.

To be fair, *Superstar* does not come down heavily on the side that Jesus is God. It asks the question, 'is he, or isn't he?' And then it lets the question hang there for the audience to answer.

But what *Superstar* does do VERY well is to give a compelling portrait of a very real, truly human Jesus. And this was a VERY important corrective at the time.

Christians have classically held that Jesus is both fully God and fully human. Not 50/50. Not 60/40 or 70/30. But somehow 100/100, 100% divine, 100% human.

But early 20th century portrayals of Jesus, especially those in movies in the 50's and 60's leaned WAY too far on the God side. If you watch those old movies, it's not hard to believe that Jesus is God. But it is difficult to believe Jesus is really human. In fact, they're guilty of the ancient Christians heresy of Docetism. Docetism means that Jesus only seems to be human or appears to be human, but he's really only divine. In some of those old movies a docetic Jesus almost seems to float around like some alien visitor from another planet, unattached to the realities of our human condition.

Thus, *Jesus Christ Superstar* does a good job at showing Jesus' human side. Jesus gets tired. Jesus gets frustrated. Jesus gets overwhelmed by the demands placed on him. These are all things that a real human being would encounter.

And while *Superstar* does not deal with Jesus' divine side, it is very clear that Jesus thinks he is doing God's will in going through with the Passion.

While Judas is often the focus of the play, Jesus dominates the action in both the Garden of Gethsemane and in his trial before Pontius Pilate. And in the Garden, Jesus is wrestling spiritually with God and God's will. And he is portrayed as having a VERY clear sense that God wants him to go through with being Crucified. And so Jesus acquiesces and is obedient to God's will. And the movie ends with his Crucifixion.

This was also a criticism of the original work, that it ended with the Crucifixion and didn't mention the Resurrection. It's interesting that a number of later productions try to portray the Resurrection symbolically. One I saw had Jesus' body ascend off of the cross at the end. Several that I've seen have bright lights that swallow up Jesus' crucified body in an overwhelming blaze of glory. One production had Jesus and the entire cast come out for the curtain call in outfits that were identical to the costumes they had worn throughout the play, with one exception—they were all pure, dazzling white, as if they had all been raised and transformed.

And if you watch the 1973 movie, all of the actors get back on the bus to leave the movie set, except the one who plays Jesus. And the last shot shows the sun setting behind an empty cross. But then in the foreground you see the silhouette of a shepherd walking with his sheep. This was totally unplanned and serendipitous—the shepherd just wandered by as they were filming the sunset. But Jewison left it in the movie as a nod to the Resurrected Good Shepherd still being present with his sheep.

We mustn't forget that *Jesus Christ Superstar* was not written to give definitive answers. It was written to ask questions, and let the audience decide. So, we mustn't be too hard on it for not taking one side or the other.

Next Sunday, we begin our annual observation of Holy Week. And each of us will have to confront the question of who Jesus is to us? Just a man? Or something more?

And like *Superstar*, we will see Jesus Christ crucified. Was it just a tragic meaningless death? Or was there a greater purpose?

I would definitely come down on the side of the latter. Because not only do we begin Holy Week next Sunday. We also celebrate Jesus' Resurrection the Sunday after that.

The Cross is inextricably linked to the Empty Tomb. Crucifixion leads to Resurrection.

Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life. Let us put our trust in him.