

Giving up Popularity

Luke 19: 28-40

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The results are in: Jesus still is and remains, after 2000 years, the most important, most popular person that ever walked this earth; according to the internet. I am not kidding! A study was carried out by Steven Skiena and Charles Ward who ranked famous individuals using a specially developed algorithm that would see how famous they remained after their death. According to Skiena and Ward, Jesus is at the top of the list, followed by Napoleon, then Mohammed.

The first American on the list is Abraham Lincoln, who came in fifth. He was closely followed by George Washington, who was sixth, one place ahead of Adolf Hitler. Skiena and Ward gathered their finding in a book called, "Who's Bigger? Where Historical Figures Really Rank." It needs to be said there are no female historical figures in the top ten. Here are some other placements in the ranking: "Barak Obama came in 111th, 10 places ahead of Madonna. Bob Dylan was 130th, and young popstar Justin Bieber finished in 8, 663rd place. Skiena said in an interview that, "The significance of Jesus is shown by his mindshare today fully 2,000 years after his death. We don't see the same happening for Justin Bieber." One can only hope that he is right. (1)

Let go back in time to see why Jesus deserves to be the most popular person in history, a distinction he probably would shrug off and ignore. We meet him at the high of his popularity. Jerusalem is packed with people who had come to celebrate the Passover. It was a festive occasion—the celebration of Israel's release from Egyptian bondage. Every Jewish family from the diaspora who could afford it, came to Jerusalem. The temples were busy. Animals were sold to be sacrificed in the temple. Lots of money changed hands, every room was rented; there were people everywhere.

Of course, a gathering of the masses for festivals always made the Roman occupiers nervous. According to Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan (2), the Romans put on a military parade on one end of town to show off their power to intimidate people into behaving. And then there was Jesus' little

parade, much more spontaneous and not quite as glamorous but nevertheless impressive and worrisome to the authorities. Jesus is welcomed like a king, a leader who is thought to bring an end to the oppressive system. His reputation as rabbi and healer preceded him. His message was one of liberation, peace and freedom, and that is what people wanted him to do. And what does he do after the parade? He does not take on the Romans. The first thing he does is go to the temple, and throw over the tables of the money changers which in turn angered the priest. Things went quickly downhill for Jesus. Within days he went from "most hailed to most failed" because he would stay the course of faithfulness to God. Once he did not fulfill people's expectation, he became a liability, and had to go.

Jesus, I believe, did not care about being popular, of being the best preacher, and the most successful healer. His life was not about being popular and revered; his life was about being faithful, faithful to God. Maybe at one point, Jesus might have felt affirmed by this little welcome parade. Maybe for a moment he thought, "maybe the message of God's great love for all is sinking in, it's being heard, its working," but when the going got tough, people turned away from him and his message. Within days, the crowds that welcomed him like a king, called for his death.

Where is it that we can link into the story? We have welcomed Jesus the Christ into our lives by our baptism, and we are spending our lifetime figuring out what that means. We welcome his message. We love and cherish what he has to say. It challenges us for sure. If nothing else his words, his life, hold us to a higher standard we are trying to follow but it remains, for the most part, a try. Some might say it is impossible to be like Jesus or to follow him in everything to a "T" which is probably true. If it were different, we would not be talking about him anymore.

We are the cheering crowd, welcoming him into our lives and hearts but when we don't get from our faith in him what we want or perceive as our need, we turn our backs and give our loyalty to someone or something else who can fulfill our dreams and hopes.

We are the disciples who at one point have promised to never leave him or lose our faith in him. We want to walk with him. We want to be part of a movement and share his message of unconditional love for all people, a movement that would bring an end to poverty and illness, that heals people

from blindness and frees people from their self-made imprisonments. But when that means losing all that we have and all that we are, we turn our back and watch from a distance.

The story of Jesus' passion is a painful story. Jesus' steps to the cross are marked by repeated denials, total abandonment, an unfair trial, and a brutal death. It is a tough and painful story because it is a story that hits so close to home. Jesus is left alone to die by the people who have promised to love him, always, no matter what. And these were faithful people, loving people, people trying to do the right thing desperately. People like you and me.

What in our lives proclaims our faithfulness, our fidelity to Jesus Christ? And what in our lives would make us turn away from him?

There are lots of temptations out there that have the potential to lure us away from Jesus, to switch allegiances and to forget about this whole faith thing.

When it comes to the everyday work of life, we don't often make Jesus the central or starting point of all our actions. We are really good at compartmentalizing our lives and faith: we might apply very little faith to our daily tasks. Faith is for church and that happens to take place on Sundays.

Or it makes more sense to us to put our faith into the things that we can see and touch – our actual relationships, or money, or our intellect, or our careers and with that our successes. That usually does not include faith in Jesus.

Or we let our feelings dictate our depth of commitment and faithfulness. It is so easier to let go of our belief in Christ or put it on the back burner if we feel mad, or sad, bored, tired, distracted or overwhelmed. We all have been guilty of being fair-weather, part-time, weekend or on summer vacation Christian.

Jesus wants more from us; needs more from us. He needs us to be disciples. He needs us to be faithful, to love him even when it's really, really hard to do so. He needs our discipleship even when this faith in him doesn't make any sense – when he asks us to forgive each other when we feel most hurt. He needs us to care for the sick and lonely when we are feeling sick and lonely and forgotten

ourselves. Jesus does not want part-time enthusiasm watching from afar, he wants us to make the kingdom of God happen here on earth with our lives. Jesus does not want an audience that judges the performance of a few people. In God's realm everyone is a performer, using their gifts and talents for the good of all.

Our Christian faith is about our relationship with our Creator and Redeemer, and if we are serious about this relationship, it means changing our life so it reflects our faithfulness and loyalty to God in everything, seven days a week, 365 days, year after year. It means picking up where Jesus left off, even when the tasks seem hard to do. It means being open to the Spirit's guidance rather than following the path of least resistance, or following what we, what I want to do.

The story of Jesus' passion is a hard and difficult one to listen to. He is going to die because he lived his life and his faith with integrity and commitment. Jesus is showing a faithfulness that does not falter even when his life is on the line. This should make us squirm just a little bit as carriers of his name and followers in his footsteps. For I believe it is exactly this example of faithfulness that has kept him at the no. 1 spot as the most important person that ever lived. Amen.

Sources:

(1) By Catholic Online (www.catholic.org) 12/16/2013 (2 years ago)

The Top Ten, by Skiena and Ward's findings, were:

1. Jesus
2. Napoleon
3. William Shakespeare
4. Mohammad
5. Abraham Lincoln
6. George Washington
7. Adolf Hitler
8. Aristotle
9. Alexander the Great
10. Thomas Jefferson

(2) Borg and Crossan, *The Last Week*, A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus's Final Week in Jerusalem
HarperCollins San Francisco, 2006