

St. Andrew's Sermons  
The Rev. John D. Rohrs  
10 Pentecost A; Aug. 21, 2011  
Gospel: Matthew 16:13-20

### **Who Do You Say That I Am?**

“Who do you say that I am?” Jesus asked. Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

As some of you know, I'm just back from a week in Oxford, the city of spires. I went with the bishop to participate in a study program there, and it was wonderful. It was such a treat to have time to learn and explore. For an Episcopalian, Oxford is like going to Mecca. So much of our church's history and theology emanates from that city.

Which brings me to two stories I want to share. The first is about going to church. I was there over a Sunday, so I went to service at St. Mary the Virgin, which is sort of the university chapel. It turns out that St. Mary's was the site of one of the most dramatic moments in our church's history. It involves Thomas Cranmer, and if you don't know that name you should. He was the Archbishop of Canterbury and one of the leading figures of the English Reformation. He was the author of the first *Book of Common Prayer*.

Anyhow, Cranmer was brought to trial during the reign of Queen Mary, who was a militant Catholic. He was found guilty and was condemned to death. The day of his execution, he was taken to that church, St. Mary's, and was invited to recant and perhaps save his life. So he climbed into the pulpit, with the script of a sermon in hand, a sermon that did in fact swear allegiance to the pope. But halfway through, Cranmer tossed the script aside and stood firm. He said he was ready to die for his faith, and he did. He was immediately yanked from the pulpit, marched down the street and burned at the stake. You can still stand in the spot where it happened.

Now, the second story. After dinner that Sunday night, a group of us went to a pub down the street from that church. It was crowded so we shared a table with a local guy who no doubt was having a quiet evening before these clergy tourists showed up. But he didn't seem to mind; in fact, he was glad for it. He was clearly fascinated by us. He asked a bunch of questions about our faith and our churches. Finally, one of us

asked where he went to church, and he let out this good-natured laugh. “I don’t go to church,” he said. “I’m not religious; I’m British.”

That’s a bit of a self-inflicted caricature, I’m afraid, but it’s also an honest and common answer – common not just in Britain but throughout the Western World. There’s no question that we live in an increasingly post-Christian society. And that’s exactly what struck me about these two experiences. That morning, I’d stood in the spot where one of the founders of our tradition was executed for what he believed. That evening, a few hundred yards away, I was reminded how different our context is today.

“Who do you say that I am?” Peter risked everything to answer that question. He declared Jesus the Messiah, and he was later crucified for it, upside down. Thomas Cranmer gave his life too in service to the gospel as he understood it. What about us? What does it mean to follow Jesus and to confess our faith when the risk is not heresy or treason, not life or death, but more like the risk of embarrassment or irrelevance?

Ours is a completely different context, and yet at the root, the basis of our faith is the same. Just as 500 or 2000 years ago, there is something that draws us to those eternal questions. Who is God? Who is Jesus? What if it’s true? Even those who claim agnosticism or atheism are searching for something. We all are. The context of our faith has changed but what remains is that need, that desire for something greater than ourselves. Especially now, in times of economic uncertainty, in times of terror and war, we search for some tangible sign of hope and salvation.

“Who do you say that I am?” The context of the question has changed, but the answer was and is and ever will be the same. Now, we may need new language to describe it, to keep it relevant. Or maybe we need less language – fewer words and more action. Either way, we may well need to change how we share the gospel if we’re going to reach my friend in the pub. But what will never change, not even in the end of the age, is the blessed answer to Jesus’ question. “Who do you say that I am?” Jesus asked. Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the son of the living God.” Amen.