

Who Do You Say I AM?

Matthew 16:13-20

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

It's a fair question. "Who do you say I am?" Jesus has been teaching, both the disciples and the people, for over two years. During that time they heard him teach, many times in parables, about the kingdom of heaven. He has confounded the Pharisees, confronted the demons, and amazed the people with his words. What's more, on numerous occasions he set aside the ordinary to perform the extraordinary acts of God as signs for the people. He has given sight to the blind, speech to the mute, and walk to the paralyzed. He has calmed the storm, walked on water, and fed the 5,000. Soon, very soon, he returns to Galilee, from there to set his face toward Jerusalem. He needs to explain to his disciples that he must go there to suffer many things, be killed, and on the third day be raised to life.

But to do so they need to know who he is. So it's time. Have they gotten the message? Do they know who their teacher and master is?

Today we are confronted with the same evidence. We are not eye witnesses. But we are the beneficiaries of eye witness records of the evidence. We read the accounts in the gospels. And we are confronted with the basic question: Is it true? Is Jesus who he says he is? It is really just that simple.

The answers, however, are far from simple. The Muslim would say Jesus is a great prophet, second only to Mohammed. The Mormon would say Jesus is a god, a model for how *we* might become gods. The New Age teacher would say Jesus is one among many wise men, but that god is an impersonal energy, the life-force or soul of the world. Divinity is to be found in every being. What is the truth? Who do you say Jesus is?

In a typically masterful way, Jesus introduces the issue of his identity with an innocent question: "Who do *people* say the Son of Man is?" The answers could have come right out of today's paper. Why some

say you are one of the prophets, in the great lineage of the prophets like Elijah, Jeremiah, and John the Baptist. Is Jesus mostly a great *religious* figure?

Others say you are a great *moral* teacher, for the crowds are amazed at your teaching because you teach as one who has authority (Matt. 7:29). Should we add Confucius and Ghandi? Is Jesus just a great moral teacher?

Still others say you are a pivotal *historical* figure. "All the armies that ever marched, all the navies that were ever built; all the parliaments that ever sat and all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man upon this earth as powerfully as has this one solitary life." Should we add Alexander the Great and Napoleon? Is Jesus a pivotal historical figure? We want to say "yes" to these questions, but we know that "yes" is inadequate when identifying Jesus.

The disciples have taken the bait. Jesus gets to the point. *Who do you say I am?* A couple of observations. Notice the *second person* pronoun. Who do *you* say I am? Any and every answer to the question of Jesus must be personal. It is why we say in the creed "*I* believe" and not "*we* believe." Jesus always confronts us personally and individually, calling forth a response from each of us to the question "*Who do you say I am?*" No one can believe for someone else. Each stands before God individually to respond: This is who I believe Jesus is.

The second observation: Our proper answer to the question of Jesus is revealed by "my Father in heaven." No one believes in Jesus of his own accord. Flesh and blood cannot reveal this. For this flesh is in bondage to sin and blinded to the identity of the Son of Man. We can't get *beyond* Jesus as prophet, teacher or historical figure. Only God reveals Jesus. Thankfully He is in the revelation business. And isn't it a comfort, knowing that faith in Christ is not internally generated. Our faith is God's doing, the work of the Holy Spirit, nurtured through Word and Sacrament. God, who began this

good work in you, will bring it to completion in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus calls Peter by his full name. Simon Bar-jonah. His name is, literally, Rock, son of John. His 21st century name is Rocky Johnson! And his faith statement is exactly right. “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Peter gets it! YES! Finally!! This – the first of many professions of faith. This—the intended outcome of God’s eternal plan recorded in Holy Scripture. “These [things] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31).

“I am the resurrection and the life,” Jesus says. “He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” Martha echoes Peter’s confession: “You are the Christ, the Son of God who was to come into the world” (John 11:25-27). “I am the way and the truth and the life,” Jesus says. “No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

Thomas, who was so confused at one point that he says, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” exclaims after the resurrection, “my Lord and my God!” Time and again, down through the ages, Jesus poses the question: *Who do you say I am?* By the revelation of the Father and power of the Spirit we have taken up that confession this morning in the words of the Creed and carried it forward in our day.

Jesus’ claims do not permit any middle ground. As C.S. Lewis writes: “Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

So who do YOU say Jesus is? We come here this morning, each of us, with cares that crush and burdens too heavy to carry. We know only too well our fallen condition, our many sins. But we have heard of a Savior from sin, who took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows. It is Jesus

Christ, the Son of the living God. He laid down his life for us, only to take it up again. That whoever lives and believes in him will never die. This confession—the rock upon which Jesus builds his church—is the only way to the Father. “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). May it be *your* confession. That you may know your salvation is assured. The pronouncement of the forgiveness of sins spoken today is that key which Christ has given to his church. And when we possess this forgiveness we cannot be shaken: “The gates of Hades will not overcome it.” For nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

So who do you say *Jesus* is? With Peter – with Rocky Johnson -- we confess, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” To know Christ and to be known by Him: There is no greater good, no higher calling. He and he alone is the way, the truth and the life. He is the only way to the Father for he is the only one who has paid for our sin and become our Savior. Place your confidence and trust in him, for he is the Christ, the Son of the living God. *That’s* who we say Jesus is!

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