

Who Do You Say That I Am?

Who do the people say that the Son of Man is? Jesus raises this question in an interesting way. Is he asking the disciples to tell him what the crowds are saying about himself? Is he asking in a broader, theological way about who the people are expecting as the Messiah? From the Christian perspective, the two could be the same, since we acknowledge Jesus to be the Christ. In fact, as I began to work on this sermon, my mind interpreted the question as if it had been written in the first person. Who do THEY say I am? Who do YOU say I am? It was only later, as I re-read the Scripture passage directly, that I realized my mistake. About the people, Jesus asks who they say that the Son of Man is. About the disciples, Jesus asks who they say he is.

Concerning those who are observing from a bit of a distance, Jesus asks about their expectations, their understanding of the long-awaited Messiah. While he may be referring to himself by using the term Son of Man, he does so in the third person – a distancing form of question. The answers are also distancing.

Some think John the Baptist – the recently beheaded prophet whose spirit some believed had been raised from the dead to join with Jesus' spirit. Some think Elijah, the ancient prophet who, it had been foretold, would come again to earth to proclaim the coming of the Messiah. Some think Jeremiah, another ancient prophet who challenged the leadership of his day just before the great exile. Matthew again leaves the distance between Jesus and the Son of Man by having the disciples answer without qualification. They do not say, some think you are John the Baptist, Elijah or Jeremiah. In response to Jesus' question, they simply say, some think.

Then Jesus turns the question to his more intimate setting. Who do you say that I am? Peter responds, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” This is a bold statement. The Messiah had been long-awaited, much anticipated, and there had been many false claimants to that title. In the tradition of the Messiah, the Son of Man and the Son of the living God were both titles associated with the coming Messiah. Peter has made the leap from the association of Jesus with the venerated prophets to the proclamation that Jesus is the Messiah.

Jesus does not congratulate Peter on his deductive reasoning a la Sherlock Holmes, nor even praise Peter for his great faith. Jesus declares that Peter can only have come to this understanding because God has revealed this amazing fact to him. That God has revealed the Messiah to Peter is a blessing – and a blessing that comes with a responsibility. While the following verses have often been used as a foundation for privilege, they should more rightly be seen as a foundation for responsibility. From the gift of knowing the Messiah comes the responsibility of living in such a way that the Messiah is revealed to the world, so that those who do not yet know the Messiah, those of whom the question is asked at a distance, might be drawn closer, might be bound to heaven.

The disciples do not yet fully understand this responsibility, just as they do not fully understand the purpose and role of the Messiah. For this reason, just after declaring the responsibility of those to whom the Messiah has been revealed, Jesus tells them not to reveal him to anyone.

Jesus’ reasoning, which may seem puzzling at first, becomes clear in the next interaction Matthew shows. Now that the disciples understand that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus must explain to them what this means. He begins to tell them that he must undergo suffering, be

killed, and on the third day be raised. Peter, in typical human fashion, does not listen to the whole story. His mind shuts down at the killed phrase. Indignant on behalf of God, Peter takes Jesus aside, takes aside the man whom he has so recently declared to be the Messiah, and says, “God forbid it, Lord. This must never happen to you!”

Jesus rejects this approach from Peter. Vehemently he responds, “Get behind me Satan!” The suggestion that the crucifixion need not occur is tempting. As tempting to the fully human, fully divine Jesus as anything that Satan had thrown at Jesus.

We may shake our heads at such arrogance, but we are so frequently prone to doing the same. When the teachings of Christ threaten our way of life, our practical ways of business, when they stretch our capacity for dealing with family and neighbors, do we not mentally rebuke Jesus and tell him that he is asking too much of us? Since Jesus has promised to be beside us, to lead us and strengthen us through the Holy Spirit, is this not the same as saying to Jesus, this is too much for you?

Such a tamed down Jesus is not the radical, crucified and risen Jesus who called all – rich, poor, powerful, alienated, insiders and outcasts – to repent and be baptized into a new life. Such a tamed down figure might make a good teacher or prophet, but not the Messiah who can transform our lives through his living presence.

This morning we will have the wonderful privilege of baptizing Virginia Boatwright. During this baptism we will be asked to respond to the question, “Do you, as members of the church of Jesus Christ, promise to guide and nurture Virginia, by word and deed, with love and prayer, encouraging her to know and follow Christ and to be a faithful member of his Church?” We will answer yes, and in that answer we will be taking on the responsibility of helping

Virginia come to know the Messiah, the living Christ, through the Holy Spirit acting in our lives. The question is, what will Virginia see? As she moves from the more distant relationship with Jesus of knowing about Jesus to the more intimate relationship of knowing Jesus, what will she say in response to the questions Jesus might pose to her – who do the people say the Son of Man is; who do you say that I am?

Baptism in the early church included whole households. A few centuries later concern evolved over a particular piece of Scripture which was interpreted by some to suggest that sins committed after baptism were not covered by baptism and that a person who had been baptized and then sinned was worse off than one who had never been baptized. As a result, some, such as the Emperor Constantine, waited until their death beds to be baptized.

In one sense Constantine understood better than many the difficult decision it is to follow Christ. He felt that, as Emperor, he would have to make some decisions which would be contrary to Christian teachings. Rather than embrace the new way of Christ as what might also be best for his people, Constantine tried to walk a middle ground – doing many things the way Christianity taught, and promoting Christianity as an official faith, then trusting that baptism on his death bed would wipe away the sins of the times when he allowed imperial expediency to override Christian teachings.

What a loss to him through misunderstanding! Baptism is rite which acknowledges and affirms our cleansing from sin through the grace of Jesus Christ, and this is an enormous gift we received, but it is only part of what baptism is.

Baptism proclaims as well that through this cleansing we are made part of the Body of Christ, grafted into his body and into the community of faith. Baptism declares that the power of the Holy Spirit to transform is present in the here and now, not just in the hereafter.

Faith that treats baptism as simply an amulet against the pains of the world, or as a “get in free” ticket for heaven, is like Peter’s initial declaration of Jesus as Messiah – correct in so far as it goes, but it does not go nearly far enough.

The cleansing aspect of baptism enables us to be relieved of the burden of sin so that we can pursue with joy the ministry – however challenging it might be – that Christ sets before us in his name. In baptism we no longer need to rely on our own strength and wisdom – though we so often live as though we do. God’s will, God’s purpose in Jesus Christ, are to become our will, our purpose in life, our way of living.

Daily we proclaim what we believe about Jesus Christ, through the way we live our lives. Who do we say Jesus is?

Is the Jesus we proclaim present in our lives 24/7, evident in our decisions, our actions, our choices, - or is Jesus more of a weekend warrior visible only at 10 or 11 o’clock on Sunday morning? Is our Jesus someone who avoids the commitments of faithful life, judging them to be impractical in today’s society, or is Jesus the power that leads us to do what is right, whether or not it is the politically correct thing to do?

Is the Jesus we proclaim one who cares for the weak, who seeks the lost and rejoices when they are found, or does he remind them how much trouble they are? Is our Jesus easy to get along with or does he make inconvenient claims on our lives, push us to challenge our assumptions, call us to uncomfortable repentance?

When we act, we may not ask the recently popular question, “What would Jesus do?”, but we might ask, “What would Virginia learn about Jesus through this action?” As we watch her grow, as we look around at all the children who are usually in our midst, we might hear Jesus looking directly at each of us and asking, “Who do you say I am?”

Let us live as ones inspired by God, who reveals the wisdom and grace of the holy through Jesus the Christ, the Messiah, and who empowers us through the Holy Spirit so that with every word we speak, every action we take, every thought we think, we may declare, “Jesus Christ is the Messiah, the Son of the living God!”