

Who Is Jesus and Who Are We? A Sermon for The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost (A)

He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Matthew 16:15

There's a lot of titles' being thrown around in today's Gospel! Jesus starts it off by asking his disciples to identify the 'Son of man,' by which apparently, he means himself. What are people saying about me? What are the rumors? What do the polls show?

The disciples, for their part, recite a probable list of candidates drawn from both recent and distant memory. Some say he's John the Baptist come back to life (or so Herod feared). Others say he's Elijah who had ascended in a fiery chariot but was expected to return to usher in a new messianic age. Still others say he's Jeremiah or some unknown prophet.

OK, forget the name-dropping, Jesus must be thinking. No more proof-texting. Who do YOU say that I am? Speak up for yourselves, you who have chosen to give up everything in order to follow me!

Peter, as always, pushes to the front of the line. He blurts out an answer that Jesus suggests later he may not even fully understand. Undeterred, Peter forges ahead, while adding a couple of titles of his own to this question of identity. 'You are the Messiah,' he declares, 'the Son of the living God.' . . . Silence. . . The other apostles look down at their sandals. . . Yet surprise! for once Peter has gotten it right. At least now Jesus doesn't correct him but instead lauds him and appears to give his confession and by association he himself primacy of place among the disciples, and in Matthew's fledgling church gathered around the truth that he's just spoken.

But back to those titles. They're not new associations at all but very old ones. The Son of man to ancient Israel meant simply a son of Adam, literally a creature of the earth. The messiah was anyone, king or righteous leader, whom God had chosen to rescue the nation from its state of distress, be it military or spiritual. And, by the way, not everyone in Jesus' time was expecting a savior! The Torah the explicit word of God handed down from Yahweh to Moses was all the redemption anyone needed, if one followed it fully.

And as for the Son of God? This was one whose life corresponded most closely with the will and purposes of heaven, a title that could be conferred on any righteous soul. In other words, the disciples are reciting back to Jesus their own history as faithful Jews. And to Matthew's predominantly Jewish audience (scholars tell us), these all would all have been very familiar, and very revered, covenantal touchstones.

What is new is what Peter proclaims, what he confesses to and about whom he proclaims it. This marks the departure. This is the inflection point, as we say today. For the Son of man is not just any man. The messiah is not just any anointed leader or heroic personage. The Son of God is not Abraham or Moses or Elijah or one of the prophets; it is now and finally Jesus, the carpenter's son, the preacher and healer from Galilee a Son of God for all time.

This must have been a lot to swallow. So it could've been here, at this moment, hearing these titles being used as never before, that some of those members in Matthew's Jewish church first began to part company, sadly but inevitably, unable to give up all the things that had made them a unique religious people. Some bridges cannot be crossed without a further, and fatal,

loss of identity. All our roots of knowledge and faith and hope are distinctly Jewish as is the one who embodies them. The interpretation of that hope would become distinctly Christian, and in time all but completely Gentile.

Still, sadly or not, that's where we find ourselves today, you and I. We are Christian believers, and that means we have chosen to cross that bridge, to follow that inflection point by way of scripture and tradition even to this affirming morning, and in the service of one to whom we give the title, for all time, God's Anointed. We know everything of what Peter confesses, and why; and we know more. We have the testimony of God's word, we have the apostolic heritage, we have the joyful witness of the saints, then and now, and we have our own personal, revelatory experience to draw on. The Lord has spoken to each of us too. What remains is to live out that confession of faith, to honor that witness, to validate that experience, and to rejoice in that truth. What remains is to answer, and resoundingly, with Peter, who we believe Jesus is in our lives and for our world. " You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Say it loud, say it proud . . . say it often!

But we also must answer equally who it is that we are, and who it is we want to be, and how these desires match up to God's own dream and God's own longing for humanity. It's no accident that Matthew sets his account of Peter's confession today in the region of Caesarea Philippi. In Jesus' time this was the royal residence and resort named in honor of the emperor. Matthew wants us to know that in answering who Jesus the Christ is, Peter is also affirming who Caesar is not. For there was one greater than Caesar who had come into the world, and through whom the world was made. There could be only one Son of God, and he did not reign from Rome.

We would do well to spend the whole of the rest of our lives beginning with this season of decision, this inflection point declaring who we are in Christ, and whom we follow, and whom alone we serve. Never mind what others say. Who do you say that I am. Do not fear what Caesar might do. What will you do for the success of the true kingdom and the true God? Look no further for wisdom or for strength. Rather, believe in who Jesus is, and in so declaring believe in who we are and in what we can and will accomplish by his grace, in his Name. Amen.

Blessings,
Fr. Gordon +