

Who Do You Say That I Am?

Grace and peace to you from our Lord Jesus Christ...

In our Gospel reading this morning Jesus is with his disciples in an area of what is now modern day Lebanon and Syria (which is called the Golan Heights today) but in Jesus day was called, 'Caesarea Philippi' (about 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee)... it was a predominantly Gentile area that had numerous religious sites dedicated to various gods scattered all over the area (like you might see various cities in India today) – and it had a 'very striking' white marble temple (that at one point was used to worship a Greek god called, 'Pan') but in Jesus' day was used to worship the Caesar...

And it's in this pagan area (which serves as the background for our story) that Jesus asks his disciples who they believed him to be...

In fact, listen to what it says in verse 13... it says, *"Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" ... and they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." ... and then he said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" ... and Simon Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." ...*

So, let me begin with a question (if someone were to ask you – *"Who do you say that Jesus is?"*) – how would you respond (using language that relates to your own personal experience?) ...

That was a question that one of my seminary professors, Richard Bliese (who taught evangelism), wanted us to ask strangers on the street – when I was studying at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago – in order to get a better sense of how people might respond... and as you can imagine (there were as many answers *as there were questions*)... in fact, some believed that Jesus was a prophet (like Muhammed or Gandhi) – a few thought that he was a great rabbi, or a Jewish mystic, a healer, an apocalyptic revolutionary, or even a liberator of the poor and the oppressed...

And yes, I did meet Christians along the way (who had their own strong convictions) but I also met some who thought Jesus was 'a crutch for weak people to lean on', 'opium for the masses', and I will always remember one very unhappy man tell me that Jesus was the "white man's poison"...

But the number one answer I received then (and an answer I still hear when I ask the same question today) – is that Jesus was nothing more than a ‘great moral teacher’... and who could deny the power of our Lord’s most famous teaching - the Golden Rule? (which reminds us to “*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*”)... and so, in so many ways it’s hard to deny that Jesus was indeed a great moral teacher (because he was)...

But listen to what C.S. Lewis once said (to those who might be satisfied with this answer) and who forget that Jesus also claimed to be able to forgive sins, resurrect from the dead, and speak on behalf of our Father in Heaven (even equating himself with God in John 14:9 where he says, “*Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father*”)...

C.S. Lewis writes, “*A man who was merely a man (and said the sort of things that Jesus said) would not be a great moral teacher... He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell... You must make your choice... Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse*” ...

You know, in some ways I agree with C.S. Lewis (because for anyone to make the claims that Jesus made – it does beg us to answer) either Jesus was indeed God (or he was crazy)...

But I think it’s also important to point out – that when Jesus asked Peter the same question, “*Who do you say that I am?*” he (like it would be for some of us today) he actually gave the right answer (saying that Jesus was the Christos (the Messiah) – but evidently, knowing the right answer still isn’t enough in knowing who Jesus really is...

And if we’re going to be honest here – even after Peter gave the right answer his life was muddied by one incident of doubt after another... in fact, just a few verses after this reading Jesus tells him that he’s going to the cross to die (and Peter wants to hear nothing of it)... to which Jesus says, “*Get behind me Satan*”...

Or how he promised to stand by the cross with Jesus (but as the cock crowed 3 times) set out to save his own skin instead (and had to stare into the disappointing eyes of our Lord)...

And who can forget how he (along with the other disciples) hid and locked themselves away in fear (after Jesus had been crucified) and appeared to be dead?...

So yes, Peter gave the right answer (just like we might, if we were asked, “*Who do you say that I am?*”) but evidently just knowing the right things to say – and knowing the ‘right answer’ (isn’t the same thing as really knowing all of Jesus)... who – if we really did know fully – wouldn’t cause us to settle content in our pews (but would cause us to do amazing things)...

But I think that’s why I love this story – because even if – like Peter – we know a few of the *right things to say* (and a few things about Jesus) – that even then there’s more we can know... even then more will be revealed...

Which is why we read this in Matthew 11:25, “*At that time Jesus declared, "I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because You have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children"*... and by little children Jesus means (those who are still open to learning)...

I want to close by mentioning that world renown preacher and professor, Fred Craddock, once imagined being asked by Jesus the same question – who do you say that I am?... and with all of the faith of the saints (and all of the conviction of Heaven) he envisioned himself when he was a young man (boldly declaring Jesus as Lord)...

And in his wild imagination (his confession would be met with the sounds of violins playing, the birds chirping, and an Hallelujah choir singing celestial praises to God)... and in his mind, he likened the surrendering of his life to entering into a room and slamming a one thousand dollar bill on God’s desk (and saying, “*Here I am Lord – use me to do your will*” – much the same way Peter did in Caesarea Philippi...

But what I have always loved about Fred Craddock (is not only his humor but also his honesty)... and he said that as he looked back on his life (reality told a different story than the one he first imagined).. that rather than take Craddock’s thousand dollar bill God gave it back in rolls of quarters – and the faith that he actually did live out (had so many wonderful moments) but it was more like 25 cents here (listening to a neighbor) 25 cents over there (teaching a Sunday school class or helping with a potluck dinner) and 25 cents every other week (when he served as an usher or a lector or as the church sexton)...

And he said, “*The same was true in how I grew to love my Savior as well... at first it was just a bunch of cheap words and melodramatic emotion, but over the years*

(and through the challenges that came my way) more and more of God's love was revealed to me – and with it my conviction only grew more sincere... and all along the way – my understanding of who he is (and how I was loved) continued to deepen year after year”... and then goes on to say, “And who is this Jesus I serve?... I've finally come to realize that He's one who brings a love – too beautiful for words.”...

May your heart never stop longing to know – the love of Jesus... may His peace be made known to you in your search for His presence... and although we only see into a mirror dimly today (may the day come when we all see our Lord and Savior - face to face)...

In Jesus' name we pray...

Amen!