

The 12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
August 23, 2020  
The Rev. Jedediah D. Holdorph  
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Isaiah 51:1-6  
Psalm 138  
Romans 12:1-8  
Matthew 16:13-20

*Church closed due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic: livestream available on Facebook and YouTube.*

Here's another take on this morning's gospel:

Jesus 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."

He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"

Simon Peter answered, saying, "I've got this, hang on" (as he reaches for his Prayer Book and reads out loud):

... the right Faith is, that we believe and confess, that our Lord Jesus Christ,  
the Son of God, is God and Man;  
God, of the substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds;  
and Man of the substance of his Mother, born in the world;  
Perfect God and perfect Man, of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting.  
Equal to the Father, as touching his Godhead;  
and inferior to the Father, as touching his manhood;  
Who, although he be God and Man, yet he is not two, but one Christ;  
One, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh  
but by taking of the Manhood into God;  
One altogether; not by confusion of Substance, but by unity of Person.

He was going to keep going, but Jesus interrupted him to say, "What?" <sup>i</sup>

That's one (tongue-in-cheek) way of making the point that Jesus' question isn't really about the correct theological jargon. And he isn't simply opening up a fascinating topic of conversation. No, this question of who Jesus is goes beyond idle speculation or mere intellectual interest.

Matthew tells us that this conversation takes place just as Jesus and the disciples come into the district of Caesarea Philippi. And that place name is more than an incidental detail.

It wasn't always called Caesarea Philippi. In days perhaps forgotten by the time of Jesus, it was originally named Paneas, after the Greek god Pan. A spring located in a cave there became a sanctuary dedicated to Pan. Inscriptions in the rock are still visible today, it seems, the etchings a permanent reminder of the "old-time religion" once practiced there.

Long before the birth of Jesus, however, Rome conquered the region. And in 20 BC, Caesar Augustus gave the town to Herod the Great. Herod built a temple there in honor of Caesar, thus supplanting the old god of music and wild things with a tribute to Roman power and control. Then, after Herod's death, Herod's kingdom got divvied up amongst his four sons. And one of them, Philip, inherited this city and renamed it after Caesar and himself. Hence, Caesarea Philippi.

Oh, and by the time Matthew writes this, the Romans had crushed a Jewish uprising in Jerusalem in the year 70 AD, razing the Temple, destroying the holy city, brutally slaughtering the people who lived there. And afterwards, the Roman commander returned with his troops to Caesarea Philippi to celebrate their victory.

All of which is to say that Matthew's mentioning that this conversation took place in Caesarea Philippi is more than an incidental detail. It's in this city – dedicated to foreign gods and a testament to Roman power – that Jesus asks his disciples to give him a name. It can hardly be merely coincidental.

So when Peter names him "Messiah, the Son of the living God," it's a big deal: to call him "Son of the living God" replaces every dead idol ever conceived or worshiped; to name him "Messiah" rejects any tyrant who would rule by force.

Our times are so different. But the question is still asked with an urgency that goes beyond idle speculation or intellectual curiosity. It demands that we pledge our allegiance.

To what? To whom?

Who is Jesus? Who do *you* say that he is?

We might offer an answer that echoes the words of Peter, saying he is "the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And we'd be right, of course. Or we might choose other words. We might say that Jesus is the second member of the Trinity. Or, in the words of the Creed, that Jesus is "Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made" (*Book of Common Prayer*, p. 358)

Now don't get me wrong, words are important. But it all begs the question of what we mean when we say our words. What's the significance of any names we might ascribe to Jesus? For the faith we claim asks more of us than to say the right words. Anyone can mouth the words. Emperors and tyrants, going back at least as far as Constantine in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, have known the right terms to use for Jesus. They have less commonly shown they had an inkling of who Jesus really is.<sup>ii</sup>

Even today, both of our nation's major political parties will try to convince us that their respective nominee is a man of deep faith. But words alone will not answer the question adequately.

As the joke I used at the outset hints, having a solid theological vocabulary doesn't mean someone knows Jesus at all. Indeed, theological jargon might get in the way.

Maybe we'd be better served by coming up with an answer of our own, using plain and simple words instead. Let me give it a shot to show you what I mean. And I'll start with the ancient Creed of St. Athanasius and the insistence that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine.

God has become a vexing word in our time. We hardly know what we mean when we say it. God is not a thing to believe in, still less an old man in the clouds. We humans have too quickly accepted a God created in *our* image, so Jesus offers a corrective.

He shows us the heart of God, the heartbeat of all that is holy. Jesus shows a heart that aches with all who suffer, a heart that is stirred to anger when someone in power abuses that power against someone who deserves better.

Jesus shows a heart that beats with love. Love for all God's children. Love for you. Love for me. Love especially for those Jesus describes as "the least of these." In a world order that privileged some lives over others, Jesus showed how profoundly the lives of widows and orphans and outcasts mattered to God. Jesus showed a heart that beats to love them as only a parent can.

And instead of creating God in *our* image, Jesus shows us what it looks like for us to be created in God's. From the beginning, Jesus rejected the temptation to be superhuman. He embraced the chance to live among us – human and humane. That was always high enough a calling.

And so he lived and moved among us, striving to spark a glimpse of God's love in human touch. Rather than give in to the threat of disease, Jesus healed. Rather than surrender to the binding fear of demons, Jesus set people free. Rather than let people starve, Jesus fed them by the thousands. Rather than settle for the status quo, Jesus painted a picture of the world as it could be – and invited us to find our true home there. Rather than retaliate against hatred and violence, Jesus died on a cross ... and rose again to proclaim to us that love is more powerful than hate and fear and even death – in short, that when all is said and done, love wins! Jesus showed us what it looks like to live a life that is fully, and truly, human.

That's at least a partial answer to the question of who Jesus is for me. Our answers to that question matter.

But not so much for Jesus' sake, but for our own. For take note of this: the name we give Jesus tells us who we are, at least as much as whatever it says about Jesus. Do we seek merely our own pleasures? Do we worship wealth and power? Or do we devote ourselves – body and soul – to the one who proclaims the love of God in every word and deed?

Our gods define us.

That's why (it seems to me) we should notice that as soon as Simon names Jesus "Messiah," Jesus re-names Simon "Peter" (saying that he will be the rock on which Jesus will build his church).

And then Jesus promises to give Simon, now named Peter, the keys of the kingdom.

There are countless jokes that pick up on the image. In most of them, Peter is the one standing at the "pearly gates," making sure no one gets in who shouldn't get in.

But that's not at all what Jesus had in mind. I think Jesus was full of the hope that Simon finally understood who Jesus was, that Peter had glimpsed why Jesus had come into the world in the first place: to show us "God's heart" and to invite us to embrace the best hope for humanity ... to live lives in the confidence that "love wins."

Give the keys to someone who gets this. He'll know how to fling wide the gates to everyone!

Well, I've said a lot about today's gospel and the questions Jesus asks. The thing of it is, though, I'm not sure it matters what I say in the slightest. It might even be counter-productive.

Because here's the thing: it doesn't matter what any preacher says today. It really only matters what you say when Jesus asks the question: "Who do *you* say that I am?"

And I think that's why, at the end of this morning's gospel, Matthew tells us that Jesus "sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah." It's not that Jesus didn't want others to know him; it's just that he knew that we'd settle (too easily) for a few words about him rather than discover who he really is – for us and for our world. Too readily we engage in idle speculation or too casually repeat answers that others have passed on.

And none of that really matters in the end. What matters absolutely is how you name Jesus for yourself ... not only with your lips but in your life.

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<sup>i</sup> For a variation on the theme, see also <http://www.extremelysmart.com/humor/theojoke.php> -- accessed August 21, 2014:

Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, and James Cone find themselves all at the same time at Caesarea Philippi. Who should come along but Jesus, and he asks the four famous theologians the same Christological question, "Who do you say that I am?"

Karl Barth stands up and says: "You are the *totaliter aliter*, the vestigious *trinitatum* who speaks to us in the modality of Christomonism."

Not prepared for Barth's brevity, Paul Tillich stumbles out: "You are he who heals our ambiguities and overcomes the split of angst and existential estrangement; you are he who speaks of the theonomous viewpoint of the *analogia entis*, the analogy of our being and the ground of all possibilities."

Reinhold Niebuhr gives a cough for effect and says, in one breath: "You are the impossible possibility who brings to us, your children of light and children of darkness, the overwhelming oughtness in the midst of our fraught condition of estrangement and brokenness in the contiguity and existential anxieties of our ontological relationships."

Finally James Cone gets up, and raises his voice: "You are my Oppressed One, my soul's shalom, the One who was, who is, and who shall be, who has never left us alone in the struggle, the event of liberation in the lives of the oppressed struggling for freedom, and whose blackness is both literal and symbolic."

And Jesus writes in the sand, "Huh?"

<sup>ii</sup> Sarah Dylan Breuer @ [http://www.sarahlaughed.net/lectionary/2005/08/proper\\_16\\_year\\_.html](http://www.sarahlaughed.net/lectionary/2005/08/proper_16_year_.html) writes:

I'm thinking of the emperor Constantine, who underwrote the Council of Nicea, giving him opportunity to decide which bishops got invited and the final say on any statements that came out of that gathering. Legend has it that the statement that the Son is of "one substance" or "one Being" with the Father was his suggestion.

People argue over whether Constantine had truly converted to Christianity -- he wasn't baptized until he was on his deathbed, but that practice wasn't uncommon among Christians of his time; he was a patron of Christian churches, but he also continued to build and worship in temples to Sol Invictus, the conquering sun-god his ancestors worshipped. I have no trouble believing, though, that he really believed that Jesus was the only-begotten Son of God.

Constantine was right on the question of Jesus' titles. Unfortunately, he was wrong on the far more important question of Jesus' character, and the character of the god who is Jesus' Father. Constantine grew up worshipping a god who was all about power, and specifically the power that would help him become powerful, victorious in battle, supreme over his enemies. And he never stopped worshipping that god. He never stopped worshipping power. And so Constantine could confess that Jesus is the only-begotten Son of God, and could put an empty throne next to his so he could claim to rule as Jesus' agent, and still murder his children if they posed a threat to his power. He turned Jesus' name, Jesus' God, and even Jesus' cross, into symbols by which he hoped to conquer and rule.