

Pentecost 12A August 23 2020
Matthew 16:13-20
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
Greg Bensted

Grace and peace to you from Father, Jesus, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

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." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Let's pray:

Who do people say Jesus is? The responses vary depending on a person's upbringing, background, life experiences, and so on. Here are a few: My personal Lord and Saviour. The Son of God. God incarnate. My life, the song I sing, my everything. Mate, brother, friend. Rock, comforter, coach. Teacher. Example. The co-pilot next to me. The list goes on and on.

Hopefully, we've all been told who Jesus is. Maybe you heard it from pastors, teachers, parents, friends. Maybe you read it in books, Sunday school lessons, or on car bumper stickers. Maybe you saw it on Facebook, read it on the internet, or heard it in a song. Some of the answers may be helpful. Some aren't. Some are just silly and some are hurtful and destructive. Regardless, the question remains.

But who do you say that Jesus is?

I can't answer the question for you. We must each answer it for ourselves. This isn't a Biblical theology exam, but the question invites us to examine our own lives and our relationship with God.

I don't think Jesus wants us to parrot answers we've heard or read. Maybe that's why he pushes the disciples to move from what they're hearing around them to what they're hearing within themselves.

“But who do you say that I am?”

It's not an easy question. And I wonder if we sometimes answer it too hastily and settle for “Sunday Jesus” answers. You see, everyday life doesn't always carry with it the comfort, consolation, and fellowship of a supportive, worshipping community with Christ in our midst. It's one thing to say who Jesus is here at St Peter's, on a Sunday morning, in relative safety and comfort. It's a very different thing to say who Jesus is in other circumstances. The question always has a context:

- Who do we say Jesus is when we read *Rainbow Spirit Theology*, co-authored by spiritual elder and pastor, Reverend Doctor George Rosendale OAM, the third Aboriginal person ordained in the LCA?
- Who do we say Jesus is amidst the ongoing war between Israel and Hamas, and in the continuing persecution of Christians in the Middle East and Northern Africa?
- Who do we say Jesus is as Covid-19 continues to spread worldwide, as refugees cry out in need, as people in our city face eviction, live rough, go to bed hungry, endure domestic violence, or work for a wage that can't support a family?
- Who do we say Jesus is when the doctor gives news we don't expect or want to hear?
- Who do we say Jesus is when we're faced with decisions that have no easy answers, when the night is dark and life overwhelms us, when faithfulness means risking it all and taking a stand against a louder and seemingly more powerful majority?

Using the context of these few examples what does it mean to say Jesus is my personal Lord and Saviour, my example, or my brother and friend? What does it mean to say Jesus is my life, the song I sing, or my teacher?

My point is: Who we say Jesus is has everything to do with who and how we are. Our answer says as much or more about us than Jesus. It reveals how we live and what we stand up for. It guides our decisions, and determines the actions we take and the words we speak. It describes the expectations and demands we place on Jesus. It discloses the depth of our motivation and commitment to following him, a motivation and commitment that will be challenged by next week's gospel in which Jesus invites us to take up our cross and die with him.

Jesus' question isn't so much about getting the right answer as it is about witnessing and testifying to God's life, love, and presence in our lives and the world. It's about our heart more than our intellect. It's grounded in love more than understanding. It moves us from simply knowing about Jesus to knowing him.

In a sense, there's no once and for all, finally and forever, answer. We're always growing into the question. Who Jesus was when I was a child is different to who he was in my 20s or at the Sem in my 40s or who he is for me today. Hopefully, who he is for me next year will be different from who he is today. It's not that Jesus changes. We do. We're constantly engaging his question, discovering Jesus anew, discovering ourselves anew, discovering life.

More than once I've fallen into the gap between my "Sunday Jesus" kind of answers and the circumstances of my life and world. Sometimes my answers were too simple, too small, too easy. They were no match for the complexities of life and the pain of the world. Sometimes my life hasn't reflected what I said about who Jesus is. Sometimes I kept quiet when I should have spoken up. Sometimes I was passive when I should've done something.

Whenever I've fallen into that gap it's usually been because I was trying to play it safe. That doesn't work. There's nothing safe about Jesus' question. There's nothing safe about Jesus or the life of discipleship he calls us into.

Jesus' life and presence with us calls into question everything about our lives, our world, and business as usual. That's why we shouldn't answer his question quickly, glibly, or with too much certainty. It's not a question to be figured out as much as it's a question to be lived.

Still, I'll give you a taste of who I say Jesus is. My view is biased by how I see Jesus' self-revelation in the Bible, through his words and actions. And I'll try to be honest about how I incorporate that into my lived experience:

- I say that Jesus is my Alpha and Omega. Jesus is the first person I talk to when I rise in the morning and the last when I retire in the evening.
- I say that Jesus is Emmanuel – God with us; I believe that Jesus is always with me through thick and thin, in good times and bad. In good times I try to remember to thank him, and in bad times I yell and moan at him while trying to remember to dump my whole sorry self at his feet. When I'm at my lowest (usually following the tantrums), I find that repeating his name; Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, over and over in my mind and out loud brings instant relief.
- I say that Jesus is Patience because I'm in his ear constantly and he hasn't told me to go away yet.
- I say that Jesus is my Redeemer and my Anchor. I believe that God has reclaimed me through Jesus Christ and that nothing can snatch me from the palm of his hand. On this, I stake my life, and I am completely unafraid to die.
- I say that Jesus is my Life-giver and Sustenance. I believe that I only live because Jesus' breath keeps me alive and when he decides to withdraw his breath, I will finally see him face to face and live with him forever.
- I say that Jesus is my Hope. I cling to his promise of salvation and eternal life because thinking about heaven calms me down, reminds me to smile, and gives me a place to escape to when life gets heavy.

- I say that Jesus is my Lord and Saviour. I feel the pain of the world keenly and I want to help everyone. I get very upset sometimes, but Jesus reminds me *he* is Lord of all creation and he died to save the world from sin. That relieves my distress and gives me hope for humanity.
- And indeed, I say that Jesus is the Messiah, Son of the living... and I want to emphasise, *living*, God. That heightens my excitement, sharpens my awareness, and boosts my motivation, knowing that he is alive and dynamic, creating and recreating wonder, mystery, and life. It gives me goose bumps.

The list could go on, but I hope what I've said gives you some insight into what a relationship with our awesome, gracious, and merciful God looks like at this point in my life.

Who do you say that Jesus is? Let Jesus' question rattle around in your head and heart and revisit it regularly. As you spend more and more time reflecting on it and talking to Jesus, I'm sure he will be gracious and bring joy, hope, and peace to your heart. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.