

17th Sunday after Pentecost B 15 September 2024

Mark 8:27-38

St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth

Greg Bensted

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

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do you say that I am?' Let's pray: ...

'Who do you say that I am?' Is there a question any more significant than this one? How essential to our very own identity is this? What are the implications of Peter's answer for us? Today, I'd like to share with you my own insights to Jesus' probing question, "Who do you say that I am?"

I declare that Jesus is king! He's the king of all creation and he's my king. I acknowledge, proclaim, and celebrate him as such. But Jesus isn't a king like others.

He's not a king in the usual sense of an earthly monarch. After all, an earthly king is distant, wealthy, and powerful. But Jesus turns these ideas upside down. This little story from World War II will help provide some perspective on the differences:

The story is told of a man living in London during the Second World War. Every night, enemy aircraft flew over London dropping countless bombs on the city below. Buildings burst into flames, entire blocks were reduced to rubble, and havoc ruled the night. One day, he was sitting amidst the wreckage of his home. The walls were still standing, but the roof was gone.

The man himself was in despair. His home ruined, his city devastated, his country under attack, his resolve waning. Suddenly, his thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the door.

When the man opened the door, he was taken aback by the small, regal figure standing in front of him. It was the king! King George VI! He was touring the war-damaged neighbourhood and had stopped at this particular house. The startled man welcomed the King of England into what was left of his home.

That's the sort of king Jesus is. He comes, unbeckoned, to the ruin that I am, and knocks firmly on the door of my heart. And he doesn't visit only once, but often, always knocking on the door to my heart. This king, my king, Jesus, comes to me in times of crisis, across the landscape of my brokenness. My king, Jesus, comes to me Sunday by Sunday on the paten, in the cup, out of the pages of his holy word, and from the comfort and consolation of the princes and princesses of his holy realm.

Our usual idea of a king is that he must be wealthy, possessing gold and jewels, fine artworks, castles and palatial homes, golden carriages, fine horses, and regal clothing. Yet, King Jesus is the prince turned pauper; his birthplace a manger, his palace a hillside, his throne a cross. If I want to catch a glimpse of King Jesus today, then I have to look in the right place: among the poor, the disinherited, the meek, the powerless, the hungry. It's there that I'll find my king; among the hapless, the helpless, and the hopeless, just as he was two thousand years ago.

Oddly, my greatest fear isn't that I might insult him, reject him, even blaspheme him to his face, but that I might simply overlook him. How? Because he no longer dons a robe, sandals, or long hair. King Jesus now reveals himself as a weary woman raising her kids alone in a car parked on a street not very far from here. Also, as an old man dying slowly and alone down at the Lyell Mac. And he even appears as someone suffocated by success, numb to their inner emptiness. In each of these disguises King Jesus appears to me. He's a prince who's become a pauper. Please pray for me; that I may recognise him, kneel before him, and kiss his hand.

A king must be powerful, we say. He must sit dominantly upon his throne and wield his sceptre well, and remain confident in who he is. But Jesus casts aside his omnipotence and drinks the cup of human experience, human limitation, even down to the dregs of our suffering, sorrow, and death. There's no calamity I've known or will ever experience that is unknown to him. King Jesus has walked through all of the dark nights of my soul.

Another incomprehensible thing that I know I'll ever get my head around is, that it's by letting go of all power that all power comes to him. King Jesus dies the disgraceful death of a common thief, an outcast, a failure, abandoned and forsaken on a tree. No royal burial crypt lays in wait to receive his body that it may rest in peace. Instead, his friend, Joseph of Arimathea begs for his corpse and arranges a hasty burial in a borrowed tomb. And yet, it's by this impenetrable mystery, through his death and his death alone, that the world is reborn. Through his new, resurrected, and unconquerable life, King Jesus throws open the gates of eternity.

But, is this man, Jesus, who dies a shameful death, nailed to a cross, bearing all the sin of humanity, really a king? Yes, indeed. Jesus is king like no-one else can ever be. The way he relinquishes control teaches me that I do more good when I give than when I grab, when I allow myself to be a deep river of peace rather than a sea of anger. His relinquishment of control tells me that the only game that matters, the game of eternal life, is won already, and when the results are tallied, the winning team will be the holy fools and not the wise of this world. One after another, earthly rulers die and are replaced. Today a king, tomorrow a corpse.

But King Jesus turns this saying on its head. Once a corpse, now he is king forever! And his resurrection tells me that the absurdities of my life won't have the final say; rather, that he offers me his unconquerable life and that the kingdom where he rules unquestioned and unopposed will become my address forever.

Who do I say that Jesus is? Jesus is king. He's my king. Not distant or wealthy or powerful in the way that earthly kings are. Still, like earthly kings, Jesus commands my obedience. He calls me to be loyal and dutiful to his kingship and kingdom. To perform my duties, I can do no better than to work, pray, give, and love for the spread of his kingdom.

It all seems so straightforward, doesn't it? Jesus is my king. The duty I owe him is to work, pray, give, and love for the spread of his kingdom. None of us will do this perfectly but our shortcomings are meant to challenge and inspire us to persevere.

Jesus asks each of us, “Who do you say I that am?” Will you answer him and say, “You are king. You are my King Jesus forever?” “How may I serve you?”

Saints, your work is important. There’s no task, no matter how small, that escapes our king’s blessing, especially when it’s tackled with loyal intention because, “[You] are what he has made [you], created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be [your] way of life” (Ephesians 2:10).

Your prayer is important. No matter how frail it seems, “the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words” (Romans 8:26). God hears and responds to your prayers for yourselves, each other, and the world.

Your generosity is important. That you give makes a difference for the world and for yourself: “Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work (2 Corinthians 9:7,8) ... For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9).

And, your love is important. “if I ... do not have love, I am nothing” (1 Corinthians 13:2). But if you do have love, you show the world that “God is love” (1 John 4:8); you show the world who is king, and you show the world that “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16).

How shall we respond with our lives when Jesus asks: “Who do you say that I am?” May we all cry out, “MY KING! Help us to love you and our neighbour as you have first loved us.” Amen.

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