

Sermon for Pentecost 14 (16A)  
Christ Church, Andover  
August 21, 2005  
The Rev. Jeffrey Gill

Matthew 16:13-20

“Who do people say that I am?” “Who do YOU say that I am?”

These two questions stand before us today, just as they did Jesus disciples so long ago. The first one is easy enough to answer. The second...? What about it?

Who DO people say that Jesus is?

Great religious leader...Founder of the Christian religion...Great teacher...Moral leader and example...Visionary...Healer...Social revolutionary...Liberator...Prophet...Wise man...

So it was with the people in his own time. They had lots of explanations for who he was. Some of them pretty far fetched. Just look at what they said:

John the Baptist – John had recently been killed by Herod, and there were some, including Herod himself, who wondered, knowing what a powerful presence John had been, if this might be a resurrected John.

Some said he was Elijah. Jews of Jesus time expected Elijah to come back before the great and terrible day of the Lord, and many wondered if this might be that time.

I mentioned that great theologian, Charlie Brown, a couple of Sundays ago. In another of his strips we see that the television is on but there is no one in the room listening to it. The announcer is talking about a golf tournament that is in process. He says: “Smith has to make this putt to win the championship. There will be no tomorrow.” And just as he says, “There will be no tomorrow,” in walks Lucy. She immediately goes into a panic and starts running around and yelling to the other children: The world is coming to an end. They just announced it on television. Her panic quickly spreads as we see all the peanuts kids as they go wildly screaming about. Finally in the last square we see all of the children huddled on top of Snoopy’s doghouse waiting for the end of the world. And Charlie Brown finally speaks up with a puzzled voice: “I thought that Elijah was supposed to come back first.”

Charlie Brown could have been a first century Palestinian Jew. Elijah was supposed to come back before the end time. When the disciples told Jesus that some people thought he was Elijah, they were expressing a common feeling among the people that the end was very near.<sup>1</sup>

Some thought Jesus could be Jeremiah, the prophet who had wept over Jerusalem, was rejected by the people, and who lived an utterly tragic life.

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<sup>1</sup> This story comes from Richard Donovan.

And some thought that he just might be one of the other prophets. Israel hadn't had a prophet for four hundred years at this point, and the thought that any of the prophets might have returned was news enough. The Israel of Jesus' time revered its prophets, and they longed for the return of their prophetic voices to set Israel straight once again

It is clear that people think well of Jesus and have pegged him as a prophet. But, when they try to identify him, they think in terms of past prophets, in terms of what they know and what they have heard about.

But this question, "who do people say that I am?", was really a prelude to the real question, which was "who do YOU say that I am?" Now he's going to put them on the spot! He goes from the objective question about what others are saying, to the more personal and subjective side of things, from what is purely academic to what is intensely personal. With this question he presses them from the relatively easy task of reporting what is objectively true in an external sense, to the much more demanding task of defining what is true for oneself, internally. "Who do YOU say that I am?"

It's easy to talk about what we see, hear, taste, touch, and smell, what others say, what others do. It's much harder to talk about what we feel and what we believe.

In my mind, I can see the disciples get a little uncomfortable at the question, like most of us if we were put on the spot with this kind of question. I can see them lowering their gaze, avoiding eye contact, catching sideways glances of each other, reluctant to speak up, or to say something that would be wrong, or that they would regret saying – something that exposed their lack of faith or their naiveté or lack of perception. Was it just because they were put on the spot and were cautious, or was it because it is so hard to know what we really feel and believe sometimes?

But Peter came to the rescue. Good old Peter! You can be sure that Peter would never hem or haw. Peter was the kind of guy who would jump out of a perfectly good boat to walk across the water to Jesus. Peter was the kind of guy who, though hopelessly surrounded by guards, would draw his sword to protect Jesus. Peter was the kind of guy who always had an opinion. Peter was one of those people who are often wrong, but never uncertain.

Peter, the extravert, spoke up, perhaps saying what others were thinking but were afraid to say; perhaps going totally out on a limb and trying something that he had no idea how it would be received. Perhaps it was something he had been thinking about, working it through, and it had been all bottled up until now, and he just had to say it. And so, he blurted it out – "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Now there was nothing in Jewish thinking that would have made Peter's response obvious, or automatic, or indeed even rational. Jesus didn't seem to fit with what Jewish expectations of the Messiah were. Perhaps some of his teachings might have caused people to wonder; but he had no army, and he didn't seem to be particularly well suited for bringing about the great and terrible day of the Lord. And then, to top it off, there is nothing in all the Hebrew scriptures to suggest that the Messiah would be divine, would be the "Son of the living God!" But Peter blurts both these things out, as if out of nowhere.

Jesus immediately recognizes Peter and blesses him. He gives Peter a place of preeminence for his --- well, was it his deep spiritual perception? or was it his willingness to put himself out there when others were too timid to come up with the answer? Jesus said that flesh and blood had not revealed this to him, but his Father in heaven. And for his openness to God in heeding this revelation, he was given the keys of the kingdom of heaven.

Peter's confession of who Jesus was became the church's confession. The church would not be founded on the basis of Jesus as a prophet or a great teacher or moral example, but on a confession that takes us to an entirely different realm – Jesus, the incarnate presence of God.

What difference does that really make, whether we simply acknowledge Jesus as a prophet and teacher, or whether we confess him to be divine, the Son of God?

Prophets and teachers are people we can heed or not. We make choices about whether we believe them or not, whether we will follow them or not. They are *us*, in varying degrees of intellect, wisdom, insight, perception. We argue with them, we can disagree with them, we can flat out ignore them. If they are wise teachers and prophets, we do well to heed them.

But for the Christian to confess Jesus as divine means something more: it means that he becomes not only the object of our respectful consideration, but the object of our worship. That seems strange to a lot of people, but worship is what we humans naturally do in the face of “that than which nothing is greater.” And finally, what we worship, said one great theologian, we *become*. God has given us in Jesus the picture of what we too might become. “God became human,” wrote Thomas Aquinas, “so that we might become divine.” Confessing Jesus as divine, as the Son of God, is to acknowledge God's true nature to be self-revealing, and that God does so supremely in the person of Jesus. And that offering to him our utmost love and adoration – our worship – we too will become like him.

C. S. Lewis, the Oxford philologist, and a mid-life convert to Christianity, became one of the best known Christian apologists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He wrote, famously, in his little book, *Mere Christianity*: “I am here trying to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: ‘I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God.’ That is the one thing we must not say. 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 a level with a 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 can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come with any of that patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. Nor did he intend to.”

That's kind of blunt. And so was Peter's confession. He blurted it out – “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” It took the other disciples some time, though, as it often does for us. After all, committing oneself to worship something or someone is serious business. Who and what we will become is at stake.

And so, the question, “Who do you say that I am?” is anything but an abstract theological question. It is a question about what our deepest commitments will be, and as a result, what kind of people we will become.