

Sermon for Proper 19, Year B
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Holy Nativity, Plano
17 September, 2006

“Who do you say that I am?” This is the question put to the disciples by Jesus. It is a simple question. It might even seem like an innocuous question. They have just told him who others are saying he is. And the answers given are all positive. It is a high honor to be identified as a prophet. Dangerous, because someone might kill you for speaking the truth, but a high honor nonetheless. So the disciples are basically saying, “They like you, boss. They even think you’re one of the prophets.” And then Jesus quietly turns the conversation from a meeting of the public relations committee to a searching of the soul.

“But who do *you* say that I am?” And suddenly the whole world stands on the knife-edge of this question. It cuts to the heart of everything, because everything should follow from this simple question. The question of Jesus identity *matters* at the most profound level. His claims are such that we must either follow him or not, obey him or not, worship him or not. The disciples who a moment before were all chattering away about public opinion polls are suddenly silent. This is not a light question. This is a matter of life and death.

Peter answers the question. He says simply, “You are the Messiah.” That is, “You are the Christ, the anointed one, the one anointed by God to be king over his people and to save them from their enemies. You are the true king, the heir of David. And we owe you allegiance, obedience, and love.” All of that is packed into that one little word, “Christ”. And Peter is correct. That is who Jesus is.

The trouble for Peter is that he has not understood properly what the true king is going to accomplish. That’s not unique to Peter. Almost no one had understood it properly. It’s a stumbling block to many, even today.

But Jesus has identified himself as the Servant of the Lord found in the prophecies of Isaiah. In our reading this morning, the prophet speaks with the voice of this servant. “The Lord God has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him that is weary. . . . The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I turned not backward.” The true king, the Messiah, the Christ is the one who is perfectly obedient to the Lord. He is the one who hears God and obeys him. Therefore he can speak the truth that he has learned and comfort those who are weak and weary in their disobedience.

But this servant is also called to endure pain and humiliation. “I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I hid not my face from shame and spitting.” The Messiah is specifically called to this gauntlet, to endure what he does not deserve, being perfectly obedient and without fault. But he is not forsaken by God. “For the Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been confounded”. The servant knows that God will vindicate him, and ultimately he will be restored to honor. Jesus puts all of this together in a way that no one else does. And so, when Peter says, “You are the Christ,” he goes on to teach this as the way of the Christ.

But he also goes one step further. Not only does he teach the cross as the way of the Messiah, he teaches it as the way of reality, as a principle of the Kingdom of God. Not only does he live this way, but we must as well. And all that is bound up in acknowledging him as the Messiah. The principle is this: My life for yours. “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it.” Jesus gives his life for ours, and we give our lives *to* him and *for* each other. My life for yours.

Anyone who denies this principle of reality, anyone who refuses to submit to the order of “my life for yours”, is “not on the side of God, but of men.” This is why Jesus can turn around after Peter’s great acknowledgment of him and call him *Satana*, adversary, enemy. Peter still thinks in terms of power, rather than sacrifice. God, however, the most powerful being in existence, not only teaches self-sacrifice, he practices it.

St. James points out that we make the same mistake as Peter if we show partiality in our community. If we treat the rich better than the poor, simply because they are rich, then we have fallen into the same trap. We are thinking in terms of power and influence and human ability, rather than the power of God working in the fundamental principle of sacrifice. We have abandoned the principle of “my life for yours”. Instead, we’ve shifted to the principle of “whatever you’ve got, I want some of it too”. That’s not part of ultimate reality. It is an evil reversal of God’s principle. It is from the devil. And if we have succumbed to it, then we are enemies of God.

This is why faith without works is dead. When you say that Jesus is the Christ, then you must accept him as your lord and master. You must obey him. In the final analysis, there is no difference between saying, “I believe in Jesus,” and saying, “I obey Jesus.” The oldest Christian creed is simply, “Jesus is Lord.” And what our Lord asks us to do is to take up our cross and follow him. My life for yours.

And so we come back to the original question: “Who do you say that I am?” It is not a question that demands a merely intellectual answer. If Jesus truly is the Christ, the true king who gently but inexorably requires obedience and worship, then our response to this question will involve much more than our brains. It will even involve more than our guts, or emotions. It will involve our hearts, the exercise of the whole person in the will. We will have to bow down before the kingship of Jesus the Christ, and submit the entire pattern of our lives to him. “Take up your cross and follow me.”

“Who do you say that I am?” What does your life say about your answer to that question? Have you been participating in the divine exchange that is the heart of reality? Have you given your own life for someone else today? Yesterday? In the last week? Have you undergone humiliation or discomfort for the good of someone else? Have you been trying to hoard your own life, saving it? Or have you been losing your life, giving it up for Jesus’ sake and for the sake of the good news we have in him? If I examine your works, will I see your faith?

Because the world is watching you. The world is watching to see whether you really mean what you say about Jesus being the Messiah. The world doesn’t really believe anything you say, unless it can be read by your actions, by your lifestyle, by the decisions that you make that are different from the decisions others would make. If we are truly followers of Christ, then we must confound the world by our behavior. We must confuse people.

Otherwise, they will assume that we are like them. That we don’t really mean it. That our religion is just a cover for our own insincerity and insecurity. And they will be right. God will see it the same way.

“Who do you say that I am?” And will you live that way?