

Sermon for Proper 19, Year B
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“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, Jesus. 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 Christ.” That is, “You are the Messiah, 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 Old Testament 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. He is called to lay down his life under the humiliation of a death by crucifixion, as a sacrifice for our sins, even though he himself is sinless.

But in the Gospel, Jesus 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 of this 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. 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.

So when we say that Jesus is the Christ, then we must accept him as our lord and master. We 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; it will involve the exercise of our 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 to Jesus? Have you undergone humiliation or discomfort for him? 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?

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 will confuse people.

Otherwise, they will assume that we are of the world. That we are still preoccupied with power. That we have nothing new to say to them that the world cannot say better. 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?