

Who is Jesus? Matthew 16:21-28

Who is Jesus? Like so many questions, it depends on who you ask. Almost everyone in our time has an opinion about Jesus, though far too often that opinion seems to come from the failures of those who claim to be his followers.

It was no different when Jesus walked among us. The opinions of His contemporaries cover the entire spectrum of love and hate, honor and humiliation. Listen to some of the names Jesus was called during His short, three-year period of ministry. He was labeled the "Lamb of God," the "carpenter's Son." He was called a teacher, a devil, a deceiver, a sinner, the Savior. He was considered to be a wine drinker, possessed by the devil, a blasphemer, an insurrectionist, and the Christ the Son of the living God.

Who is Jesus? That's the question asked of the disciples in today's Gospel lesson. Jesus first asks his disciples who others say he is. Jesus had taken His closest followers to the city of Caesarea Philippi—the headquarters of the Roman procurators who ruled, and the troops who enforced that rule—in Judea. Caesarea Philippi was not a comfortable location for God-fearing men who considered themselves to be direct descendants of father Abraham. Everything they had been taught to avoid, everything they were supposed to abhor, had a good representation in Caesarea Philippi. This was a party town, a heathen town, a place that boasted fourteen temples to Baal, one for Caesar, and a cave which the locals proudly pointed out to tourists as being the birthplace of the Greek god of nature: Pan.

It is here, far from the safe and familiar, surrounded by false gods, that Jesus asks, "What do people say about Me? Who do they say I am?" He wants to know the general feeling of the people around him, and he wants

to know if the disciples have been paying attention to what's going on around them. You can almost hear the disciples, who like school children that for once are sure they know the right answer, eagerly reply: "Some say You're Elijah!" Another disciple declares, "I've heard some say You're Jeremiah!" and a third throws in, "Or one of God's prophets."

They give the answers they've heard. The people are putting Jesus in line with the prophets they know. Jesus had picked up John's message of preaching repentance and proclaiming the kingdom of God, fulfilling the prophecies of God's messenger coming. Elijah never died, but instead was carried up to heaven in a fiery chariot. When we finished looking at Malachi, the last of the Minor Prophets, his book ends with the promise that Elijah must return before the day of the Lord, and to this day an empty place is left at Passover meals as Jews wait for Elijah to return. Other prophets had come and gone, calling the people to repent and return to God, and Jesus certainly fit into their mold. But that's it. The crowds, Jesus' friends, and even Jesus' enemies had some ideas about who he was, but couldn't say for certain who he was.

Then Jesus comes to the crux of the discussion. Who do they say that he is? Who do you say that I am, Peter, James, John, and the rest? After walking and talking with me, after watching miracle after miracle happen, who do you say that I am?

That question was a little tougher, and although Scripture doesn't say so, it probably got quiet for a second. Elsewhere in the New Testament, the disciples show that they thought Jesus was going to restore the kingdom of Israel and overthrow the occupying Romans. Certainly

they knew Jesus was a great Teacher, and on countless occasions He had shown Himself to be a miracle worker. But this question, "Who do you think I am?" puts them on the spot. You can almost see the wheels spinning in their heads as they search for the right words. Then Peter, the disciple who often speaks first and thinks later, rightly responds with the Spirit-given reply: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." I think Jesus would have had to smile at that answer. Although Peter did not understand the full impact of his words quite yet, he had gotten it right.

For the first time in the Gospel, Jesus is acknowledged as who he is. Others had given partial answers. The disciples had been amazed earlier when Jesus calmed the storm, but this confession doesn't come out of amazement at a miracle. It comes out of the time spent following and learning from Jesus. It comes from hearing his words and seeing his miracles. But most of all, it comes from God.

Peter could not have come up with the correct answer on his own. Through hearing the words of Jesus, the Holy Spirit worked to create the faith in him that came out in that confession. The same Holy Spirit works to create faith in us, too, through the words of Jesus, through learning about Jesus from our family and friends, and through Holy Baptism and Holy Communion.

The most important question in this exchange is "Who do you say that I am?" It's one thing to know about what happens in general. It's another to make it personal. It's one thing to know what the crowds who have only heard bits and pieces of Jesus' teaching, who have heard rumors of what he said and did, thought of Jesus. It's another thing for Jesus to ask the disciples, the ones who have been following him, learning from him, watching him, seeing him, believing in him.

That's the question for us, too. Who do you say Jesus is? It's easy to talk about Jesus in abstract terms. But who do you say that he is?

When it all comes down to it, we're left with a decision CS Lewis described as deciding if Jesus was either a liar, a lunatic, or Lord. Either Jesus was who he said he was—and who Peter said he was—or he must be rejected and denied as crazy or a crook. Lewis writes:

"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."

If you're here on a Sunday morning, you've probably already made up your mind. If you haven't, though, I pray the same Spirit who worked faith in Peter works faith in you, so you can confess, say the same thing, that we do, that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God, who came into the world to die on the cross for the sins of the whole world, to die for you and me.

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