

Jim White
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Church of the Mediator

“WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?”

Matthew's Gospel 16:13-20

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’ And they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’ And Jesus answered him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.’ Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

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IN TODAY'S GOSPEL READING Jesus asks the disciples two questions:

“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” “And who do you say that I am?”

I

The disciples answer the first question by simply reporting their experience: “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” They are telling us, that is, that the people see Jesus in light of the Hebraic tradition. This is not surprising: it is what we all do when faced with something new: we think of it in familiar terms and images.

The people have before them a person unlike any other, strange and mysterious: in his power, in his compassion, in his ability to heal and save—and in his capacity to challenge both the people and the authorities. No prior experience can really have prepared them for this, so they think in terms of what they have been told about their past. So they say Jesus is a prophet.

II

The second question put to the disciples presents much bigger issues: “Who do you say I am?”

Except for Peter, the disciples just don’t know what to say. They know Jesus well, but who is it exactly that they know? Someone

utterly amazing, confounding, exciting, commanding, and above all loving. How could they possibly sum up who he is, or label him? What can they say? What would you say? So they are silent.

But Peter says boldly: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Like the people’s word “prophet,” Peter’s word “Messiah” is drawn from the Hebrew tradition, but it has very different political implications.

There were lots of prophets, but only one Messiah: the anointed one who was supposed to be the supreme king of Israel, a reincarnation of King David, who would free Israel from its bondage—and in those days its bondage to Rome was all too obvious. Maybe Rome could tolerate another prophet but not a Messiah. He would have to be killed.

From our perspective we know that the people and Peter are only partly right about Jesus. He is like a prophet, but much, more than that; he is the Messiah, but not in the usual sense of a being a King, certainly not a military leader. He is a wholly new kind

of Messiah—unimaginable at the time—who dies for his people on the cross.

Jesus actually uses the term here in its traditional sense, for that is the kind of Messiah the Romans will see as dangerous, but he will utterly transform its meaning in his life and death.

In these responses Peter and the people use labels taken from the past with highly uncertain meaning in the present. How adequate can these labels possibly be as answers to the question, who Jesus is, when he is like no one else in history? How would we answer Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?"

III

That is surely as important a question for us as it was for the disciples. It speaks to us.

How are we to answer it? Who do we say Jesus is? Can we do this without reducing him to a label? How possibly?

A.

Here is one possibility. As Christians we have a complex theological vocabulary, developed over the centuries, that we can use. We could

say: “You are the only begotten Son of God, who lived among us, was crucified to save us from death, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven. You are one of the persons of the three-person God.”

Here we would be repeating our Creed in simplified terms, and for us this is the truth. But it is not the only truth and not the complete truth.

How much does that summary of the Creed say about who Jesus really is, for you or for me? It is a set of doctrinal statements declaring a theological position, and surely they are not a complete answer to Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am?” And history shows us that what these formulations actually mean is open to deep questioning and controversy.

So who is Jesus for you or me? How can we possibly express it? This question invites us, as it invited the disciples, to think not in terms of labels or abstract propositions, but in terms of our own experience. Who is Jesus to us? How can we respond to his question?

B

It might help to think here of other moments in which we are asked who someone is. Suppose a very close friend who has never met your mother asks you who she is. What would you say? “She is a musician, a teacher, a farmer, a great cook or gardener?” Some such labels might be perfectly true but they would not express very much of who your Mom really is—not much about her soul.

How would you try to express your sense of her?

Instead of using labels or generalizations we might try to do it by telling stories. This would be a second possibility.

You can imagine how the stories might go: “One story that I think captures something of her essence, is this one. It was Thanksgiving Day and . . .”

And then comes the story, maybe a funny one that tells us something—or lots of things--about her that really cannot be reduced to labels. She comes alive before us, at least a little. We all know how to tell such stories about people we love.

Stories can of course be mechanical and dull and sentimental, but at their best they open up new possibilities for thought and feeling and imagination, telling us among other things that we cannot reduce another person to a formula. The story tells us that in any person who is truly alive there is always a possibility for newness and change and originality.

In Jesus' case we can and do tell stories about him, the stories we live with, stories of his life and death and resurrection, as told in the Gospels. These stories do not reduce him to labels, or theological assertions, but open up possibilities of meaning as we follow the story and think about what it meant—and means--to different people.

These stories are totally familiar to us. They are the backbone of our faith. And we know from our own experience that to retell them is to rethink them, to re-imagine them, to make them the subject of questioning, of new doubts and new certainties. Working with scripture is a crucial way of discovering and saying who Jesus is, for he is present not only as the main actor in the stories, but he is

with us in our shared efforts to come to terms with the stories, to give them life.

In this double way our reading of the Gospels may help us answer the question. “Who do you say that I am?”

IV

This is wonderful, but is it all? Is there a third possibility?

Do we have other experiences of Jesus that can help us answer the question, “Who do you say that I am?”

Some of us have had moments when Jesus has been present to them, speaking to them, offering them comfort or advice, but these experiences would be difficult to talk about, to put it mildly.

Likewise we all have experience of him in the Eucharist, but again it is hard to imagine expressing fully what that sacrament means.

Another traditional way of talking about who Jesus is might be helpful here. It begins with a kind of doctrinal statement, but opens itself up to something very different. What I have in mind is the idea, dating back at least to Paul, that the “church is the body of

Christ,” which is to say: the church is the place where Jesus can be found now—not two thousand years ago but right now.

As I say, some of us no doubt have their own private experiences of Jesus, and that is an immense blessing, but I think it is probably true of all of us that that a lot of our experience of Jesus is shared in our experience of the church—which is to say, our experience of each other.

If we think of the church as a place where we experience Jesus, this may help us answer the question, “Who do you say that I am?” in a way that reflects not only what has been said for centuries, as a matter of doctrine, but also our own experience, the story of our own lives. We might think of this in grand terms—“What is our experience of the universal Christian church?”—or in decidedly ungrand terms: “What is our experience of the Church of the Mediator, in Southwest Michigan?”

Here I especially regret that we are not together in the sanctuary, for I would like now to say to everyone, “Look at the person on your left; look at the person on your right, look behind

you, look ahead of you.” But even on Zoom I know what our church is like: it is full of love and dedication and a heartfelt sense of belonging. It is a place where people seem to be able to be themselves in a real and deep way, alone and together, as we may have trouble doing elsewhere. In this sense it is a place of redemption.

To be at worship together, or even to be in a business meeting with a group of us, all sincere, all trusting, all hoping, is to be in the presence of Jesus.

Who do I say that Jesus is? He is many things of course, but among the rest: Jesus is the spirit of love present among us and within us. He is in the room with us—even this virtual room.

AMEN

