

## WHAT DO YOU REALLY KNOW ABOUT JESUS?

**TEXT:** Matthew 16:13-20

What do you really know about Jesus? What we hear and think is a lot of the historical present as in “Jesus says”, but we’re really talking about what Jesus said in Scripture some 2,000 years ago. And, if truth be told, what we preachers are talking about is often what a contemporary scholar has to say about what Jesus said. In fact, you often can’t tell from a lot of sermons that border on lectures, political speeches, or even stand-up comedy whether Jesus is really alive and present in the church right here and right now!

How often do some of us head home from church on Sunday thinking “I don’t go to worship to hear about Tillich or Bonhoeffer or Bultmann. I want to see Jesus. And I can tell in five minutes whether the preacher is sold on his product or not!”

Today Matthew poses for us Jesus’ question for both pastors and parishioners. Jesus asks not merely: “Do you think I’m alive?” Jesus wants to know: “Am I the Living Lord of your life?” Could it be that some scholar, some mentor, some friend, or even some loved one has more authority over us than Jesus?

There are plenty of people who talk about Jesus as if they really know him, but when you compare what they say about Jesus with the Jesus of Scripture, it’s clear that their Jesus is a projection of their feelings and ideas or of someone else’s feelings and ideas. In other words, they really don’t know Jesus!

“Who do you say that I am?” Jesus is still asking the question to you and me. “Am I the Living Lord of your life? Or am I just some ancient dead guy whose body molded away long ago in the sands of Palestine?”

”Who do you say that I am?” Jesus is present here and now to ask that very question. Many of us have gone through the milestones of Baptism, Communion,

Membership, as if they were no more significant and less important than athletics, academics, and the arts. Perhaps we have celebrated the Enlightenment, bring freedom from the patriarchalism, classism, sexism, abject anti-intellectualism and homophobia of Christianity. For, after all, Jesus, the great poet of love, would certainly look askance at what the Church has done with his ideas if only he were alive to see it. But what foolishness to think that Jesus is God in the flesh who could die and rise and still be in charge of the universe!

And Jesus, the Living Lord of the Church, responds, present tense, “But who do you say that I am?”

Of all the words credited to Jesus during his time on this earth, these words are probably the most important ones he uttered. Because if we cannot answer this question, we can never understand what it is that we profess as the Church of Jesus Christ in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

So let’s start by looking at the context in which this question was asked. The setting of the scene, Caesarea Philippi, had a political dimension all its own. It was the site of an ancient sacred spring emanating from the mouth of a cave at which a shrine to the god Pan had been established. Herod the Great and then his son, Herod Philip, as was their family custom, built there a resplendent complex of buildings designed to showcase Rome’s wealth and power.

Jesus takes this time with his disciples to do some public opinion research on the nature of his identity. This question makes more sense when you realize that the rock face of the mountain that forms the backdrop for the cave of Pan had carved into it numerous niches, still visible today, into which miniature shrines to various other deities in Rome’s pantheon could be ensconced. Rome’s attitude was quite ecumenical, validating a variety of beliefs and practices. So Jesus found this an appropriate setting to talk about options that the Jews of his day might have had in assessing who he was and what he was doing.

So, Jesus posed the question of who others might think that he is. Suggestions ran the gamut from John the Baptist to Elijah to Jeremiah, or perhaps any one of the prophets. But Jesus responds in the present tense, “But who do *you* say that I am?”

When Peter, whose name (as we all know) in Greek means rock, confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of the Living God, Jesus promises to build His Church upon this confession of faith. He promises Peter that the gates of hell will not prevail against the Church. But some of us present-day Christians might doubtfully interject that lately it hasn’t been looking so good for the home team.

We tend to forget that the true foundation of the Church is not Peter’s confession but it is the One whom Peter confesses. There is one costly foundation upon which the Church is built. That foundation is the Crucified Jesus, God’s Son, who has lovingly given his life away that the world might be drawn from the culture of death into the culture of life – eternal life that begins here and goes on forever.

When Jesus said to Peter that he would give him the keys of the kingdom to bind and loose, he was promising that the doors of heaven – and hell – would open and close to all the future generations through Peter’s preaching and the preaching of all who would come after Peter. Jesus’ question is still present tense: “Who do you say that I am?”

So, who do you say Jesus is? How we answer that question has a lot to do with whether we will see a dead Jesus or a live Jesus. Actually, how we answer that question is a matter of death and life. God sent His Son into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. Even today the Living Lord Jesus Christ wants the entire world to be drawn from the culture of death into the culture of eternal life.

How do you see Jesus? Do you just see the form of his crucified body on the crucifix, or do you see the Risen Lord with the marks of the nails in his hands and feet and side standing before you alive today as the Lord of your death and life?

When we look around today we do not see a barefoot, bearded, white-robed young man striding down our streets. We don't see him in the marketplace, in the businesses, in the factories, in the schools.

Today we can look at the part of the world where Christ first made his presence known. Our news these days is dominated by the aggression of those who wield power. We condemn their lack of caring, but do we, the "Christian" nations of the world, do better? As the people of Darfur and Somalia and Ethiopia starve from lack of food, we enjoy abundant harvests of more than we need. As the people of Egypt and Syria and Lebanon take to the streets to fight the dictators who have abused them for years, we find our leaders moving us closer and closer to the dictators that haunt our past and threaten our future. As our neighbors to the south seek refuge from warring drug lords, we look for ways to keep them from finding a better, safer life for their families.

So today, again, Jesus asks us: "Who do you say that I am?" How do we 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christians respond to the identity of the Christ? We need to remember the words that he used in telling his disciples the answer. In the 26<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Matthew, Jesus told them, and he is telling us, that in responding to the sick, the hungry, and the homeless, we are responding to him. Here is where we meet and identify Jesus today. Yes, of course, we make our annual pledge to United Way. Of course we contribute to the food baskets each holiday season and donate to the food banks regularly. And, yes, we take our turn at the clothing bank, or the community supper program. But in most of these endeavors we quickly run past the faceless Christ. Many of us do not see the poor of our world; or if we see them, we don't recognize them as persons. They are the invisible poor. Why? Because they are not at our door; they are off the main thoroughfares. They live down the back alleys and under the bridges. We do not see – or do not recognize the Christ in this "other" America.

If we are going to see – and know – the Christ in our world, we must look beyond our easy borders. To find his identity, we must know the sick and hungry child, and see the reflection of the Christ-child's face in her eyes. To know this Jesus, we must look at

the feet of the sojourner at the crossroad – or the dead-end – of the highway so we can see Christ’s dusty feet as he walked the paths of Galilee. We need to look at the hands of the migrant workers and see in the gnarled fingers the blood-streaked hands of Jesus. And we need only to look at the faces of the homeless, the AIDS-infected, the hungry and the displaced. Here, in the midst of our busy world, we will see the face of Jesus, asking of us “Do you know who I am?”