

It is Not About Who He Is, But What He Is
By Reverend Litton Logan
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Scriptures:

Matthew 16:13-28 (NRSV)

¹³Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" ¹⁴And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." ¹⁵He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" ¹⁶Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷And 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. ¹⁸And 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. ¹⁹I 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." ²⁰Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Introduction and Comments:

I went to the Santa Fe Opera again this last week - didn't go fishing. I think my wife, despite all my protests, is still trying to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. However, the opera about Steve Jobs was excellent and I highly recommend it. Yet, parts of it and its cultural context hit home for me. So, energized by the opera and its commentary on our culture, I want to take a cultural look at our scriptures today, not a traditional Christological take.

Sermon:

Initially, in our text, it may appear that either Jesus knew who he was and was testing his disciples, or Jesus was unsure as to who he was at that point in his ministry and was seeking his disciples' input. This latter point is not too farfetched.

In our culture, we think of a person as a unique, self-aware, self-determining physical and psychological entity over and against other such individuals. This would not have been the case in Jesus' or Matthew's culture. In their world, a person's self-identity and the dynamics of their self-determination, were embedded in others and always about the group, primarily the family, then village, tribe, etc.

Therefore, a person's self-identity was given to them by their family or group and confirmed by others - the people, the village, or the crowd if you will. When and if someone stepped out of their expected roles or presumed upon a higher station than they were born into, people, including the individual, became confused. Such individuals were often seen as demonically possessed or out of their minds. Even when a person had some new life-role thrust upon them by capricious circumstances, they may have even doubted their sanity - who am I or what am I?

To these points, I hasten to remind us that in Matthew, Jesus had heard God's endorsement of him as the beloved son at his baptism, however, such a thing still needed to be demonstrated in his actions and ratified in the court of public opinion such as in our story today. However, I don't think our passages today really have all that much to do with how Jesus or others saw him. I think who Jesus was, was pretty obvious by this time. I think what we are seeing is Matthew laying the foundation and the authority for his church in what God has done in Jesus. Jesus

identified as the Messiah, Son of Man, and Son of God would all have been names or terms that pointed to definitive manifestations of God's power and presence in Jesus, not to any metaphysical aspects of Jesus himself. In Matthew and his sources, Jesus was an eschatological prophet and teacher of wisdom, endowed with the living authority of God, whose primary function was to speak the definitive word of God in anticipation of the fast-approaching Kingdom of God no matter what the costs. Jesus was truly human, even though his birth in Matthew was divinely effected, he truly died as a human, and was truly resurrected as a glorified, mortal being.

In Jesus' and Matthew's culture, the term "Son of Man", in general, meant just a human being. However, the author of the OT Book of Daniel in his apocalyptic vision saw a divine being, who in the form of a human or son of man, came from God to effect judgment and usher in the Kingdom of God on earth. Over time, in some Jewish circles, "The Son of Man" of Daniel came to be used interchangeably with the term Messiah, the expected warrior-priest-king, like King David, who was to come and rectify the people's situation and restore Israel to its former glory. By the time Matthew writes, the concepts of the Son of Man and the Messiah in some Jesus-believing communities have been conflated to refer to the resurrected Jesus, who is to return to earth soon as God's divine judge, to establish and rule over the kingdom of God on earth - a kingdom that would favor the Jews, especially Jesus-believing Jews.

In Matthew's and Jesus' Jewish context, the Hebrew term Messiah, Christ or Christos in Greek, meaning the Anointed One, was used to designate those who were inaugurated into the office of either a prophet, priest, or king. Also, the term a son of or sons of God could be used to identify or talk about these same people, God's people in general, or others, who distinguished themselves for the greater good. For Matthew, the royal connotation seems to be more prevalent, along with an emphasis on Jesus' prophetic role.

The term Messiah with its Jewish understandings and expectations would have had little meaning for the non-Israelite, Hellenistic God-venerators - the Gentiles - associated with Matthew's community. However, the disciples' previous declaration of Jesus as a son of God after he rescued the presumptuous Peter from drowning, and now Peter's declaration of Jesus as a son of God would have been more encompassing of the Hebrew and Greek world views concerning holy or divine people.

However, as I said, I don't think these passages are so much about Jesus' identity as about his declaration that Peter's divinely, inspired insights would be the foundation or rock upon which Jesus' new family or community would be built, since his biological and greater religious families had rejected him as possibly being demonic and out of his mind.

Furthermore, it is fitting to note the locale of these passages as being Caesarea Philippi, an area littered with temples to pagan gods as well as the site of a temple built to the emperor god, Caesar Augustus, by Herod the Great, the Roman, Jewish puppet king. I reiterate that Caesar was also called Savior, Son of God - the son of the Roman god, Jupiter. Thus, we see the laying of the foundation and establishing the authority of a new community of faith in the heartland of paganism, Roman emperor worship, and the hinterlands of Palestine as Matthew retrospectively identified God's work in Jesus as Messiah, Christ, Son of Man, a son of God.

This new community of faith was to be the model of the Kingdom of God and its values and practices when the kingdom came on earth. Furthermore, Matthew's Jesus-group was to send out disciples to proclaim the Good News of God in Jesus to all of God's people scattered about the empire. Once that was done, then Jesus would return as the Son of Man at the Great Day of the Lord, judging and ushering in the Kingdom.

Now there has been much debate concerning whether Jesus meant the church was to be built upon Peter, the man, or it was to be built upon Peter's insights that became the Church's declaration of faith, regardless of the lines of leadership. I think it was the latter although some

Protestants in the ecumenical movement have conceded to the Catholic position that Jesus meant the church was founded on Peter, the man, and his dynastic, ecclesiastical successors, i.e. the popes. Parenthetically, Peter, erratic and impulsive, is the last guy you would want to build a church on.

So, let's look at the text again. Here among all the symbolism of pagan religion, with all its gods, Jesus asked the question that would polarize many Jewish and Greek metaphysical concepts into what became the spiritual foundation of the church across the ages - "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" or said another way, "In light of all that I've done and said, who do people say I am?"

Jesus got some odd answers. Some people said that Jesus was the prophet Elijah, another human being, who was taken up to heaven without dying and expected to return as a harbinger of the coming of the Messiah. Some said he was the return of the prophet Jeremiah, another divinely inspired, human prophet. Some believed he was a reincarnation of John the Baptist, himself a mortal herald of the coming of the kingdom of God.

However, Jesus asked the disciples, "Okay, amid all such understandings, who do you, my disciples, *my group*, say I am?" Peter, answering as the voice for the group in one of his rare moments proclaims that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, the Anointed One, a son of the living God unlike the gods of paganism and their emperor sons.

Imagine if you will, Jesus' mouth flying open, his eyes going wide, and a sudden inrush of air as he gasps out in surprise, blessed are you, Simon son of Johan! For flesh and blood - that is human reasoning or intuition - has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.

Next Jesus says that based upon Peter's insight he will build his new community of faith and the destructive powers of chaos and its sidekick, death, will not prevail against it; that is, the Church built upon God's manifestation in Jesus is supposed to be the model of the coming Kingdom of God into perpetuity. In this kingdom, death, being cut off from God and participation in the kingdom, will not be the end of Jesus' followers no matter what other Jews may say about them, their beliefs, their faith in Jesus and it leading them into hell. In addition, Peter and subsequently the church, is given the keys to the kingdom; that is, Peter and the Church, now like Jesus, will serve as divine brokers of God's blessings as well as hold the binding and loosening authority to set or relax obligatory Jewish religious customs, beliefs, and practices for this new community of faith.

²⁰*Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.* We find out why as Jesus began to teach or demonstrate that he must go to Jerusalem to become Isaiah's suffering "Son of Man" in fulfillment of God's plan.

It is often easy to read these passages as simply Matthew defining the church and its authority for a group of like-minded people awaiting the great day of the Lord and Jesus' return. I believe, however, we should focus on the fact, just as Jesus did, that it is God that inspired Peter's revelation, which becomes the basis of people's faith and the blessings that they receive, when they are willing to live by this revelation. We should focus on the fact that God, just as Jesus did for Peter, gives us a new identity, a new nature, a new honor status as sons and daughters of God, and commissions us to continue Jesus' work, empowered by the authority of the Holy Spirit to make decisions in his name.

However, let us temper these heady insights by noting that in the following verse, Matthew 16:21-23, we hear this:

²¹ From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. ²² And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God

forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.’²³ But he turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’

Wow! Across the ages, I think some of the popes and church leaders missed this passage and its insights. Peter was just extolled as the paragon of divine inspiration, the foundation of the church, the keeper of its authority, but was now called a stumbling block of Satan as once again he presumed upon matters of God in another impulsive, knee-jerk, emotional reaction and tried to persuade or prevent Jesus from going Jerusalem to meet his death to fulfill God’s plan.

The doubled edge message from Matthew is that Jesus was God’s Messiah even though he had been crucified and as proof that he was the Messiah, possessed of the living authority of God, he had been resurrected. All of this was a part of God’s plan. Furthermore, Peter, symbolic of the Church, then and now, should prayerfully seek to discern God’s will lest it presume upon God’s purview and plans that often lay well outside the Church’s human abilities and insights to discern.

Practically speaking, when the Church or even individuals seek answers from God in matters of faith and practice not already defined by scripture, they must do so cautiously in soulful sincerity and wait for the Spirit’s leadership and not go arrogantly charging off in their impulsive reasoning. What am I referring to? Well, the Church’s knee-jerk endorsements of some of the current social, political, and medical issues based solely upon the emotional responses of an under-educated, under-informed, and a willfully, morally, ethically, and spiritually ignorant populace comes to mind. The popular feel-good religious sentiments deciding matters of “salvation” based upon shallow and limited understandings of the biblical culture and dynamics are another dimension.

From my point in life, I am amazed at how the Christian faith in this nation has deteriorated into a cult of the lowest common denominators of emotionalism and individualism and frequently, if seriously reflected upon, paints God as either irrelevant, a personal genie, or as some kindly, old dufus of a grandfather. American Christianity, you had better wake up and return to your moral and spiritual roots or I fear God will let us reap what we have sown, allowing us to sink beneath the waves of our presumptive arrogance. (Yes, I know I am mixing metaphors.) America, you had better reclaim the awesome, holy otherness of God, and seek God in mystery and humility before the silliness of your religious philosophies and idolatrous individualism places God far beyond your recognition and ability to discern.

Folks the question is not who is Jesus, but what is he in God’s grand scheme of life on this earth and beyond. And, the question in our text today is not an individual or personal “you” question, “Who do *you* say I am”, but “who do you disciples, you the collective, the church” say Jesus is and what does he and his message mean for us as a manifestation of the living power of God for the life and times of the church. Therefore, as we come together as church let us be open to the Spirit’s guidance and reclaim its purposes in our life and times. And, what is that purpose - see, here is the book - study it, seek to understand it, live its truths and you, the church will know.