

St. Bartholomew's Anglican Church in the Town of Tonawanda, N.Y

The Rev. Deacon John E. Commins, Curate

Scripture: Matthew 16:13-20

"Messiah, and that's my final answer!"

Setting the scene:

You are standing in the midst of a bustling, first century, urban setting. The city of Caesarea Philippi is in the northern most part of Israel, right near Lebanon. It is in hills of the Dan region, about 1,500 feet above the Sea of Galilee. It was a center of Pagan belief – with a shrine to Augustus Caesar and a very ornate shrine to the Greek God – Pan, built out of the mountainside. Long before all of this was established it was a place of Baal worship. In this area is a large fresh water spring that joins with the water coming down from the mountains to form the Jordan River. Not far from this place is a high mountain –Mount Hermon, which many believe to be the place of the Transfiguration. This is a very important place for many reasons. This is the scene of today's Gospel.

Two statements from two unlikely sources:

Here are two statements about Jesus that came from very different, unlikely sources: "*Surely he was the Son of God!*" (Matthew 27:54) and "*I know who you are -- the Holy One of God!*" (Mark 1:24). The first statement was made by the centurion at the foot of the cross on Good Friday. I can't help but remember John Wayne playing this role and saying those words. This centurion was the man in charge of Jesus' execution and after he saw what had taken place, and the manner in which Jesus responded to it all, he was moved to make this brave declaration.

Do you recognize who made the other statement about Jesus? It was an evil spirit—a demon. He was in a state of panic – being face to face - in the presence of the Son of God, and so identified him as the Holy One of God. The demon which identified Jesus as the Holy One of God was immediately silenced and driven out of the person it had occupied. Regarding the centurion - we aren't told if his confession of Jesus later led him to learn more about the one he had crucified.

It would appear that both of these examples didn't benefit from their confession – and I would venture to say that a correct confession of who Jesus is – is only of benefit to a person when that confession comes from faith in Jesus.

It seems a little late -- after having crucified Jesus -- to realize that He is the Son of God. And what good would it do for the demon to tell the truth about Jesus – except that it had to.

There are people within certain religions, who say that Jesus is "a great teacher," "a famous person," "a great prophet," and there are even some who call themselves Christians who say that He is the Christ... **but** unless there is a confession of faith in Jesus it is not the means of salvation. **Knowing and believing who Jesus is** and what he has done is the key to a person's salvation from sin. Our acceptance or rejection by God hinges on what we believe about his Son. John 3:16 reminds us, ever so clearly, that **God sent His Son, Jesus Christ "so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."** The essence of Jesus' church comes from belief in the truth about Him. With those thoughts in mind let us turn our attention to today's Gospel from Matthew 16. I pray that the Holy Spirit lead us to a correct response produced by faith to the question Jesus asked his disciples, "**Who do you say that I am?**" And so I ask you:

Who do you say that Jesus is?

"Who do you say that Jesus is?" Remember that the correct answer to this question is going to be a rock for your faith and the correct answer to this question is going to be a rock for the church.

Three of the Gospels clearly relate to us the account of this turning point in the ministry of Jesus. Up to this point, living with Jesus, and seeing Him in action, the disciples had been given a pretty clear

understanding of who He was. In just six days from this event at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus would go up to a nearby mountain and be seen in all His Glory – with Moses and Elijah at the transfiguration. After this series of questions about His identity, Jesus began to reveal to the disciples more about his role in the Father’s plan of salvation. He would then head for Jerusalem, be betrayed into the hands of his enemies, suffer, and be executed. In time their knowledge of who Jesus is and their faith in him would grow. **But it would be on the simple answer that Peter gave - that their faith would rest. And on that simple confession Christ’s church would be built.**

Jesus asked his disciples, **“Who do people say the Son of Man is?”** Jesus often used the Old Testament title “the Son of Man” when he was referring to himself. The prophets used this title to refer to the promised Savior – the Christ. The disciples told Jesus just what they were hearing from among the people: *“Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”* They are all – as they used to say in the Family Feud “good answers”, but – “Survey says..” (BUZZING SOUND) -- **wrong.**

- John the Baptist was a powerful preacher who had done his work of preparing the way for Jesus. But he had been executed by King Herod to fulfill that foolish promise that the king had made. Jesus was not John the Baptist.
- Although Jesus did many miracles he was not the prophet Elijah.
- Jesus did speak God’s Word boldly in the face of opposition but Jesus was not Jeremiah or one of the other prophets.

All those answers to the question “Who is Jesus?” were incorrect. They were flattering and of good intentions, but they were just plain wrong!

If we were to go outside today and do a “person on the street interview” – like “Jay-Walking” on the Tonight Show – asking people “who Jesus is” we would probably **get even more answers than the disciples had heard.** **Muslims** will say that he was a prophet. **Buddhists** will gladly call Jesus a “guru” and one of the incarnations of Buddha. **Mormons** say that Jesus is “a son of God” along with many others. **Philosophers** might acknowledge Jesus as one of the great minds of the ages. There are some **theologians** who would call Him a metaphor, while other historians would point to Him as one of the most influential people that has ever lived. Jesus has been called a wonderful teacher, a political activist, and a miracle worker. All of these answers to the question of who Jesus is sound wonderful - but they all fall short of the full truth—**the most important truth.**

It is important to note what many people won’t say about him.

A person might know many things *about Jesus* - but not *know Jesus* in the way that matters. **That is why Jesus turned the question away from the crowds - to his disciples.** *“But what about you?”* he asked. **“Who do you say I am?”** The crowds were confused, but did the disciples know and believe the truth about Jesus? “Simon Peter answered, *“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”* I think that it is practically impossible for us to grasp the impact of these words when they were spoken. The hearts of the twelve Jewish men who had been hand picked by Jesus as His disciples must have skipped a beat when that answer came out of Peter’s mouth. The long promised Savior – Messiah – the Christ- **was standing right in front of them!** Immanuel—God with us—had finally come and he was there with them. These men knew many of the Old Testament prophecies by heart that pointed to Jesus. When everything “clicked” and the pieces finally all fell into place they must have been ecstatic.

When he called Jesus the “*Messiah*” and “*the Son of the living God*” Peter was acknowledging that Jesus was the “Anointed One.” The disciples knew that for centuries prophets, priests, and kings were anointed with a special oil to mark them as chosen by God. They also knew that the Old Testament

prophesies said that some day God would come to his people as THE ANOINTED ONE and **serve as all three persons--prophet, priest, and king—at the same time.**

He would be **the ultimate prophet, priest, and king** –

- and here He was standing right in front of them.
- Can you just imagine the Lord of the Universe standing right in front of you – asking you if you recognize Him?

There was no doubt at all in the disciples’ minds about what Peter meant when he said that Jesus was “*the Son of the living God.*” The first century Jews believed that when the “Son of God” came he would be equal to God in all power, authority, and majesty. We don’t know how much they knew about the Holy Trinity, but we do know that the disciples acknowledged that Jesus of Nazareth was the eternal Son of God and nothing less than God himself!

But what did this event or confession really mean for the disciples? Listen again to Jesus’ reply to Peter’s confession, “*Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.*” Knowing the truth about Jesus made Peter a “blessed” man. The original Greek for blessed is *makarios* - *to be happy—to be filled with joy.*

Peter didn’t suddenly figure out this truth about Jesus and then put his faith in Jesus. No, God the Father revealed the truth about his Son to Peter through his Word. That Word empowered Peter to believe and be blessed.

Brothers and sisters - let Jesus ask you the same question he asked the disciples so long ago. “*But who do you say I am?*” Your answer to that question is the most important answer you might ever give. Only the Holy Spirit can reveal the correct answer to you and can cause you to know and believe the truth about Jesus. It is then with your faith filled heart you can say along with Peter, “**Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God!**”

And what blessing comes to you when you know and believe the truth about Jesus? Knowing and believing that **Jesus is your prophet, priest, and king** changes your relationship to God and everything in your life.

- As your prophet he speaks from God and for God through the Scriptures. His living Words still talk to your heart.
- When you believe in Jesus as your priest you have confidence that he is your go-between. His blood covers your sins. He takes your prayers to the Father. He brings blessings from the Father back to you.
- When you know and believe that Jesus is the King of kings you have peace and security under his rule. Knowing and believing that Jesus is the “Son of the Living God,” assures you that you have a substitute who lived and died in your place.

Who Jesus is - confirms the truth that your salvation was taken care of by God himself. John wrote at the very end of his gospel, “*But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.*” (John 20:31) **The correct answer about Jesus is a rock for your faith.**

Who do you say Jesus is?

Many answers to that question sound nice but are either wrong or miss the mark in some way. C.S. Lewis dealt with misguided statements about Jesus in his book Mere Christianity: he wrote, “*I am trying here 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 one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the 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*

14th Sunday After Pentecost, August 20-21, 2005, Liturgical Year “A”

not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

Who do you say Jesus is? **Only one answer matters. Knowing and believing that Jesus is “the Messiah, the Son of the living God”** is a rock for your faith.

The Rock

The truth about Jesus that Peter answered is the rock on which Jesus’ church is built. Jesus went on to say, *“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.”* Just moments after Jesus said this (as we will hear in next weeks’ Gospel - Peter tried to block the plan of salvation and Jesus called him “Satan”. And let’s not forget how Peter denied Jesus three times. **It would not be on Peter that the church would be built. It would instead be on the correct answer to the question of “who Jesus is” that His church would be built.**

That truth still stands today. A church that doesn’t believe and teach the truth that Jesus is “the Messiah, the Son of the living God” is not building on the rock. That church has no substance, no solid foundation to offer their people. Without a correct answer to the question of “who Jesus is” a church cannot be a church worthy of His Name.

It may seem hard for us to imagine how this simple answer to the question of “who Jesus is” can destroy the gates of hell itself. Think for a minute about what this truth does for the church. When a lost soul is given the truth about Jesus and that truth through faith transforms that soul -- hell shrinks by one and the church grows by one. When Satan’s lies are confronted with the light of the facts about Jesus – Satan’s rule of darkness is dispelled. Sometimes whole cities and whole nations are then added to Christ’s church. Satan is called “the accuser of God’s people” and will rant and rave, reminding one about the sins a person has committed. But “the Messiah, the Son of the living God,” has closed the case for sinners. Satan doesn’t have a leg to stand on because Jesus has taken the punishment for all sinners. When people know and believe the truth about Jesus they can tell Satan to be silent. Satan loses and Christ’s church grows. Where Satan has twisted the truth and told outright lies - the truth about “who Jesus is” will cause His church to grow. In John 8:31-32 Jesus proclaimed the power of the truth: *“If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”*

Knowing and believing the truth about Jesus gives the church its spiritual power in another way. In today’s Gospel Jesus went on to say, *“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.”* With the correct answer to the question of “who Jesus is” - the disciples were given the keys to heaven. Those who rejected the truth about Jesus would be locked out forever. To those who put their faith in the truth about Jesus, finding their forgiveness in Him - an open door to heaven would be waiting – the promise of eternal life.

Truth is the “lifeline”

I am sure that most of you are familiar with the television show, “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?” As a contestant answers a series of increasingly difficult questions he or she wins more money. If a contestant gets stuck and can’t answer a question he or she can use a “lifeline” for help – getting help from the audience, or even to “phone a friend.” Picture yourself sitting in THE chair across from Regis Philbin. Regis leans toward you – you are out of lifelines – and this is for “all the marbles.” Regis asks you **“Who do you think Jesus is?”** Let your answer be the one that Peter gave. That correct answer is a rock for your faith and a rock upon which the church is built. Answer that question with the truth in your head and faith in your heart, **“Jesus is the Messiah, and that’s my final answer!”** Amen.