



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

"Who do you say I am" - The Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost - 8/23/2020

In the name of the loving, liberating, and life-giving God. Amen.

It wasn't more than maybe four years ago that I was in my final year of seminary and cramming for the general ordination exam – if you've never heard of that, think bar exam for clergy – and at the same time, getting ready for finals when the bishop decided that it would also be a good idea for all of us to also sit for a two-day oral exam, presided over by himself, the dean of the school, and some of my future clergy colleagues.

"It'll be fun," he said. Yeah, it was just as fun as that sounds. But the last question I was asked during those oral exams was the same one that Jesus asked the disciples today. The bishop asked, and it was, I think, the last question of the day, "Who do you say Jesus is?" And we were all very tired and you could just see the panel of examiners kind of lean in to hear my answer. And looking back today, part of me wants to kick myself because if I had just known my Bible a little better, I could probably have seen this one coming and maybe had a better answer ready, but I didn't.

And so I kind of stumbled around a bit and tried to string together a sufficiently orthodox sounding answer that was getting longer and longer as I kept adding to it, trying to cover every base, until finally the bishop took some mercy on me and he says, "Okay. Okay. Thank you, Chris. That was great. But my question wasn't who do others say that Jesus is. My question was who do you say He is?" And suddenly the question became a bit more interesting and a bit more difficult.

And of course, it's not just an interesting question, but a pretty important one and not just for the disciples today, not just for aspiring clergy, but for all of us. After all, if we were going to follow Jesus, it stands to reason that we should be able to articulate just who this Jesus is, not to mention that if we're doing maybe just a little bit, right, then our very lives might provoke a question or two. Why are you so dedicated to the poor? Why are you so compassionate and so generous with your life? Why are you so nice?

As a kid I remember asking my grandmother that very question. She was the only person in my family who went to church and it eventually led to a conversation about Jesus and eventually led me here. And because our faith is very much a journey, I think it's a question that we should probably come back to from time to time. After all, the answer we give or that we might've given back in Sunday school certainly is not the same one we would give today, nor should it probably be.

So who do you say I am? Who is Jesus to you? And if you hesitate on that question at all, you're not alone. You notice the disciples today, they're not exactly falling over themselves to answer it. It's left a good old impetuous Peter to jump in and break the silence. And he gets it right. Jesus is the Messiah, the anointed one, the Son of God. But as we'll see, next week, Peter may have said the right words, but he has no idea what that really means, which is to the point here, who Jesus is, is not about saying the right words or memorizing the right answer. It's about being able to share what's in your heart.

Besides the official answers about who Jesus is, like any effort to try to describe the mystery of God in a formulaic way, always seem to fall a bit short don't they? For example, after this sermon, we will recite one answer about who Jesus is from the Nicene Creed, which by the way, is about as orthodox as one can get, but it's never been particularly compelling to me.

As the creed says, Jesus is true God from true God; begotten not made, suffered, died, and was buried. And on the third day, rose again, ascended to heaven and will come again to judge the living and the dead. Okay. But if that was all you knew about Jesus, if you had nothing else to go on, I'm not sure that's the most comforting description I've heard. In fact, I wouldn't blame you if you might've heard it as a little threatening. In other words, it basically says Jesus is the son of God who came to earth, we tortured and killed Him, but God raised Him so that He can return one day for what sounds like it could be some pretty serious payback.

Now if you're someone who loves the Creed and it brings you great comfort, that's totally fine. I'm not here to suggest anything's wrong with that. I'm just saying for me, it's never got my heart beating. And then there's the familiar, if not most common description, Jesus is the one who died for our sins, right? The Lamb of God who ransomed His life to pay the debt of our sin. But I have to say that one too has never really gotten me excited because it always ends up saying about God – I mean, Jesus comes off looking pretty good, but God comes off as something of an unforgiving debt collector, someone who needs a ransom paid before He can forgive his children.

My girls are only three years old, but if I practiced this at home, I would be a rich man. But again, if that rings true for you, if that's what you grew up with, if that stirs your heart, if it propels you to give your life sacrificially for others, amen. I'm not here to tell you otherwise, it's a perfectly orthodox position. It's just never clicked for me. And before you reach for your phone, Wikipedia, by the way, isn't terribly helpful either. I looked it up. According to Wikipedia, Jesus is a first century Jewish preacher, religious leader, and a central figure of Christianity, a central figure of Christianity. Okay. That's about as watered down as you could get, I think.

But why go to the internet? As good Episcopalians, we should really start with the Book of Common Prayer, shouldn't we? And if you look at page 849 and the Outline of the Faith, it says, Jesus is the Messiah sent by God to free us from the power of sin so that with the help of God, we may live in harmony with God, within ourselves, with our neighbors and with all creation. Okay. That's a bit more like it. But to be perfectly honest, none of these really get my heart pumping. And I shouldn't be too hard on them. The idea of distilling the mystery of God into a few sentences will always be a bit lacking.

What's probably lacking for me is that they each try to describe Jesus without mentioning words like mercy, compassion, forgiveness, and love. But my point here isn't to beat up on our well-worn orthodoxies. Rather, my point here is to free you, to free you up as you try to answer this question for yourself. As you consider who Jesus is, don't be limited by trying to regurgitate the exact words of an official sounding answer. Don't try to just repeat back what you've heard growing up. Try to start with a clean slate. Imagine you were being asked who Jesus is by a child with an open mind or a neighbor, a random stranger who sees the cross you're wearing. And here's a hint. Don't come at it like an academic question, like I might have. Come at it as a relational one. What does Jesus mean to you in your life? How has Jesus changed you? How does Jesus challenge you? How does he help you get out of bed in the morning and face the day?

So who do you say I am? Is Jesus the one who comforts you in times of suffering because He's been there too, because He's seen firsthand the anguish of His mother who looks upon her suffering child, helpless to put an end to it? Is Jesus the one who carries you when life seems too much, or when you feel alone or abandoned? When you're up all night staring at a problem that no one else knows about and no one else understands, is Jesus with you, right next to you? Is he that second set of footprints in the sand that you can always rely on being there to catch you when you stumble and to carry you when you fall?

Do you see Jesus as a liberator who frees you to finally be yourself? To let go of all the expectations and feelings of failure and shame that come with trying to live a life up to someone else's expectations. Does Jesus give you the courage to be the person God made you to be? And does He give you the peace of knowing that's more than enough? Is He the light of the world? Is He the one who shines through the darkness and restores your sight so that you can see more clearly the needs of the world, the injustice that is around every corner, and to see more fully all the ways we have been gifted to heal it?

Is Jesus the one whose sacrifice reminds us that we are forgiven once and for all, and no matter what we've ever done, no matter who we've ever let down, no matter who we might have wronged, no matter how far we might have fallen short, that God will always be there waiting for us to come home, and throw the biggest party He can muster when we do? When we wander and lose our direction in life. When we get lost, looking for love in all the wrong places is Jesus for you the good shepherd who never stops looking for us, who never ceases, who never quits until he brings every one of us home?

Who do you say I am? And I'm not here to answer that for you, but to encourage you to wrestle with that question yourself today, maybe you could put a comment in the comment section on Facebook or in the chat box on the internet, let us know, share it with others. Talk about it over dinner tonight maybe. Send me an email. I'd love to hear yours. So I'm going to let you finish this sermon and do it on your own time, but I'm going to leave you with this last thought.

In today's gospel, Peter gets the word right, Jesus is the Messiah. But notice it ends with Jesus telling them not to tell anyone. They have the word right, but He knows they still don't get it. Jesus knows they are still trying to fit Him into their own idea of what a Messiah is. And so can we. So as we wrestle with this question of who Jesus is for each of us, let us also be in God on guard that we don't domesticate Jesus, that we don't turn Him into our personal problem solver and our personal ego trip.

If Jesus is going to be our Messiah, if Jesus is going to be the one who comforts us and liberates us, who restores our sight and heals our brokenness, if Jesus is going to be the one who offers us new life, let us remember that we will never be able to fully grasp it unless we're willing and ready to give ours away as well. We cannot rise to this new life until we're ready to die to our old one.

I don't want to step on Father Bill's sermon next week, but I suspect we might hear a bit more about that next week, but in the meanwhile, who do you say I am?

Amen.

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