

## **Sermon**

**Rev. Steve Domienik**

Proper 16

Year A

8-21-11

*Matthew 16:13-20*

### **Who do people say that I am?**

This is the simple question that Jesus asks his disciples in today's Gospel. On the surface it seems harmless enough but if we look a bit closer we will see that it is loaded with political and theological significance. This little question has sparked conflict and division among the followers of Jesus since the day he asked it. There have been many answers to this question and much of our faith has been built upon these varied responses.

At first the disciples repeat what they have heard other people say about Jesus. "You are John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the other prophets who have come back from the dead". These conceptions of Jesus are rooted in the Jewish experience - heroes from the past whom the people revere. Since Jesus exhibits qualities of these other religious leaders it makes sense that he would be equated with them. Yet, all of these responses would be seen as normal or typical within their tradition.

Jesus, however, is not satisfied with these answers from the general population so he pushes the disciples - "But who do YOU say that I am"? Peter jumps in and says, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God"! Now this answer had some punch to it. Peter was stepping out in faith on this one as he pushed the envelope in using this title.

Remember that the Jewish people were indeed waiting hundreds of years for a Messiah to come and save them, but they defined this Messiah as a conquering king like David. The people expected a mighty warrior to come and push the Roman legions out of their land. Peter was thinking outside of the box with this answer because nobody would have expected Jesus to be the Messiah.

Peter's response seems to win the day as Jesus praises him for giving the correct answer. Jesus also says, "You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church." This statement plays on the Greek words Petros meaning Peter and petra which means rock. This little remark has sharply divided Roman Catholics and Protestants for centuries.

Catholics take that statement to mean that Peter himself is the rock, the foundation that Jesus is going to build the church on. By extension, therefore, it implies that each pope, being the successor to Peter, is the true foundation of the church.

Protestants on the other hand, believe that what Jesus was praising was not so much Peter himself, but Peter's faith. So faith in Jesus as the Son of God is the true foundation of the church.

The Church surely needs leaders like Peter at all levels of its structure, leaders who have recognized both the divinity and humanity of Jesus and whose own lives are being built on him. In a very real sense, such leaders are the "rock" on which Jesus continues to build the Church.

But what does that look like for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christians? Who is Jesus Christ for us today? What are the typical responses that others give to this question? Is Jesus seen as a religious leader, a healer, a wise prophet, a folk-hero or as divine savior? Whatever the popular views about Jesus are we are called to think outside the box, just as Peter did when we give our response.

Jesus called for his disciples to make a distinction between popular opinion and genuine faith in God. So must we in the midst of many competing cultural images pick out the real Jesus. Can we find Jesus Christ to be the answer to the most searching hunger of our spirits? Can we find meaning in Jesus that will touch and change our lives?

It has been suggested that our faith is not so much resting on the hope that Jesus is like God, but rather our faith is resting on the hope that God is like Jesus - compassionate, forgiving, accepting and welcoming.

The disciples first met Jesus as a human being, and they struggled with the notion that God was somehow present, active, speaking, giving and healing through this man. It was only later that Peter and the others recognized Jesus as the Son of God. The struggle for us might be the opposite – we might more easily see Jesus as divine and have a difficult time seeing him as human.

But if Jesus is not fully human, if he is of different stuff than ourselves, then Christian faith becomes ancient history. We go back 2000 years to an event in a far away time and place, and the faith becomes a kind of hero worship. If Jesus is human as we are human, then faith becomes absolutely current, pertinent, and awaiting our response.

What Peter and the other disciples confronted was the central Biblical miracle, the incarnation, the presence of God in human form - God as one of us. The challenge and the invitation that Jesus holds before us is the possibility that we too as human beings can be the temples of God's presence, the vehicles of God's action. We can enter into the realm of God in the world. We can become the body of Christ. If we affirm God in Jesus, we are also open to the possibility of God in ourselves.

The question that Jesus asked two thousand years ago is still relevant to our ears today.

“Who do you say that I am?”

AMEN

