

Who Do You Say that I Am?

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Text: Matthew 16: 13 – 20

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I recall very clearly the thoughts that occupied my mind at the conclusion of my first three-year seminary experience. Let me share with you this morning a little of that thinking. Contrary to some viewpoints there really is no ending or, for that matter, no completion to a theological education. There is no concrete position on matters of faith, belief, or interpretation of scripture which we, as newly ordained ministers, are required to espouse or promote as truth when taking our places as congregational leaders. In fact, if I may use the phrase, there is much unfinished business as I will briefly turn to later. Having been raised in the evangelical arena of the church, which I later rejected, I was not expecting any overwhelming desire to proclaim what is often referred to as the *good news of the gospel* in the way I had listened to it much of my life.

I had always had difficulty with preachers whose dogmatic approach to the gospel was one of certitude; a heavy focus on sin; and of course the forgiveness which we were told, even as very young people, came with salvation to avoid damnation. Such teaching can actually produce fear. I do recall on one occasion at a church youth event that the speaker, in his attempt to convince our young minds that salvation and conversion were absolutely non-negotiable, told us that we should respond that night lest we be run over by a bus on the way home! I didn't personally succumb to his invitation, but I did from that day on watch out for busses! In retrospect, and on a more serious note, I could not associate with what I consider *abusive teaching* within the context of what was seemingly presented as *good news*. Where did the unconditional love of God fit in the equation?

Well you might be justifiably wondering what positive revelations and enlightenment I did take from my years in seminaries and bring into ministry. I can assure you there was much for me that validated a *call* to ministry and my enthusiasm was and still is intact. I do however remain with the questions that many of us as seminarians discerned and grappled with over the course of our programme: For instance the questions: what on earth can all of this, i.e. church history and theological education, be of interest to the persons we will address in the pews on a Sunday morning? To what extent do we demonstrate our independence of thought by pushing the envelope on matters theological? And then of course the stark reality that every sermon commences with a blank page (now a blank screen), but hopefully not with a blank mind!

In the interest of time I want to pick up on the matter of what I earlier termed *unfinished business*. What I am referring to here are those areas of study that are ongoing. You have heard me say before that, not unlike many other disciplines, theology is continuous learning, the results of which at different times in our lives can be enlightening as well as correcting. To use what is now an old phrase, we can experience a *paradigm shift* in our thinking. We see or understand things differently.

Let me briefly introduce a subject that clearly resides in that category of *unfinished business* in both theology and Christology which has been and remains ongoing over two millennium. I speak to what is known as the *quest for the historical Jesus*. Several contemporary theologians differentiate between the *Jesus of history* and the *Christ of Faith*. To unpack this a little I will defer to the late Marcus Borg who uses alternate terms that are more descriptive; the *pre-Easter Jesus* and the *post-Easter Jesus*. Borg tells us that *minimally there are two layers of tradition or two kinds of material in the gospels. Some material goes back to the pre-Easter Jesus, and some is the product of the early Christian movement. To put it another way the gospels contain minimally two voices – the voice of the pre-Easter Jesus and the voice of the community in the post-Easter setting. In order to construct an image of the pre-Easter Jesus, that is the historical Jesus, involves separating out these layers, these voices. As students our faculty accentuated this point in that there is a necessary vigilance when studying and interpreting the gospels.*

And so for us the questions follow: Who was Jesus? What did he actually say? Which words in the gospels attributed to him are in fact his words? And which have been added or embellished by later traditions? In summary the gospels contain minimal authentic words of Jesus together with a great deal of commentary by the authors who are reflecting on the impact of the person of Jesus on the community. As you can imagine after Jesus' death the experience of a living Christ, that is the post-Easter Jesus, significantly enhanced the commentary.

This quest for the historical Jesus has had considerable attention in the last century commencing with Albert Schweitzer, theologian, physician and organist. His book "The Quest Of The Historical Jesus" was first published in German in 1910. Described by a much later author and theologian Arthur Rowe, Schweitzer's position was that if we look for the historical Jesus in the light of our ideas of a good man we will never find him. If we take seriously the fact that he lived in a different world from ours we will find him a stranger whose career ended in failure. But his Spirit could still inspire people, like Schweitzer himself, to live a life of sacrifice. In the year following his published work Schweitzer studied medicine and went on to care for the sick and do missionary work in French Equatorial Africa.

This brings me to the crux of the matter for us because when we set aside all the questions we may have about the person of Jesus, I believe that we never cease to experience that his life remains an inspiration and example for us to live with authenticity. From a personal standpoint I have to say that what I have gained through continuous learning in the field of theology generally has never eroded my appetite for the faith journey we collectively share. Whatever the personal

a-has or enlightenment along the way my faith has been enhanced. Seeking authenticity in our changing understanding of the person Jesus is never a futile or unnecessary exercise. Many contemporary theologians have contributed greatly to this undertaking.

Well I want to move briefly to this morning's scripture that Joyce read to us. I deliberately chose this passage because, in light of what I have shared with you thus far, this interaction between Jesus and the disciples also speaks to the question of who Jesus was and is. The question of course being asked by the subject himself.

Let us engage our imagination and identify with this particular period in Jesus' life. He had been carrying out his public role of ministry for some time and being human it was only natural that he would have been curious as to how he was doing, how he was perceived, and what was being said about him. Herbert O'Driscoll one of the most highly regarded preachers in the Anglican Church and former warden of the College of Preachers, Washington National Cathedral refers to this episode as *the most reassuringly human moment in Jesus' life*. He shows himself to be just like us, dare we say a little insecure, wondering about self-performance, self-image. Affirmation and reassurance are very much a part of personal well-being. To acknowledge this apparent insecurity does not diminish Jesus in any way, rather it brings him closer to us.

At this time Jesus had concerns. His days were numbered and he wondered whether anyone understood him; who had recognized him for what he was? Was there any who, after his departure, would carry on his work and labour for his kingdom?

So Jesus decided to test this out with a line of questioning. In a kind of casual way and in keeping with Jesus' way of gradually getting to the heart of the matter. First the easy question to the disciples, *Who do people say that I am?* A question that did not require a personal response. The answers came quickly in that the disciples told him what they thought he would want to hear: *Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets*. Note that the answers deliberately left out the not so pleasing *gossip* of the day, Blasphemer, glutton, or wine lover.

Then with the general question out of the way Jesus gets to the burning question: *But what about you, who do YOU say that I am?* The eager responses to the initial question were instantaneously replaced with a deafening silence. The confidence with which the disciples had offered the descriptions of Jesus that they had heard from others was exchanged for an uncertainty of their own understanding. The silence was broken in what is the climax and culmination of this conversation. The disciple Peter responded with what was to be the first declaration concerning Jesus' identity: *You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God*.

Peter's answer doesn't necessarily tell us that he fully understood what he was saying or what he meant by it. In fact the consensus of today's Bible scholars, particularly those who make up the Jesus Seminar, is that this story and the entire conversation are the creations of the storyteller in later Christian circles. That is, as mentioned earlier, another voice in the gospel. For Peter this was a step in faith and it was sufficient for Jesus to receive the assurance he needed concerning the survival and continuation of his ministry . . . a ministry now entrusted to you and to me.

This morning Jesus asks us the same very personal question *Who do YOU say that I am?* It is perfectly okay if our answers differ and it is also acceptable for us to respond that we are still discerning the question. There is no shame in saying *I just don't know . . . I don't completely understand God or how God works. I'm searching too*.

From the disciple Peter down through the ages many have declared who Jesus is by uttering similar words . . . but not necessarily with confidence or a full understanding. That understanding grows over time as we walk the road of faith.

In conclusion I leave you with another quote from Herbert O'Driscoll: *Like Peter, we do not have to understand in a precise and analytical way what we are saying. Indeed we will never fully understand. The depths of Jesus Christ will forever elude us. Amen.*

Bibliography resourced for this sermon:

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