

August 23, 2020 - 12th Sunday after Pentecost - Sermon notes

Exodus 1:8 - 2:10, Psalm 124, Romans 12:1-8, Matthew 16:13-20

“But who do you say I am?”

Tradition tells us that Jesus spent about 3 ½ years in ministry to the people of Israel following his baptism by John in the river Jordan. The first 16 chapters of Matthew’s Gospel describe approximately 3 of those years. During all that time Jesus continued his work of ‘proclaiming that the kingdom of heaven is at hand, calling for repentance, and healing the people’. Evidence abounds that his ministry was very effective and well known, particularly in the Galilean region of Palestine. At the time of today’s Gospel reading Jesus and his disciples have removed themselves from their familiar travel routes and gone north to Caesarea Philippi. It has been noted by a number of Biblical Scholars that Jesus probably chose this setting intentionally for the occasion of making his full identity known to his disciples. This Roman city was filled with temples to Syrian gods as well as a large temple in honour of the currently reigning emperor of Rome. Each of these temples declared the deity of one imposter after another and it was in the midst of all this idolatry that Jesus asked that most important question. It is the question we are all asked to answer in the deepest part of our hearts - “But who do you say I am?”

Most of us have been traveling in the company of Jesus for much more than 3 years. We have been witness to some of the wonders and the teaching about the kingdom at least to some degree for all the years of our travel. As I thought about the event described by Matthew in this portion of his story I realized that, particularly during this Covid-19 crisis, we have all been removed from our familiar settings and we find ourselves in the midst of an atmosphere surrounded by symbols of false gods. I recognize that we probably don’t use that kind of language to describe our surroundings but each day we are confronted with something other than God asking for our allegiance or our attention. It is as if we are situated in the midst of pagan temples which are each asking us to consider their message rather than considering the message of God in Jesus Christ, I can easily imagine Jesus asking me, ‘what are people saying about me?’ and then asking ‘but what are you saying’. I, like Simon Peter before me, declare, “you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God”. I have spent a good portion of my adult life finding ways of proclaiming that truth and learning what it means for my day to day life. Please allow me to share some of what I know to be true.

Jesus declared to Simon Peter that it was the Holy Spirit who revealed this truth to him - it wasn’t by human wisdom. A Holy Spirit revelation is not that unusual. I have found many people who look at the same evidence I look at when it comes to Jesus who come to different conclusions than I have. In Jesus’ day those conclusions were that ‘he was John the Baptist, or Elijah or ...’ Today those conclusions sometimes are spoken of by referring to Jesus as a good moral teacher (which he was) or a good example to follow (which he is) and a host of other conclusions. While all of these are not

completely wrong they fall far short of the revelation that Jesus is God's Anointed One. The fact that Simon Peter made the correct statement was a good thing but his subsequent actions revealed that he didn't completely understand what his statement really meant. I often find myself discovering what it means for me to believe that Jesus is God's Messiah as a surprise and a Holy Spirit revelation.

The God we worship is the Creator of all things, who stands outside of Creation but is intimately involved in it. This God we worship made a Covenant with the descendants of Abraham and Sarah and who revealed His presence to those descendants in a powerful way, particularly during the lifetime of Moses. God's presence traveled with His people as they wandered in the wilderness making their way to the Promised Land. The task of manifesting God's presence to the world was part of what the nation of Israel was meant to do but, as we know from their history, they often strayed away from this purpose. God's obvious presence left the nation and God's Temple was destroyed. Even after that Temple was reconstructed there was an awareness that God had not abandoned his Covenant but God's abiding presence had not returned. Time stretched on and on and the people of God yearned for God's return and the Gospels proclaim that in Jesus of Nazareth that return was seen. In a completely unexpected way the Creator God once again came to be with His people. John, the apostle, declared that 'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have beheld his glory' The word John used, that is translated as "dwelt", is the same Greek word used when speaking of the Tabernacle in the story of Moses. Once again God had set up his tent in the midst of God's people. The fact of Jesus being Messiah includes this understanding. That in him, in a completely surprising way, the Creator of the universe has come among His people. I think you will agree that this is so much more than Jesus being a very good human being. As God's Anointed One Jesus carries out the work of God in the way God wants that work carried out. This concept, as Jesus explained, does not come from human reasoning but by a revelation brought about by the Holy Spirit of God.

Of course there is a great deal more to say about this topic. I am still discovering new and wonderful truths as I contemplate the meaning of that profound statement 'you are the Christ, the Son of the living God' but what I have shared so far seems to me to be at the core of the understanding. The arrival of Jesus in the world marked the beginning of a new age. The landowner was returning and would be asking how his realm had been managed by those he left as stewards. The father who had given his youngest son his inheritance is ready to welcome the son back from the pit and forgive and restore. The shepherd would be going to and fro to find the lost sheep and rejoicing when that lost sheep is found. The harvester would be sifting the grain from the chaff. The bridegroom would be coming to take his bride. These images are word pictures of what it means that Jesus is God's Anointed One and all of them have depths of meaning that challenge and fulfill us.

In his letter to the Gentile Christians in Rome St. Paul spent considerable time wrestling with the

impact of this reality - that Jesus is God's Messiah - and helping his readers unpack the meaning. In the passage offered today St. Paul urges his readers to 'present your bodies as a living sacrifice...and not be conformed to this world' (Romans 12:1,2) This revelation that Jesus is the Messiah of God ought to have a profound impact on the way in which we conduct ourselves. The impact is akin to a complete and total sacrifice - a living sacrifice - and it will ask the believer to resist the pull of this world that asks us to conform to the teaching of this world. A new thing has been brought into being through the Messiah of God and to apprehend that new thing we must allow the Spirit of God to be our guide and not listen to the message from the world. This new thing includes a renewed way to be human which includes the fact that in Jesus we are members of one another. The fact of Jesus being the Messiah creates a renewed humanity where co-operation and love are the norm rather than competition and selfishness. Simon Peter and the other apostles discovered this after the Holy Spirit fell upon them and they found themselves in a new family numbering in the thousands. The manifestation of the Messiah's continued presence in their midst called for a devotion to others that astounded people. Such is the power of the reality that comes when we truly live as if the statement made by Simon Peter is true and allow this truth to impact the lives of all believers. For instance, the pattern of leadership that Jesus introduced was not at all similar to the prevailing pattern of leadership. "The Gentiles lord it over you but it is not to be that way with you. If one of you wishes to be great that person needs to be the servant of all' (Matthew 20:24-28)

Jesus spent his time on earth living out the reality of being God's Anointed One - the presence of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob living on the earth. The pre-conceived ideas about what it would mean for God to return to their midst that existed in the descendants of Abraham did not prepare them for the reality that they would see in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth. Some did not adjust their pre-conceived ideas while others, moved by the Holy Spirit, embraced its truth. Jesus asked his disciples, 'who do you say that I am' and Simon Peter answered, 'you are the Christ, the Son of the living God' and we are asked to do the same. When we do so we are also asked to allow God to show us what that means to our day to day lives and to remain open to the surprise that it brings. In Jesus, we declare, God once again travels with His people. Through the Holy Spirit we too may have the presence of God in our midst. How that reality will impact our situation as we continue to contend with Covid-19 restrictions, health concerns, joys and sorrows only the future will know. Presenting our bodies as living sacrifices, not conforming our thoughts to the thoughts of this world, recognizing that our ideas of what Messiah is are incomplete are some of the ways in which this wonderful reality will be allowed to have impact on our daily lives. I look forward to continuing my life's journey with the Messiah and discovering the wonderful ways God wishes to impact this world of his through His Church.