

Who Do You Say That I Am?

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

We are at a high point in Matthew's Gospel in this Sunday's lesson, Matthew 16:13-20. This episode is found in all of the Synoptics (Matthew, Mark Luke) and in John. Like last Sunday's Gospel, we are probably reading a Matthean reworking of an earlier text from Mark.

Matthew alone has the portion in 16:17-19, the verses that connect Peter's confession of Jesus as Messiah with the church. We ought to also note that this is one of the only two occurrences of the word *church* in the Gospels, the second is in Matthew 18:17. The church, it appears, is the gathering that's linked to this confession of Jesus as Messiah, Son of the living God. The church is the group that's able to say aloud with Peter, "You are the Messiah, God's Son."

Last week I got a letter from a congregation in our neighbourhood. An evangelical denomination that now has its home in our former sister church Westminster. They want to make a public claim about Jesus by holding a "March for Jesus Christ and Praise Master Jesus." But I have to confess that I am not all that comfortable with that kind of "witnessing" (even if they do have T shirts available with slogans like "I am not ashamed to be a Christian" available for sale for \$10.)

Still I am left with the question: What are we doing here this morning? What's the point of all this singing, praying, speaking and listening? What makes what we do here today distinctive and different from the myriad of other human gatherings in which we participate?

Most Sundays you can enjoy warm, friendly fellowship here, but to be honest, you can enjoy that elsewhere, too. We certainly care about making our surrounding community a better place to live, that's why we welcome so many others use our building every week. But then so do a host of volunteer community service organizations care about making this a better community. We care for

the needs of others, but so does the hospital or nursing home. Among all the reasons why we gather, out of all the otherwise important matters in which we engage, this is the most important: we are gathered to affirm, to learn more about, and to grow more deeply in the relationship that is based upon the acclamation made by Peter: *Jesus Christ is Lord, Messiah, Son of God*.

Other faiths have love, have beliefs about the good and the true. In spite of the recent controversies about the role of Jesus in our denomination, only Christianity has Jesus. If God had kept aloof from us, if God had only given us a book, then we would have the Bible, but we wouldn't be Christians. We would be another noble philosophy of life or a system of ethical virtues.

But what God did, we believe, is come to us in the flesh as a Jew from Nazareth named Jesus, or more Hebraically named, Joshua, meaning "God saves." We believe that the peculiar way God saves, the way that God gets to us and gets us, is Jesus. It is our astounding claim that we look at the Jewish carpenter's son—who was born, lived briefly, died violently in his thirties, and rose from the dead unexpectedly—and we see as much of almighty God as we hope to see.

Now, we can sympathize with those folks who look at Jesus and see only a noble teacher or only a great moral example, an impossible idealist, or even a wild-eyed revolutionary. After all, from the very beginning who Jesus was and what he was about was far from self-evident. There were people like Peter who stood face-to-face with Jesus and said, "This is God incarnate." There appear to be many more who said, "This man is nuts. He can't be God, can he?"

So, from the first, that God came to us *as Jesus* meant lots of people didn't get it. Jesus frustrated people's expectations of how a messiah ought to act. Jesus didn't directly say who he was. He didn't walk around with a sign on his back saying, SON OF GOD. Messiahs were supposed to have power, were supposed to take charge, set things right, fix all of our problems.

Jesus refused to stiff-arm anybody into following him. He refused to dominate or take up arms. Looking at his life work, many people would say that Jesus was one of history's most noble failures.

So it wasn't just that God came as Jesus, it was that God came *as Jesus*. He just didn't seem like what we thought God ought to be. Eventually Jesus was executed for doing the things he did and saying the things he said. He wasn't killed for walking around bragging, "By the way, I'm God."

Jesus was killed for saying, "This is God's way: the poor are precious, the rich are in big trouble, Caesar isn't God despite what his spin doctors claim, not everybody who cries 'Lord, Lord' is going into God's kingdom. In fact, prostitutes and tax collectors get in before you."

You just don't say things like that to people and get tenure. And Christianity, being a Christian, is about following Jesus, doing what Jesus did, speaking as he spoke. Certainly we don't all succeed at that. After all, Jesus warned that his way was "narrow."

Time and again Jesus said things we wish he had not. I don't know what he was getting at when he said, "Hate your mother," or "Go sell everything you have and give it to the poor."

Well, to be honest, I do know what he meant when he said some of those things, but I don't like it! For most of us, it isn't that we've listened to Jesus and found him incomprehensible. It's that we've listened to him and found him darn difficult.

So someone came out of worship one Sunday after service saying to the preacher, "I know that you would never want to hurt anyone in your sermons, but I was hurt by your comment in your sermon that . . ."

And the preacher said: "I thought to myself, "Where on earth did you get the notion that we wouldn't want to hurt you? This is Jesus! It's going to get rough from time to time!"

Being Christian is about the challenging, lifelong struggle to be friends with Jesus and to allow him to be friends with you.

It's about a relationship. I think it was Richard Niebuhr who said that conversion happens when the God whom you thought was your enemy to be feared is really your friend to be loved.

We love God because, we believe, God first loved us in Jesus. So Christianity is not first adherence to a set of great ideals (ethics), nor is it the comprehension of a set of great ideas (philosophy); it is a way of life, a way of walking with Jesus, a relationship.

We really believe not only that Jesus spoke to us but that he came to us, speaks to us, comes to us. If Easter had not happened, who would still think about Jesus? Most of his teaching was unoriginal, his inheritance from the faith of Israel. He was not particularly effective in getting his program across to his followers.

But when he came back to us, even from the dead, we then said that Jesus—who he was, what he taught, what he did—had been vindicated by God. That's what those early Christians meant when they exploded out into the world shouting, "God has raised Jesus from the dead!" Easter was like God saying to us, "In case you have ever wondered whether or not Jesus was truly, truthfully revealing my will for the world—with all his talk of forgiving enemies and loving the unlovable and finding the lost—then be assured, this is exactly the way I see it. When he speaks, I'm speaking. When you look at Jesus, you're looking at me, the one who hung the stars and flung the planets into their courses."

I know this seems an astounding assertion to those who have not experienced it, but Christians believe that Jesus is present with us, walks with us, is closer to us than we are even to ourselves.

In today's Gospel Peter stands in front of another human being whom he has been walking with for months and says, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." That moment is a direct challenge to our inherited notions of God.

Christians believe that when we look at Jesus of Nazareth, we see the whole truth about God. This is the mystery we celebrated here back at Christmastime—the mystery of the incarnation, the fully God/fully human one who meets us in Jesus. That’s the wild, paradoxical, counterintuitive notion that became real to Peter in this conversation with Jesus.

Perhaps you might prefer your God to be with you as a remarkably effective moral teacher or wise sage. In Jesus, nothing less than humanity and divinity meet. A domesticated Jesus whose strange, inexplicable mix of humanity and divinity has somehow been toned down—a Jesus who is either human or divine, one or the other, and hence easier for us to understand and to handle—is not really Jesus at all. Intellectual humility is required in this encounter, a willingness to let God be complicatedly incarnate, close to us, rather than the simpler God we thought up on our own. Sometimes the strange rational impossibility just happens to be true—God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Godself.

Maybe you might prefer your God to come at you in an exclusively spiritual, inflated, pale blue and fuzzy vagueness, hermetically sealed from where you actually live, distant, obviously divine, aloof, somewhere up there, out there. In Jesus, divinity and humanity embrace here, now.

It’s quite a stretch to look at this Jew from Nazareth who lived briefly, died violently, and returned unexpectedly and think that this is the truth about God.

For instance, sometimes people ask, “Can I really trust the Bible, seeing that it is a thoroughly human product, full of all the errors and contradictions that characterize any human endeavor?” The implication is that if scripture has any human taint, shows any creaturely weakness, the Bible can’t be trusted to talk about God. But what if Jesus is true? What if we don’t know anything for sure about God, except that which is shown to us by the God-and-human Jesus? What if Jesus really is fully human and fully divine? Then where on earth would we expect to know anything about God, except

through a medium that is human? God came to us as we are, met us where we live, in the human words of scripture that become the very voice of God, in the man Jesus who becomes the very presence of God.

Say a prayer using ordinary human words, tear open a loaf of ordinary bread, have a sip of everyday wine; we believe Jesus is with us. When just two or three of us show up on Sunday, Jesus has promised, “I’ll be there.”

So that’s what makes Christians who we are—*Jesus*. We’re here, not because we were searching for more meaning in our lives and found Jesus. Rather, most of us were minding our own business and from out of nowhere, he found us. Or we were just biding our time trying to make it through a Sunday service without dozing off and he grabbed us. We stood to sing a hymn only to sit down after the last note saying, “I believe.”

It’s about Jesus. — Who is he? Who do *you* say? Thanks be to God. Amen.