

So, who is he?

A sermon preached by the Rev. Robert B. Edson in St. John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts on August 24, 2008, the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost.

He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Matthew 16:15-16

It is to Caesarea Philippi in northern Galilee that Jesus withdraws with his disciples to work out a strategy for the rest of his mission. If they are to form the spiritual church community, they will have to know what they are doing. Above all, they have to know who Jesus is. They are in a region with a multiplicity of ancient religions with no fewer than fourteen temples dedicated to the worship of the ancient Syrian god of Baal. The setting for this story is at the Banyan Spring where you can still see the niches in the cavern wall that once held carved statues of Pan and other gods of ancient Greece. Nearby stands a great marble temple to Caesar built by Herod the Great symbolizing all the power and grandeur of Rome.

It is here that Jesus, the itinerate rabbi from Nazareth, gathers with his disciples in the midst of all the reminders of other gods to ask his disciples an important question. "Who do people say that I am?" He has to know what others think and who they believe him to be. The disciples are awkward in their response. They tell him that some say that he is John the Baptist while others think he is Elijah and still others feel he might be one of the great prophets. If Jesus is one of the great prophets, that would mean that the coming of the messiah is near and that God's kingdom on earth will soon be realized.

Now it is time for them to answer for them selves. Jesus puts the question to them, "Who do *you* say that I am?" Predictably, Peter is the first to speak up. In my imagination, Peter is a big, burly fisherman with an equally big heart. He is aggressive, impetuous, and outspoken, running a successful fishing business and living in a spacious home with a large extended family. Whenever there is an issue or a question, he is usually the first to speak up, sometimes without thinking. This time Peter doesn't hold back and boldly proclaims that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ of God. He is God's Anointed One.

It is a very personal thing to declare who we believe Jesus to be. What we believe cannot be on the testimony of someone else; it has to come from within our own being and authenticated by our own personal experience. We can read volumes about Jesus and still not know him personally. We can take graduate degrees in theology and write books on his life, but if we don't have a personal relationship with Christ, we can't really know him. The question asked by Jesus is asked of all of us. Who is he?

Just as Peter didn't hesitate; neither should we. When Jesus says that the church will be built on this rock, it is a play on words. In the Greek, the name Peter is *Petros* and the word for rock is *Petra*. Peter's name in Aramaic, *Cephas*, also means rock. The catholic tradition has always held that Jesus intended for Peter and all his successors as bishop of Rome to be the head of the church. Protestants have insisted that it was on the strength of Peter's rock-like faith that church is built. The controversy has lasted down through the centuries with no resolution in sight. What is essential is that Jesus is the Christ and Peter is the first to affirm it. What was vital in the first century is equally important for us in the early 21st century. Jesus as the anointed one of God identifies with the human condition as one of us. He is our hope and strength.

I know some people are not comfortable talking about their faith. They may be self-conscious and don't want to be embarrassed. I have known those who were self-conscious about a Christian wedding or funeral because it might put off their friends. We must never apologize or equivocate about being a Christian. Jesus is far more than a person in history, far more than just a good man, a teacher or a prophet. He is the Anointed One of God and our personal Savior.

We have become overly sensitive about religious beliefs offending others. You can declare yourself a Christian without offending someone or being condescending about it.

If you were asked who you think Jesus is, what would you say? You could say what the Bible says about him. You could say what the church authorities and the New Testament scholars say about him. You could say that he is your favorite philosopher, except that Christianity isn't a philosophy, it is a faith. You could simply say that he is the Christ, the son of the living God and your personal Savior.

There is no need to equivocate about who Jesus is. It is he who makes sense of our lives. It is he who sustains us when there is no apparent reason or meaning in what is going on. I first learned to know Christ personally as a college student when I experienced what it means to forgive and to be forgiven personally. Christ makes forgiveness both real and personal. I would suspect that most of us find it easier to forgive others than to accept our own forgiveness. The experience of forgiveness in Christ makes it possible to live life joyfully, free from fear, doubt and uncertainty. Christ sets the example for understanding others. He sets the example of the virtue of humility. There is a difference between an egotist and a humble person. The egotist walks into a room and says, "Here I am!" while the humble person says, "There you are!"

Being a Christian means being able to love and respect others because we love and respect ourselves. When people disappoint us or let us down, we are reminded of our own frailty. Bringing out the best in each other makes us a whole people in an otherwise broken world.

Businessmen like to tell me that the church is really a business and that what each parish pays to the diocese is our franchise! The church is far more than a business, a building, a beautiful liturgy or a community organization. The church is all of us accepting each other unconditionally. When we have differences with each other, we learn to put the hurts behind us and get on with the important work of being instruments of healing. The Christian life is all about getting up and going on after we have fallen flat on our face. One of the greatest things I learned in marriage is that when I made a fool of myself I was still loved. The reality is that none of us is perfect and never will be, but we *are* forgiven.