

Pentecost XV; Proper 16a
 Mt 16.13-20; Is 51.1-6
 24 August 2008
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We've been reading, and some few of us preaching, our way through St. Matthew's gospel this summer, and this morning we've come to the hinge upon which the narrative turns – and does so as well in St. Mark's and St. Luke's gospels; they tell the story in much the same way. To put it simply, but not too simply, Matthew's gospel breaks down into two parts: the first is concerned with a matter of identity: *who Jesus is*; and the second is concerned with a matter of mission: *what he came to do*. Jesus will tell us in graphic terms what he came to do in next Sunday's Gospel lesson. So, this morning we come to the hinge, the climax of part 1; all that has been shown to us thus far – the strange circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth, the witness of John the Baptist, the controversies with the religious leaders, the parables, the miracles, and not least St. Matthew's continuing refrain – *these things happened so that the Scriptures might be fulfilled* – all of it has been leading up to this question that Jesus asks his disciples and you and me and all men and women everywhere at every time, this question of identity: *Who do you say that I am?*

Before considering the answer given to that question, I think we should take notice of the question itself. It is a personal – in fact, intensely personal, question. This is brought about by the fact that Jesus prefaces this all-important question with another: *Who do men say that the Son of Man is?* That is a question about which nice, polite, respectable people can have a nice, polite, respectable discussion, yet still remain aloof – above the question, still remain disinterested, still rest securely in nice, polite, respectability. It's as if in this silly season of our national life, someone were to ask you, who do you think will win the presidential election? That's a nice, safe question because it allows us to talk abstractly about what hypothetical other folks might or might not do three months from now. That's a conversation even George Bush and Al Gore can enjoy over dinner. But, who should win the election? – that's a different kind of question; that's a personal question.

Who do men say that the Son of Man is?, Jesus asks. Well, *some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets*. All of which registers not so much as a semi-interested “Huh” from our Lord. Because that question was a set up from the beginning. Lulling the disciples into a false sense of security with a purely academic question about the disparate thoughts of unspecified others, he now puts them directly on the spot: *But who do you say that I am?* Again, this is an intensely personal question. It is a question that requires much more than mere information in response; in fact, it requires from these disciples – in light of all they have seen and heard – a response that is classically “self-involving.”

I have a friend who walks early every morning to the Citadel Mall in West Ashley where he catches an express bus – I think it's the #9 bus – that takes him to his job at MUSC. Now, if I drive by the mall and see a bus departing, and I say “I think that was the #9 bus” – that's a minimally self-involving statement. I've got my own car, and I don't want to go to MUSC anyway. But if my friend runs breathlessly up to the parking lot at the mall and says, “I think that was the #9 bus” – that statement involves him. He has a personal stake in it, and his life is changed, if in a small way, by it.

When Jesus asks, *Who do you say that I am*, there is no neutral, safe, moderate answer to that question. But Simon Peter speaks up and involves himself: *Thou art the Christ, the son of the living God*. Thou art the Christ – think of all that is summed up in that brief answer, the millennia of God's promise and Israel's hope it contains. Thou art the Christ: the Anointed One, the Messiah of God; the seed of the woman who will crush the serpent's head; the prophet greater than Moses; great David's greater Son; the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly; offspring of the Virgin's womb; the Suffering Servant by whose stripes we are healed; the Branch from the root of Jesse; the Comfort of Zion (as we have heard this morning); the Lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world.

Thou art the Christ – the Father's appointed agent to bring healing to the nations, to break down every wall that

divides men; to put down the mighty from their seat and exalt the humble and meek.xi

Thou art the Christ – it is a momentous, startling confession. It is a self-involving confession, and beyond that it is a self-committing confession. We cannot say *Thou art the Christ* and have nothing change. We can't be like Sir Francis Drake who sailed all the way to California, planted a British flag and immediately sailed back to safety – and nothing changed. To acknowledge that Jesus is the Christ is to place oneself in his service, in his debt, at his feet. It is to commit.

It was a dangerous thing for Simon Peter to say – dangerous in the very literal sense of placing his and the other disciples' lives at risk. By confessing the Jesus is the Christ, Simon Peter is committing sedition. He is saying, "There is a King in Israel, and it's not Caesar, and it's certainly not Herod." And of course this is exactly the charge for which our Lord would be crucified. Because if Jesus is the Christ, then he is a rival to Caesar, and any rival to Caesar must be eliminated.xii

For Simon Peter to confess Jesus as Christ necessarily meant displacing Caesar. It's the same for us. If we confess that Jesus is the Christ, we are saying that every earthly authority and force – from the articles of the United States' Constitution to the dictates of the Politburo in Beijing, from the working of the free market to the demands of the class struggle to the eat-or-be-eaten biological imperative – every authority and force is relativized by and must be submitted to him. Right down to my own authority in and over my own home (I'm not the king of my own castle), my own bank account, my own time, my own body. All of that and more comes when we say with Peter, *Thou art the Christ*.

Who do you say that I am? It is an intensely personal question – our response, one way or the other, involves us; it commits us.

I have been saying that this question of Jesus' is personal, but looking at the text, there is a sense – maybe a pedantic sense – in which it is more personal even than I've let on. It is even more personal in that it specially, uniquely involves one particular person.

Jesus addresses his question to the disciples as a group – the "you" in "Who do you say that I am" is plural; it's "y'all" for people who talk right. But it is the single disciple hitherto known to his family and friends as "Simon" who responds, and over whom alone Jesus pronounces a special beatitude – "Blessed art thou, Simon bar-Jona" – and to whom Jesus gives a new and unique name and a new and unique vocation: *Thou art Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church*.

I'm sure most of you will remember from Sunday school classes that our English translations necessarily obscure what is happening here. This new name "Peter" is simply the masculine form for the Greek word "Rock" – *Petros*, and the same is true for the underlying Aramaic, *Kepha*. Did you know that this is the very first instance of "Peter" – "rock" – being used as a personal name in any language or culture? No one had ever been called Peter before.

Jesus is doing a new thing. He is founding a new institution that will prevail even against the powers of death. And he has chosen to build this church on the person he has dignified with the title "Rock", Peter – often unreliable Peter, not especially well educated Peter, vacillating Peter, fearful Peter, the simple fisherman Peter – who has nothing specially to commend himself except for this God-revealed insight, and perhaps the foolish impetuosity to say it aloud: *Thou art the Christ, the son of the living God*. And by saying it, by confessing it as the truth about the world, Pe-ter involves himself; Peter commits himself. And let me just add, just to crack open a can of worms and leave them to wriggle, that to acknowledge that Simon is Peter, the Rock on which Jesus builds his church, in a similar way must involve us and commit us to him, to Peter – to that Rock and to that Church.

Last Sunday Fr. Clarke remarked upon our discomfort with the questions our evangelical brothers and sisters are wont to ask: *Are you saved? Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus?* But he noted that despite our discomfort,

these are the most important questions and to answer them in the affirmative the urgent task of our lives. By showing up this morning we are faced with another: *Who do you say that I am?* For St. Peter, answering that question meant that everything had to change, nothing could remain the same, right down to his very name. What will it mean for you and for me? How must our lives be re-ordered today because Jesus is the Christ? In a moment Jesus will be on the Altar, he will place himself into our hands, and we will become involved, committed. *Thou art the Christ, the son of the living God.*

- i N.T. Wright makes use of these concepts of self-involving and self-committing statements with regard to the Resurrection of Jesus in his book *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (pp. 714-720). I also take the “late for the bus” illustration (and the following “Sir Francis Drake” illustration) from his discussion, though I really do have a friend who rides the express bus in to MUSC each morning.
- ii The Greek “Christ” (Χριστός) translates the Hebrew “Messiah” (ain’t got no Hebrew font), both of which mean “anointed (one)”.
- iii Gn 3.15
- iv From the hymn “Hail to the Lord’s Anointed,” paraphrasing Ps 72.
- v Ps 1
- vi Is 7.14
- vii Is 53.3-6
- viii Is 11.1,2
- ix Is 51.1-6
- x Jn 1.26,39
- xi Lk 1.46-55
- xii Mt 27.1-14; cf. Lk 23.1-5