

But Who Do You Say I Am? Sunday, 2/14/21

One thing we can say about the Apostle Peter is that he didn't do things half-way. He either got it right, or he really messed up, and he often flip-flopped back and forth. Today's Bible readings are classic examples. In our first reading, Peter hit the nail on the head when Jesus asked the disciples, "But who do you say I am?"¹ There were so many ways that Peter could have responded. "You are my Lord and master;" "You are my rabbi, my teacher;" "You are my friend;" "You are God's prophet." And any of those would have been true. But for once in his life, Peter, the same Peter who got so flustered upon the appearance of Moses and Elijah on the mount of transfiguration, now cut through the fog and went directly to the most significant truth of who Jesus is. "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."² Why is that important? And is it still important today?

Sometimes we hear names and titles ascribed to Jesus and, because they've become so familiar to us, we just use them as a mental shortcut for the name of "Jesus." When I say Messiah, your mind's eye sees Jesus. When I say, Son of God, your brain does a sort of autocorrect word replacement and gives you Jesus. And that's okay, except that the names and titles ascribed to Jesus were chosen for specific reasons, each offering us a chance to better understand the depth and breadth of the character of Jesus in new ways.

As I mentioned in the Early Word, Messiah and Christ mean the same thing: Anointed One. "Messiah" comes from a transliteration of a Hebrew word, the primary language used to write the Old Testament, and "Christ" comes an abbreviation of a transliteration of the Greek translation of that same Hebrew word. Many people are recorded as being anointed in the Bible, especially kings, and the Jewish expectation for a Messiah was that God would anoint a human king to deliver them from their political oppressors. What we translate into English as Messiah or Christ is reserved for THE anointed one of God. It's a singular title, and to call Jesus the Messiah or the Christ is to say that he and he alone is the one blessed and sent by God to overthrow the powers of evil in this world and to usher in a new Kingdom marked by justice and righteousness. Can you hear how those titles, Messiah and Christ, are loaded with power and potential? Who do you say Jesus is? Is Jesus the Messiah,

¹ Matthew 16:15. New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

² Matthew 16:16. Ibid.

the Christ?

The second part of Peter's reply adds a uniquely Christian twist to an old Jewish expectation. Rather than simply being a human agent for God on earth, Peter announces the startling confession that Jesus is none other than the Son of the Living God. Not "a" son, but "the" son. And not the son of just one of the many pagan gods offered in that day by the predominant cultures, but the son of "the" God, the one who is "living," the one and only true God. There's nothing metaphorical about Peter's choice of words here, as we know from the account of the Christmas story at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel. Jesus is the Son of the Living God, blessed and sent by his Father with the power and authority to give sight to the blind, make the lame walk, cure those with leprosy, give hearing to the deaf, raise the dead, and preach Good News to the poor.³ Can you see how these seemingly simple words turbocharged the title of Messiah? Jesus is not only the Messiah, the Christ, but also the Son of the Living God! That's what Peter said, but who do you say Jesus is?

If we say that Jesus was not the Messiah or the Son of the Living God, but was just a famous moral teacher, it makes him into just one of many historical teachers and it leaves us free to mix and match guidance for our moral choices at our whim. It changes our expectations from hope in the return of a divine conqueror of evil to relying entirely on human wisdom and the will of the crowds. It offers us all the control, at the cost of all the hope. In the words of C.S. Lewis, in *Mere Christianity*:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”⁴

If instead we use words like Peter's to declare the divine mission and identity of Jesus,

³ Matthew 11:5.

⁴ <https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/bible-study/why-does-jesus-ask-who-do-you-say-i-am.html>

but we don't shape our daily attitudes and actions to match, then we're not any better off than the Pharisees, because we're living what Jesus declared as hypocrisy. Unfortunately, that is part of the fallen human condition that we call sin, and none of us are immune from it no matter how strong our faith or how forceful our confessions. True to form, Peter himself demonstrated this problem for us in Matthew's Gospel, almost immediately after he managed to say the right words in our first account. I'm picking up the story in Matthew 16, starting just a few verses later in verse 21.

{Read Matthew 16:21-26 NLT}

Faith in Jesus can be relatively easy when it's convenient, but how often do we include our share in the cross when we confess that Jesus is the Christ? When there's something we need from God, then it's quite convenient to call upon Jesus and believe that he has the divine authority to grant our prayer. But when someone else needs something from us, and it's time for us to take up our crosses and follow Jesus, then isn't it more tempting to write off the teachings of Jesus as those of an extremist? When Jesus asked the disciples, "But who do you say I am?," he was really asking them, "Are you ready to go the distance with me? Are you ready to lay your life down in order to save it?" That's the tough question we all have to face. Just how deep and wide does our faith really extend. If faith without works is dead⁵, then how "alive" is our faith that Jesus really is the Son of the Living God? But Jesus never intended to leave us in perpetual confusion, a state of half-believing and half-doubting. So let's review some of the things Jesus affirmed about who he is.

Jesus affirmed his divinity very clearly when he said, "I tell you the truth, before Abraham was even born, I AM!"⁶ Jesus is eternal, not a passing fad. Jesus used the same words God did when answering Moses out of the burning bush, saying, "I am who I am" or "I will be who I will be."⁷ Do you say and believe that Jesus is the Son of the Living God?

Jesus called himself the Bread of Life.⁸ Do you believe that Jesus is the one you need each day to sustain your life, without which your strength will quickly fade and your

⁵ James 2:17

⁶ John 8:58. New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

⁷ Exodus 3:14

⁸ John 6:35

eyesight will swiftly dim to gray?

Jesus called himself the Light of the World.⁹ Do you believe that Jesus reveals the things you're most in need of finding, guiding your steps in dark places and showing you the difference between right and wrong, good and evil, love and hate?

Jesus called himself the Good Shepherd.¹⁰ Do you believe that Jesus has your best interests at heart, knowing that you need protection from evil and provision for the journey of life? Do you believe that Jesus will come looking for you when you get lost?

Jesus called himself the True Vine.¹¹ Do you believe that staying connected to Jesus is as necessary for your vitality as the water you drink and the air you breathe? Do you believe that all the fruitfulness in your life is entirely dependent on the spiritual food that Jesus provides?

And Jesus called himself the Resurrection and the Life.¹² Do you believe that to fully live in this world, you need the Spirit of Jesus to burn within? Do you believe that this life isn't the last one, but merely a prelude to a restored life in which we will be made whole and eternal?

It's easy to listen to other people talk about Jesus. Today, Jesus is asking each of us, "But who do you say I am?" If we really believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the anointed one; If we really believe that Jesus is the son of the Living God; If we really believe that Jesus is the Bread of Life, the Light of the World, the Good Shepherd, the True Vine, and the Resurrection and the Life; how does that compare with what we tell our friends, our neighbors, and our kids about Jesus? And even more crucially, how does that compare with the ways we spend our time and treat each other?

It's easy to get bogged down by the weight of guilt as we face the truth of our hypocrisy. That's not the way of Christ either. Instead, go to Jesus in prayer, each morning. Confess your shortcomings. Ask for greater conviction and strength of character. Yield your life to the power of the Spirit of Christ, who alone has the ability to make you a more

⁹ John 8:12

¹⁰ John 10:11

¹¹ John 15:1

¹² John 11:25

consistent doer of God's Word and a more faithful follower of Jesus. And then go, live out your faith one day at a time, one choice at a time, reflecting the love of the anointed one in all that you do.

Please take some time now to reflect on who you say Jesus is. How is that reflected in the way you live your life? If you like, you can share a comment or a prayer.



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