

Matthew 16: 13-20
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Nogales, AZ

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August 21, 2011

Who is Jesus? Today our gospel features Peter, and portrays a central tuning-point in the life of Jesus with his disciples. Peter apparently catches on to who Jesus really is. From then on Jesus spends more time with the private instruction of his intimate followers, and attempts to prepare them for his coming suffering and death.

Who is Jesus? Jesus seems to figure still in the life of our country. I still see some cars with those fish symbols on them. Maybe not quite so many as I saw in Atlanta! I like the ones with the legs - some of them labeled Darwin. There are also bumper stickers about Jesus around. One of them says, "Jesus is the Answer." When I see that I am tempted to respond with the old saw, "What is the question?"

As we go through life we learn that Jesus is lots of things to lots of people. Just as the disciples reported on what people were saying about him at that time: Some say he is John the Baptist or one of the great prophets - Elijah or Jeremiah come back to earth. As we listen, we hear people saying all kinds of things about Jesus. He is the answer. He is the greatest teacher, a teacher of wisdom. He is the greatest prophet. He is "sweet Jesus," the lover of my soul. He is the radical lover of the poor, judge of the rich. He is the demanding and stern Judge of the world - the Jesus of the Middle Ages. He is the founder of the Christian movement, the Church. He is the living spirit of the Church. He is God incarnated in a human being. He is a spirit person. He is like me, yet not like me. He is my Savior. He is irrelevant. He is boring. He is disturbing. I don't know who he is.

Today the Gospel features Peter's "Confession" as to who Jesus is, and as I said, apparently Peter got it right on this occasion. But we are reminded of another later occasion when Peter blew it in a big way.

You remember the scene. Peter was sitting outside in the high priest's courtyard while Jesus was inside being interrogated. A maid servant came up and asked him if it wasn't true that he was a follower of this man who was at the root of all the trouble. Then Peter said, "I do not know the man." It was Peter's denial, of course: I do not even know who he is. It was the denial Jesus himself had predicted, and a the cock raised his beak into the air and crowed,

just as Jesus had foretold. But it was something else too. It was a denial, but it was also the truth. Peter really did not know who Jesus was, did not really know, and neither do any of us really know who Jesus is either. Beyond all we can find to say about him and believe about him, he remains always beyond our grasp, except maybe once in a while we touch the hem of his garment.

Maybe this is partly why we are reticent to speak to others about Jesus. I'd like to think that. We Episcopalians in particular, I think, find it difficult to witness verbally to our faith. We are kind of tongue-tied. Part of it is that there is not just one Jesus to talk about. We hear the word "Jesus" and it immediately gets shunted into some category, depending on what the person's experience is.

But here we are in church on this late summer morning, and he presses us, Never mind those others; who do YOU say that I am? Just as he did to Peter.

Peter replies, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. Christ - Messiah - the Anointed One" - the One who is to come, to make all things right. We have become so used to that term, the Christ. It's like his last name to us: Jesus Christ. It doesn't convey to us the power with which it must have hit the disciples when they first heard it from Peter's lips. Out of a whole cultural expectation came this loaded word, the Christ. To a downtrodden people, hope. But to us, no, is is a well-worn coin, that word "Christ" - with his visage very faint.

But he still asks you, in terms of your life, your world, "Who do you say that I am?"

I can pass on to you five suggestions regarding talking about Jesus:

1) Share your uncertainties about Jesus, if you have them, as most of us do. Be honest. Do not pretend to a certainty you do not have. It is OK to doubt. After all, Peter did.

2) Share your own experiences. All of us have had experiences in life that have touched us more or less deeply. We may or may not put religious words on those experiences. (Incidentally, there is no such thing as a Christian experience - there is experience on which we may put a Christian interpretation.) I can think of an Epiphany of God I had in a meadow, with the Glory of God just radiating in the tall grass - being in God's wonderful world, that to me has something to do with Jesus - or the precious good humor and

support of friends that lightened a tough time and put it in perspective - being in that community of the Church - or that occasion when taking communion transforms me and I know that I am cherished by a love greater than anything in this world - or in prayer sometimes the doors of heaven are opened, really opened, and there is that depth of being in which I rest. Share your own experiences, whatever they may be for you. Maybe a passion about something you want to do in life. A passion can be a rock on which Jesus builds.

3) Get to know Jesus in all four gospels. Over the ages, reading his life has been one of the best, most constant ways people have come to know him. One of the ways you can do this is to read Forward Day by Day including the gospel selections therein, from the daily lectionary of the Church.

4) Learn to listen a lot. Check your own experience with what others are saying about him. I remember my Dad, with whom I did not talk religion a lot, saying to me, "I keep coming back to Jesus as somehow the key to life. He shows us in his words and in his life the truest things about who we are and about who God is." I could tell he really meant this. I could not understand it fully, but it impressed me. I checked it in the back of my mind to bring it out and look at it later as I had more experience in life. I have been reading his writings now. He was a teacher of comparative religion in a college and traveled in places like China, India and Arabia in his early days and had interesting conversations as a Christian with adherents of other religions. Listen to some authors. I personally found Marcus Borg's little book that came out a few years ago, Meeting Jesus again for the First Time, very helpful.

5) Finally, if you are uncomfortable talking about Jesus, share that too. He can take it. Honesty is so important as we relate to Him.

When all is said about Jesus, there is much to be done. Beyond talk, there is action that tells what we think of Jesus: how we live and relate to others. All through history the most powerful tool of evangelism has been not words, but example. How a life is lived.

This kind of living comes out of a relationship with Jesus that grows and it kind of marinates our life. It is not a belief about Jesus but a belief in the sense of giving one's heart to, for that is at the deepest level what believing means. Not believing doctrines about Jesus, but giving one's heart, one's self at the deepest level to the Jesus who is the living Lord, the side of God turned towards us, the face of God, the Spirit of God.

Marcus Borg ends his little book with these words: “Believing in Jesus in the sense of giving one’s heart to Jesus is the movement from second hand religion to first hand religion, from having heard about Jesus with the hearing of the ear to being in relationship with the Spirit of Christ.”

For ultimately, Jesus is not simply a figure of the past, but a figure of the present. Meeting that Jesus - the living Jesus who comes to us even now - will be like meeting Jesus again for the first time.

As I said earlier, there is mystery about Jesus, and we can just at times grasp the hem of his garment. But we know he is good, and healing power comes from him. We can love him. We can learn from him. But we can come to know him only by following him - by searching for him in his church, in his gospels, and in each other.

Following him is finally the best way - the most challenging way - but finally really the only way of responding to the question of Jesus, And who do you say that I am? And that, my friends, is a job of a lifetime.

Let us continue this journey today, with him, following him, through the pain and joy of being a disciple. Along with Peter and all the other disciples, down through the ages, let us follow Him.