

## "Who Do You Say That I am?"

A sermon preached by The Rev. Susan Crampton on August 24, 2008

Three clergy \_\_ a Lutheran, a Catholic and an Episcopalian \_\_\_ ended up at the Pearly Gates one day. It was St. Peter's day off, so Jesus was administering the entrance exam that day. "The question is simple," he said. "Who do you say that I am?"

The Lutheran stepped forward and began, "The Bible says. . ." but Jesus interrupted and said, "I don't care what the Bible says: who do you say that I am?" The Lutheran said, "I don't know," and fell through the trap door to that other place.

The Catholic stepped forward next and began, " The Pope says. . ." but Jesus interrupted him and said, "I don't care what the Pope says: who do you say that I am?" "I'm not sure," said the Catholic and promptly fell through the trap door that other place.

Finally, Jesus turned to the Episcopalian and asked, "Who do you say that I am?" The Episcopalian replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!" The Jesus smiled and gestured to the Pearly Gates to be opened, the Episcopalian continued, "but on the other hand . . ."

Joking aside, the question of Jesus' identity is a critical one, perhaps, more critical today than at any time in human history.

We live in a postmodern age colored by the enlightenment and pluralism. The enlightenment taught us that in order to be "real" stories have to be literally true and biblical scholarship has caused us to question important biblical stories. In recent years any number of books debunking religion have made the best seller list: The End of Faith by Sam Harris, The God Delusion by Richard Dawkins etc. We're also more and more aware of other world religions with other stories. How, then, are we to understand the unique claims of Christ and put our whole trust in him?

To begin let us look at the dialogue between Jesus and his disciples in this morning's gospel lesson. Here Jesus puts the question of his identity squarely before the disciples. It is not enough to say what others are saying about him. "Who do you say that I am?" Jesus asks. Simon Peter makes the

confession. "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God". Jesus' answer surprises us. "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven." In other words, faith in Jesus as the Christ is a gift from God to Simon Peter and, I believe, it is a gift to you and to me. It cannot be earned, but it must be accepted and lived. After his confession, Peter still had a lot of learn. Like Peter we grow in the knowledge and love of Christ as we partner with Christ in living out our faith not superficially but with our whole heart.

For many of us this is a lifelong process of stops and starts. If you are feeling in need of a fresh start this morning, here are three steps to begin.

The first may be the hardest. Repent! That's right, repent. Repent is a word along with sin, which has pretty well gone out of our vocabulary in this postmodern world. Certainly, it's not very fashionable. Yet, as Christians, there is no getting around it.

In the gospels, John the Baptist prepares people for Christ's coming by urging them to repent and Jesus begins his ministry addressing the crowds saying, "Repent for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand." Why begin with repentance? The answer is clear. We need to repent because we are all too inclined to believe that we are in no need of a savior.

As Pastor Timothy Keller writes in The Reason For God, "The repentance that really changes your heart and your relationship with God begins when you recognize that your main sin, the sin under the rest of your sins, is your self-salvation project. . . in both our bad deeds and our good deeds we are seeking to be our own Saviors and Lords. We have alternative trusts and "gods", even though we do not call them that. We try to prove ourselves by our moral goodness or through achievement or family or career. Even diligent involvement in church and religion may need to be repented of once we understand that it was all a way to put God and others in our debt."

The second thing we must do in making a deeper commitment to Christ is related to the first. We must believe Jesus is who he said he was and put our whole trust in him. That seems obvious, but it is a tall order for some of us who may feel like the Episcopalian in the joke. We believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God on the one hand, but on the other hand there are times when living in our highly secular culture fuels our misgivings.

It is in such times that the faith of others in Christian community can be of help. Here is an example of such a faith that may surprise you. It's taken from an interview with Bono the lead singer in the rock group U2.

Interviewer: "Christ has his rank among the world's great thinkers. But Son of God, isn't that far-fetched?"

Bono: "No it's not far-fetched to me. Look, the secular response to the Christ story always goes like this: He was a great prophet, obviously a very interesting guy, had a lot to say along the lines of other great prophets, be they Elijah, Muhammad, Buddha or Confucius. But actually Christ doesn't allow you that. He doesn't let you off that hook,

Christ says, No. I am not saying I'm a teacher, don't call be a teacher. I'm not saying I'm a prophet. I'm saying: "I'm the Messiah." I'm saying: "I am God incarnate."

And people say: No, no, please, just be a prophet. A prophet we can take. You are a bit eccentric. We've had John the Baptist eating locusts and wild honey, we can handle that. But don't mention the "M" word! Because you know we're gonna have to crucify you.

And he goes: No, no, I know you are expecting me to come back with an army and set you free from these creeps, but actually I am the Messiah. At this point, everyone starts staring at their shoes, and says: Oh, my god, he's gonna keep saying this.

So what we're left with is either Christ was who he said he was \_\_\_\_ the Messiah\_\_\_\_ or a complete nutcase. . . .The idea that the entire course of civilization for over half the globe could have its fate changed and turned upside down by a nutcase, for me that's far-fetched. . .

Bono's faith in Jesus Christ was news to me, but I was aware of his work internationally on issues of peace and justice. Christians are people who let the reality of Jesus change everything about who they are, how they see and how they live.

So repentance and faith are the first steps in living out our commitment to Christ. The third is a way to practice the first two.

We participate in Christian community.

This morning's lesson from Paul's letter to the Romans speaks of the need for corporate worship.

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God \_\_\_what is good and acceptable and perfect. . ."

Perhaps, you have never thought of yourself as a "living sacrifice". Yet, in the words of the BCP we come here not for "solace only, but for strength, not for pardon only, but renewal . " In others words, we come here not merely to be comforted, but to be changed. As Paul says, we worship together so that our minds may not be conformed to the manners and mores of this world, but rather be "transformed" so that we may discern "what is good and acceptable and perfect" in God's sight."

Paul then reminds us of the unity we share in Christ, "we who are many are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another."

As diverse as we are, we gather at the Lord's table as "One Body" and from there we are sent into the world to do Christ's work in bringing in God's new creation, the kingdom of heaven.

We've heard it so often, we may not appreciate the depth and the power of our mission. Each of us has a part, a unique part, in God's great plan of salvation for the whole earth. Who would know that as a result of our coming here we and the world around us will never be quite the same again?

Who do we say that Jesus is?

In the midst of our fears and hesitations who draws us to God's reconciling love breaking into the world in often small, seemingly insignificant ways that is the source of our future hope and promise?

Who draws us with courage and hopefulness even in our pain and struggles to dare to come again to the holy table and to a special presence with each other in prayer?

Who calls us to return to our homes and communities to witness in word and deed to the hope that is in us? If it is Jesus, then who do we say that he is? I say with Peter, "He is the Christ, the Son of the Living God." What about you? Who do you say Jesus is?