

WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?

Pentecost 12 Year A

Ex. 1:8-2:10; Ps. 124; Rom. 12:1-8; Mt. 16:13-20

upload only 23/08/2020

One of the idiosyncrasies of the English language is that while it holds perhaps one of the greatest vocabularies of any language, it can also be extremely imprecise and misleading. As you know, the English language has borrowed all of its grammar and vocabulary from just about every other main language or dialect in the world—from Latin to French, Greek to German, gobbledygook to gibberish.

As one writer notes: “Not only does the English Language borrow words from other languages, it sometimes chases them down dark alleys, hits them over the head, and goes through their pockets” (Eddy Peters).

Take, for instance, the English word, “you.” If I were to look someone in the eye and say something like, “I want you to see me after the service,” there would be no doubt in anyone’s mind about whom I was referring to—and if I said it like that, you would want to start feeling guilty...about now. But if, in the context of my sermon, I was to say something like, “You need to spend more time reading the Bible,” you would probably understand that I was not just addressing one individual but the entire congregation. The word “you” is the same in both contexts but is easily distinguishable so there is little confusion. There are, however, situations where the distinction is less precise.

When it comes to translating the Scriptures from the original Greek or Hebrew into English, scholars have to decide how best to use English words to give the best sense of the original language. When no such distinctives are available, the work of the translator becomes more difficult.

We find one of these language difficulties in today’s reading from Matthew’s account of the gospel—and it concerns the use of the word ‘you.’ When Jesus says to Peter, “**Who do you say that I am?**” the tendency is to think Jesus is addressing Peter alone. We get this notion from the fact that it is only Peter who verbally responds to the question.

The word “you” in Jesus question, however, is not the singular form of the word, it is the plural form of the word. You see, in Greek, the words are different and the plural aspect of the question is clear. In English, however, it is less clear.

So, since the word “you” in the Greek here is plural, it that means that Jesus is not asking who *Peter* thinks Jesus is. He is asking who *all the disciples* think Jesus is. In other words, Jesus’ question is to *all* of them, and Peter’s answer represents the answer of all of them, and not only all of them then...but the whole church then and today. Peter’s confession of faith is the church’s confession of faith. Indeed, it is *our* confession of faith. When we, as individuals, confess that Jesus is the Messiah, we are not speaking on our own account, we are, in fact, confessing what the church says who Jesus is.

Now, some may see that as pedantics—a play on words—or maybe just theological gobbledygook—but that is not the case. As Christians we need to understand the difference.

There are two aspects to this question that Jesus poses to his disciples, that I want to address this morning.

- First, what does it mean for the church to confess corporately who Jesus is, and
- Second, what does it mean for us as individuals to confess who Jesus is?

You are no doubt aware that the church, today, is undergoing a terrible assault from a number of quarters. The Christian church, as a whole, is having to address all kinds of social and religious pressures to conform the church's distinctive beliefs into fitting in with the thinking of contemporary society.

A few years ago, I came across a sermon on this text by another minister. This minister began her sermon on our text for today by addressing the doubts that we all have from time to time concerning our faith. (a good place to start, I thought) She confessed that there was a time when she, herself, had, in fact, been influenced by the world around her and had subsequently lost her faith completely. (Well, I suppose it can happen to the best of us) She said that she had reached the point where she didn't believe in God and the concept of God held no relevance for her life. (pretty normal for our society, I suppose). She said that she lived this way for some time until she realised that that there really was a God (Aha! things are looking up)—and that this god was the god within her (then I thought, what?!)—the same god that, according to her, is within all of us. (Now wait a minute, what is she trying to say here?).

Jesus, she says, was a man who was so in touch with this inner god, that he could be considered as both human and divine. She went on to elaborate on the potential that we *all* have, to achieve great things, when we can learn to tap in, as it were, to this inner god or power. (Now I don't know about you, but it all sounds a bit New Agey to me.) For a sermon that seemed to start really well, by the end, it had fallen in a heap on the floor.

Now, before I go on, I want to make one thing quite clear. And that is, that this woman's understanding of who God is and *her* confession of who Jesus is for her, is *not* the same as what Paul says in Matthew's account of gospel. Nor is her confession of who Jesus is, the same as what the church says about who Jesus is. This minister has, I believe, become a victim of the very compromise of the church's beliefs that I mentioned.

Another aspect of what is essentially the same mind-set is the idea of religious pluralism that many quarters of the church are embracing with passion, which says that all religions basically believe in the same God, but understand God in different ways. It's an attempt to try to find common ground for faith and spirituality—to create dialogue with people of other faiths.

Now, that's a fairly noble goal I agree and we *should* be in dialogue with people of other faiths for all sorts of reasons. However, at the end of the day, what it actually does is insult *everyone's* faith, including our own, because it attempts to bring belief in God and the dynamic of the faith down to its lowest common denominator—and I don't believe you can do that with any degree of success. It ends up excluding the very distinctive characteristics of not only other people's faiths, but, more importantly, the Christian faith as well.

What first appears as graciousness towards other faiths—suggesting that we're all heading in the same direction after all—is actually the height of arrogance. It's saying that another person's beliefs are really unimportant and insignificant. It fails to take into consideration that a person's religious belief is, for many, the most important thing in his or her life. Look at the number of wars that religious beliefs have caused. You see, every religion has its own distinctive characteristics. And Christianity—which stands apart from all the others—is defined by its distinctive understanding of who we believe Jesus to be. To say that that aspect of our faith is unimportant is to deny what the church has said about Jesus for the past 2000 years. It is to deny the confession of the church and its precursor, Peter's confession of faith.

In these examples, Jesus is reduced to being merely a prophet—a religious idea or ideal—a moral advocate. Faith becomes just a pious platitude to promote happiness and well-being—and unfortunately, this is where many liberal Christian theologians have gone.

But when Peter confessed of Jesus, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God," he was saying something very different to this. Jesus is not the embodiment of some vaguely religious emotions and pious platitudes. He is not just a moral advocate whom we should emulate in our lives. He is Jesus, the Christ—someone who lived, spoke, and died in a very specific way—who claimed to be an image of the God the Father, incarnate in human flesh. It was possible to get him wrong, as Matthew's account of the conversation demonstrates.

Remember Jesus began by asking what everybody else said about him. He was widely recognized among the people as a mighty man of God, even being compared with the greatest of the prophets, John the Baptist, Elijah, and Jeremiah. But everything nice that people said of Jesus—such as "He's a great prophet, a wonderful teacher of wisdom, a fine moral example"—was not accepted by Jesus as truthfully describing who he was.

Then Jesus asks his disciples, "But who do *you* say that I am."

And when Peter makes this stunning confession, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God," Jesus doesn't say to Peter, "Great! Now you have got the point, go out and arm wrestle everyone else into seeing things the way you now see them."

Jesus says instead, “Blessed are you, Simon! Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.” In other words, Peter, you believe in me, not as a personal intellectual achievement—but rather as a gift—a gift of grace, in which there is no place for smugness or self-righteousness.

No-one comes to that kind of answer that Peter gave, through intellectual achievement or Bible bashing. You don’t come to it through being born into a Christian family. You don’t come to it through reading books or studying theology. You don’t come to it through getting in touch with your inner feelings. Rather, it comes to you—and to the church—as a gift from God.

What does that mean then, both for us and for the church? It means that we do not have the option of making up for ourselves who or what we think Jesus is. Who Jesus is, is not a subject to be debated but a truth to be believed. And whenever we revert to socialising the gospel, or reinterpreting what the church believes in order to have it fit in with some personal or societal belief, we have totally lost the plot—we have stepped outside of the church’s confession of who Jesus is and into the world of heresy.

You know, it’s quite easy to determine where people, or organisations or other religious groups stand in relation to the Christian faith—not in order to judge them—we’ll leave that up to God. Simply ask them who they think Jesus is. Who is Jesus for you?—for your organisation?—for your religious group?—for you personally? And how should that answer determine how you live your life? The point is not what others believe. Jesus asked what others believe, but then, quite quickly, he moves to the heart of the matter. “Who do *you* say that I am?” That’s the question.

Is Jesus just someone you revere as—in idiomatic Australian—a great bloke. Is he idolised simply as a great prophet or a moral example that we should attempt to emulate—or is he truly, for you, the Messiah, the Son of the living God? But remember—whatever *you personally* believe, it doesn’t change the truth of who Jesus is.

The ultimate fate of others who do not confess what the church confesses regarding Christ, is a matter between them and God. Your greatest concern is not, “What about them?” Your concern should be, “What about me? What do I say about Jesus? How does *my* life—in the way I go about the world, in the way I relate to others, in the words that I use—how does *my* life demonstrate that Jesus really is the Christ, the Son of the living God?” Who is Jesus for you?

To him be all glory, honour, majesty and power. Amen.