

Sermon, Proper 16 A
St. Stephen's Church, Providence
August 23rd, 2020

"But who do you say that I am?"

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

"Who do you say that I am?" Jesus asks his disciples today.

"Who am I?"

They know who he is, of course – he's Jesus of Nazareth;

but who is he, really?

it's an ontological question.

Who is Jesus?

And the answer to that question has a lot riding on it.

How we answer that question defines who **we** are.

It is the question that has shaped, divided, and re-shaped the church
over the centuries.

Who is Jesus?

He is a prophet? Is he just a man?

Is he somehow divine?

If so, how is he divine?

Is he both divine and human?

If so, what does that mean?

How do we understand that?

You see what I mean now –

there was a lot to figure out when it came to understanding Jesus's identity.

And how we answer Jesus's own question,

"Who do you say that I am?" is vitally important.

But of course,

Jesus was not concerned with semantics and arguments between theologians

when he posed this question to the disciples.

Rather,

after spending quite some time with them,

he was really asking if they had figured out who he was:

God Incarnate, Man Divine:

the one foretold by the Scriptures.

The rod of Jesse – the Son of Man –

the Living Water – the Bread of Heaven –

or as Peter confesses today in our Gospel reading,

"The Christ," the Son of the Living God.

What a radical confession that was.

But lest we imagine Peter saying it with awe and fear and trembling,
we would do well to remember that Peter is actually always a bit impulsive
in the Gospels.

He cuts off the ear of the soldier when they come to arrest Jesus.

He also leaps into the water with his clothes on when he sees the risen Jesus
standing on the shore.

He also ends denies Jesus three times.

But on this Rock, Jesus builds the foundation of his Church.

Peter's ability to confess Jesus as the Christ, despite his many flaws
should encourage all of us, imperfect as we all are.

God can still use us, and work through us,
as we together work to build up the kingdom of God.

Though we are imperfect,
we are, by the mercies of God, as St. Paul writes,
to present ourselves a living sacrifice,
holy and acceptable to God.

We are not to be conformed to this world,
but transformed by our participation in the life of God –
through prayer and discipleship, and participation in the Body of Christ,

which is the Church, and of which Christ is the head.

Paul, as always, has a great deal to say about the Christian community as the Body of Christ.

This morning, we heard him urge us not to think more highly of ourselves than we ought to.

In other words, he encourages us to have humility,
and to be humble with one another,
and to remember that we all bring different gifts to the table.

Like the human body,
we all have different functions,
and yet we are interconnected – dependent on one another.

As I begin my time as Rector of St. Stephen's,
and particularly as we take steps in the coming months
to resume worship and parish life when the pandemic comes to an end,
it will be important for us to remember to be humble with one another.

As we seek to engage in ministry and building up the kingdom of God,
here in our little corner of God's earth,
we will need to consider what our various gifts are –

what our strengths are.

As I get to know you, and start to learn of your interests and passions,

I hope you will also be doing the work of discerning your own talents.

Maybe there is something you'd like to do that you've not done before,
and which the Spirit is nudging you to consider.

As we look ahead to the coming months,

I must say that what the past few months have taught me

is not to plan too far in advance,

and to be nimble and adaptable as circumstances and information change.

But whatever befalls us, whatever comes our way,

as long as we stay grounded in Christ,

and remember that he is our spiritual head,

then we cannot go wrong.

Jesus is our Living Head – he is here, even now, sacramentally.

As I mentioned in my letter in the e-news on Friday,

how we answer Jesus's question "Who do you say that I am?"

informs very much how we worship here at S. Stephen's.

There are those, who, despite their good intentions,

really miss the point about Jesus when they say

it doesn't really matter what you believe as long as you just do nice things;
or they'll say that "Jesus really just taught us to love,"
and it doesn't really matter if he was nothing more than a nice guy –
a wise rabbi.

Today's Gospel reading reminds us that in fact it does matter who Jesus is.

In fact, though I'm sure he was a nice guy, there's far more to Jesus than that.

The New Testament writers really weren't too concerned with Jesus
just going around teaching.

Their central argument is that he was the Son of God,
and that he died, and was raised from death, and that he is Lord of all.

That is the central confession of the early Church.

So in fact it does matter how we understand Jesus:

as redeemer of the world,

an atonement for our sins,

the author of our salvation.

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He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

He is the cornerstone, the sure foundation,

living water and living bread.

He is Resurrection, and the Light of the World.

Because he is eternally present,

not relegated to a distant past two thousand years ago in Palestine,

he is here even now in our very midst.

He dwells within you and me,

but also especially within the Sacrament which he left to us,

and which we venerate and revere.

And so here at S. Stephen's,

we are acutely aware that when we enter into our worship,

and come into the presence of the Blessed Sacrament,

we are not just stepping into a building,

but rather we are approaching the divine presence.

We enter into the Real Presence of Our Lord,

who has promised to be with us always, unto the end of the ages;

and who today reminds us that the powers of death shall not prevail

against the Church, and upon the rock of its foundation,

which is the sure confession of its true and living faith:

"Thou art the Christ, O Lord."

Amen.