

Sermon for Proper 16A

The Text: Matthew 16:13-20

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Stories that feature a person with an unknown identity seem to be quite popular. We might think of Batman, Spiderman, Superman, Zorro, and the Lone Ranger. The other characters in those stories are left to wonder, 'Who is that masked man?'

Even though Jesus didn't wear a mask, his identity was often in question. For example, when Jesus was arrested and put on trial, one of the problems for his accusers was to try and work out who Jesus was. Herod, Pilate and the religious leaders all knew that Jesus was the man called Jesus of Nazareth, who went around teaching and healing. But who was he really? They saw him as a threat, a blasphemer, a law-breaker, a pretend king.

As we heard in the gospel lesson, at one time Jesus himself had asked his disciples what people were saying about him. 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' he asked them. There were a lot of answers to that question. The disciples reported that people were saying that he was John the Baptist, or Elijah, or Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. It seems that the people noticed that Jesus was some kind of godly person.

Then Jesus made the question personal. It was no longer about what others might think. He said to his disciples, 'But who do you say that I am?' As we heard, Peter answered with his confession, answering for them all, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' Peter answered for all Christians really. The church believes and teaches that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. However, the question is also personal for each one of us. 'Who do you yourself believe and say that he is?'

This question about who Jesus is can never really go unanswered. Even if people avoid answering or refuse to answer, then that is also in fact an answer to the question. People might want to leave their options open or offer a variety of different alternatives, but ultimately the question comes down to this: Is Jesus the Son of God or not? That's a decisive question for the Christian faith. Is Jesus my Lord or not?

The world has no shortage of different ideas about who Jesus is. Some might only see Jesus as a godly man, a good man, a good teacher, a good guide for a morally upstanding life. For them, Jesus existed in the past to show people the way they should live. This is a weakness with the 'What would Jesus do?' approach to life choices. In that approach Jesus can be regarded as an example in the past, rather than known as the Lord who lives with us now and calls us to trust him and follow him. A Jesus who is left in the past can't bring us into a living relationship with God, where

we are forgiven and set free to serve. Then the Christian faith stops being life and salvation, and becomes another moralistic way of living, coloured by guilt or pride.

Who do you say that I am? asks Jesus.

Another fairly popular idea is to see Jesus as the supplier of our needs. He becomes the supplier of perceived needs, someone who will keep us comfortable and our stomachs full. When Jesus fed the crowds, they wanted to make him king. They saw Jesus as someone who would solve their problems, perhaps freeing them from the Romans, feeding them and keeping them happy. Today, some people see Jesus in a similar way. They turn to him with their wants. They think that his main role is to keep them happy and comfortable, supplying the new house they want, or the new job which would let them know that they enjoy God's favour. That's not a living faith, a living relationship with God, and is really an outpouring of selfish human whims and desires.

Who do you say that I am? asks Jesus. There is indeed no shortage of wrong answers to that question.

It was Peter who answered for the other disciples, for the church and for us. We say, with Peter, Jesus, you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Jesus told Peter that his answer was the work of God. God the Father had revealed the true nature of Jesus to him. It always was and is God's work to create faith. This is what God continually does in the church. God brings us to faith in Jesus, letting us trust him and confess him as God's Son, the Saviour he has sent us.

The name Peter means rock. This was the name Jesus gave to Simon, the son of John. Jesus cleverly used that name for emphasis. Jesus declared that he would build his church on the God given faith articulated by Peter. This God given faith is a solid foundation. Not even death will stand against the church. That's because the church isn't built on a fallible human, like rocky Peter. No, the church is built on the One whom Peter confessed. There is one foundation upon which the church is built by God. That foundation is the Crucified Jesus, God's Son, who lovingly gave His life away so that the world might be drawn from death into life with God forever.

Jesus promised to build his church solidly and securely. Jesus promised Peter that he would be given the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus was promising that the doors of heaven and hell would be unlocked and thrown open for people through the proclamation of Jesus the Saviour. We live in that promise. We can all declare Christ's forgiving presence to each other, showing one another the open doors of heaven. The presence of the living Lord Jesus forgives sin and throws open the doors of heaven.

We are invited to live in Jesus' promises, and his question is in the present tense for us: "Who do you say that I am?"

God's Spirit has shown us that Jesus is God's Son, our Saviour. God's Spirit moves us to joyfully declare to one another that Jesus is with us, that he forgives sin, that he has smashed open the prison of death and that he has thrown open the gates of heaven. Yet the disciples were sternly ordered not to tell anyone that Jesus was the Messiah. That might confuse us at first.

The difference, between us now and the disciples then, is that Jesus has died and risen again. The danger then was that if the disciples said that Jesus was the Messiah, then the people would want him to be the Messiah of their expectations. It finally became clear what sort of Messiah Jesus is when he willingly allowed himself to be killed in order to save the world. Once sin and death had been defeated, then Jesus sent the disciples out with the promise of his eternal presence.

Who do you say Jesus is? Luther gives us a good simple answer in the Small Catechism. "I believe that Jesus Christ is my Lord. He is truly God – he has always been the Son of the Father. He is also a real human being, the Virgin Mary's son. Jesus rescued me when I was lost and sentenced to death. He set me free from all my sins, from death, and from the power of the devil. It cost him more than gold or silver; it cost him his life. Even though he was holy and innocent, he suffered and died for me. Jesus did this so that I can belong to him, and he can rule over me as my king. I can live under him and serve him, innocent and happy forever, just as he was raised to life, and lives and rules forever. This is certainly true." (Second part of the Apostles' Creed.)

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.