

Who Do People Say That I AM?

SERMON TEXT: Matthew 16:13-20 (cf. Mark 8:27-38 and Luke 9:18-20)

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Dearly beloved in the Lord, our sermon's text for this morning is taken from our Gospel Lesson.

Let us pray...

O Heavenly Father, You have revealed to us what mere flesh and blood could never fully see: You've shown us Your Christ, Your Son who came to save us from our sins. By Your Holy Spirit, You have drawn us as a people around the person and work of Jesus. By Your Holy Spirit, You make Your Word open to us and we hear Your promised pardon. O Lord, prepare our hearts anew that we may, yet again, receive Your Word's revelation, amidst this world's vain speculation. Touch my lips, O Lord, my God, that I might confess with clarity the salvific truth concerning Your Christ. Amen.

“Who do people say that I am?” Jesus asked that question of His disciples almost two millennia ago. The answers that were given were greatly varied. “Who do people say that I am?” Jesus could ask that question of us as His disciples today. The answers given would still greatly vary. “Who do people say that I am?” The answer mattered as much back then as it does today. The answer matters because all of history hinges upon the identity of this man from Nazareth because of the claims that He made concerning Himself and because of the proclamation of those who corroborated His claims to be true. Let's face the facts, if this man is indeed who He said He is and who His earliest followers professed Him to be— if He is who we, those who followed thereafter, also confess Him to be, in keeping with our earliest creeds—

then what transpired two millennia ago ought to matter to every soul that has ever lived before His day, lived during His day, lives in our own day, and will one day live during the days remaining until the Last Day. This man from Nazareth's testimony was that all of the prophetic writings of the ancient Hebrew's sacred texts testified about Him and His coming. This man from Nazareth's coming was accompanied by both fulfilled prophecy and the demonstration of miraculous signs. This man from Nazareth's miracles demonstrated unparalleled authority in the exercise of exclusively Divine prerogatives. This man from Nazareth's unparalleled claim was no less than that of Divinity. This man from Nazareth claimed to be God.

“Who do people say that I am?” The answers were quite diverse. “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” Elijah wasn't necessarily a bad answer. After all, Elijah, the prophet, was taken up to heaven without dying, and was announced by the prophet Malachi as being destined to return before the appearance of Israel's Messiah. Clearly, those who thought that way rightly surmised that the consummation of God's plan of promise was drawing near. Along the same lines there were those who opined that He was the prophet Jeremiah, who was, according to Jewish tradition, expected to come as a precursor to the coming of the Messiah. They took their cue from clues found among popular extra-Biblical writings that claimed Jeremiah would come back from the dead to reveal the tabernacle, ark, and the altar of incense, which, according to legend, as recorded in 2 Maccabees, he had supposedly hidden in Mount Nebo, “until the time that God gathers his people together again, and receives them unto mercy.” Others, recognizing that Jesus' ministry was of major significance, looked at Him as possibly being one of the other honoured prophets from the past, come back to prepare the way for the coming of God's Christ. It's interesting to

note how they saw Him as noteworthy, yet they were unable to make Him out to be the Messiah. Perhaps the oddest response came from those who took Jesus to be John the Baptist. Some were of the opinion that John the Baptist had risen from the dead as Jesus. Herod Antipas, the one who had John beheaded, was one of those who voiced such a thought. St. Matthew records, “At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the news about Jesus, and said to his servants, ‘This is John the Baptist; he has risen from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him.’” Of course, knowing that Jesus and John were not only contemporaries, but cousins separated by only six months, the idea sounds utterly ludicrous to us. Yet, there nevertheless were those who actually thought that Jesus was John come back from the dead. Now, keep in mind, those were the *positive* responses to Jesus’ question, “Who do people say that I am?” Don’t forget that Jesus— in the eyes of His detractors among the scribes, Pharisees, and other religious leaders— was also considered to be a deceiver of the people who cast out evil spirits by the power of the Prince of Demons. These individuals would wilfully remain blind to His being the Prince of Peace.

Today the situation remains much the same. The Jews continue to reject Jesus as the Messiah of Israel. The Muslims acknowledge Him as God’s Messiah, but see Him as only one of God’s many prophets and, irrespective of His miraculous birth and miracle-filled ministry, they see Him as being no more than a mere man. Liberal theologians see Him as a man and a myth— differentiating between the so-called “Jesus of History” and the so-called “Christ of Faith.” For these people, the “Jesus of History” was a social reformer who died a criminal’s death because of His subversive teachings against the Roman and Jewish authorities, and whose body was probably cast into a shallow grave to be eaten by dogs. For these people, the “Christ

of Faith” is a myth formulated by the community of His followers. For some modern atheists, Jesus didn’t even exist as a historical figure (something that no reputable historian would ever venture to say in light of the historical record). For some people, Jesus was a cynic-sage. For some people, Jesus was just a good man. Today’s answers are still varied and still, more often than not, miss the mark.

“But who do you say that I am?” That was Jesus’ question to His disciples. The people relying on their own reckoning could not rightly reveal the answer to His identity. Yet, to His disciples, God the Father made His Son’s identity as the promised Messiah manifest. “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!” According to Jesus, that which Peter confessed was made known to Peter by God the Father. That was not mere human speculation, but Divine revelation. “But who do you say that I am?” That is the question that we too need to answer. The answer to this question comes to us by means of the means through which God makes His Messiah and Himself known to us: His Holy Word. The Holy Spirit reveals Christ to us through the Holy Scriptures. Through the inspired text, God’s Spirit moves upon the hearts and minds of those who hear, creating faith through the message of Christ. This faith brings us to heed Jesus’ own answer to the question of His identity. That which is revealed, on this side of the cross, is that this Christ, this Son of the Living God, is fully God and fully man. This man from Nazareth claimed to be God. His Word is the truth upon which His Church is founded. This is His own testimony and the Holy Spirit testifies to our spirit as we are borne by it to bear witness to its truth.

The testimony of the apostles that He sent forth to bear His Word to the world is that He *is* God made flesh in our midst. They testify that God had walked with them as one of us for

the sake of all of us. They claim to be witnesses to God's salvific plan unfolding during their own day for the sake of all days unto eternity. They claim that all that happened among them was in accord with the promises of God spoken through the prophets and patriarchs. Yet, what was Jesus' own claim? Again, He claimed to be nothing less than God. Again, if this is true, then all that men may choose to believe about this world and their place in it falls by the wayside. We cannot embrace a Jesus of our own making for very long because, if Jesus' claim is true, our grip will surely give way to the pull of this greater reality that will ultimately define our destinies. If Jesus' claims are false, then it really doesn't matter what answer we give because, in the end, we remain in our sins, under the shadow of death, struggling hopelessly for answers that are never to be found.

If a man claims to be God, we have before us only so many logical avenues to travel. He may mean that he is divine in the sense that we are all somehow a part of something much larger and more sacred than merely ourselves. He might be like a pantheist or panentheist who claims that God is all and all is God. Of course, Jesus wasn't a Hindu, He was a Jew. Therefore, we can quickly dismiss dismissing His claim of Divinity by going down such a path. Jesus identified Himself with the God of the Bible as He exercised His Divine prerogative to pardon sins, cast out demons, give sight to the blind, cleanse lepers, and raise the dead while applying the very name of God to Himself. Jesus identified Himself with the God who made the heavens and the earth and all things visible and invisible. Even His enemies understood this and sought to kill Him as a blasphemer because they couldn't accept it. This leaves us then with only three viably logical options when considering Jesus' claims: first, if a man says that he is God and he *knows* this to be false, then he is a liar; second, if a man says that he is God

and he *believes* this to be true when, in fact, it is not, then he is insane; and, finally, our third option is that the man claiming to be God is, in fact, God. So, in response to what Jesus says about Himself we only have three logical possibilities to condition our response: He is either a liar; He is a lunatic; or, the unimaginable, He is the Lord. C.S. Lewis stated the case well when he wrote,

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic— on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg— or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

Brothers and sisters in the Lord, the world is full of speculation concerning the person and work of God's Christ. Let us rejoice in the revelation given to us by God Himself about the identity of His Son, whom He sent to us. What we know about Him— Him who we know— was given to us from above. It was given to us to pass on to others through our common confession about Jesus the Christ, the Son of the Living God— the Living God who lived as one of us and died for us so as to bring us from death to everlasting Life! The answer to the question, "Who do people say that I am?" points us to ponder the fact that a vast multitude need to hear that message of good news which alone has the power to bring people to faith. Of course, the more pointed question remains, "But who do *you* say that I am?" This is the

question whose answer, from the lips of all His followers, is as follows: “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!” (“You are, O Lord, He who You say You are: the Lord Jesus Christ, God with us.”). Again, flesh and blood did not reveal this to us, but our Heavenly Father has made known to us that which we confess as the Church. This confession will continue irrespective of what the people of this world say of Jesus. This is the confession we’ve been given. This confession forms and informs our faith. This confession is the rock upon which He builds His Church. The man from Nazareth is none other than God. As one of us He was taken to the cross for us and now bids us to take up the cross and follow Him. He bids us to unashamedly proclaim the message of His cross, lifting it high before the eyes of all mankind. The man from Nazareth is none other than God. In giving this as our own answer to Jesus’ question, “But who do you say that I am?”, the greatest of miracles takes place as God Himself reorders our world in accord with His Word. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.