

“Just Who *Is* He?”

A sermon by the Very Rev. Timothy Jones
Trinity Episcopal Cathedral
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Mark 8:27-38

The senior minister at a church where I once served on staff told a story of a seminary student he had interviewed for a clergy position some years before.

After the normal questions about where the young man had grown up, what he had done while in seminary, the rector asked him,

“So who is Jesus to *you*?”

The student’s face went white, and he could only stammer some tortured answer.

Finally, the seminarian said,
“If I had known you were going to ask a question like that, I would have prepared myself.”

My boss chuckled when he told it.

But “Who is Jesus to you?” is a key question for
anyone doing ministry.

It’s a question that *any* of us should be able to
make a decent stab at answering.

Knowing who Jesus is, that’s foundational.
So much hinges on settling that.

Get that wrong or shaky or be only tentative,
and it’s hard to imagine how your faith can be
vibrant and transforming,
something that can sustain you through
challenging times, through storms,
both literal and figurative.

I know of an architect who once said:
“If you get the foundation wrong, it will follow
you all the way up to the roof.”

Get a question right like that interviewing
rector asked, though,
be able to answer with conviction,
and so much of your growth in faith will flourish.
You will build your whole life on what is true.

Jesus asked that rector's question in slightly
different form in today's Gospel reading.

To begin, Jesus, I guess you could say,
went easier on his disciples.

He didn't lead with that question, but with

“Who do *people* say that I am?”

What have the crowds come up with?

It's a little less personal for the disciples,
easier to answer.

People have been talking about him, and I suspect

Jesus knew full well what was being said.

But perhaps he thought it might help to start with

the simpler question, allowing

the disciples to warm up a bit,

The disciples do have something to report.

Jesus has made a stir.

The way he has taught and healed created a buzz.

Lots of people had concluded: *He's a prophet.*

Well, that's a start.

Jesus quickly moves, though, to the critical
question for his followers:

“But who do *you* say that I am?”

Peter answers. He speaks from a burst of
conviction, thinking back to all he has seen Jesus
do, the miracles,
the teaching that confounds
the other rabbis with its profundity,
the intimacy Jesus has with his heavenly Father,
his challenge to leaders who mis-use
position and power.

“You are the Messiah,” Peter says.

The anointed one. Deliverer. Rescuer. The one
longed for by Israel through long ages.

Jesus does not dispute the truth of Peter’s answer.

But Jesus sees that all is
not secure and settled in Peter’s faith.

I think that’s the best explanation to give for why
he tells Peter to tell no one,

when later Jesus explicitly tells his followers to
get out the word and tell everybody.

Peter is too glib right now, too unwilling to accept
that the Messiah's vocation will cost Jesus much.

But Peter does get something right.

Jesus is more than a spiritual person on steroids.

More than a wise teacher.

He is the Son of God.

The one who alone can reconcile a broken,
estranged humanity to God.

Not only a teacher and example,
but a redeemer and savior,

God come to live amid our world and share our
hardships and make things right.

Which is why in Matthew's version of the story,
Jesus says, "on this rock"—this faith—"I will
build my church."

That foundational conviction will be vital for the
disciples when they face the cost of discipleship.

But there's more.

I want to bring that piercing question
to our time. Who do *you* say that Jesus is?

If he asked you, “Who do you say that I am?”
how might you answer?

Would you falter and blanch?
Stumble for words?
It’s important to let Jesus ask it of us.

Jesus meek and mild, as you learned in Sunday
school, perhaps, won’t by itself hold
through the challenges of real life.

This helps explain why Jesus isn’t content with
Peter’s blurted answer.

The euphoria the disciples experience now is not
the whole story.

Following his way will demand more than they
can see or realize.

Jesus himself will suffer, will die, and their lives
will be tied up with his.

They need to count the cost.
Only a bedrock conviction will keep them at it.

For if they nourish in their souls a conviction
about how God has come to them in Christ,
anything can be faced.

Michael Green was a professor who became an
evangelist and an advocate for renewal in the
second half of the twentieth century.

I heard him preach once, interviewed him for a
magazine, spent time with him and caught some
of the infectious, delightful faith he had.

He did a scholarly study of evangelism in the New
Testament and the early church, titled *Evangelism
in the Early Church*.

In his work he explored how those earliest
followers had such an impact,
how they turned their known world
upside down with their proclamation.

This is what he concluded:

“First and foremost is their confidence in the truth
of their message.

They were all Jews, those first disciples, ardent
monotheists. [So] They were the hardest people in
the world to convince that God had come to this
earth in the person of Jesus to share his life with
humankind.”

And they had indeed all travelled,
worked and eaten together. They shared the
grubby particulars of daily life.

“It must have been scandalous,” Green continued,
“to entertain the possibility that he might indeed
be what his name suggested, *Jehoshua*, God to the
rescue. But once convinced, they did not waver.”

They were *passionately* convinced of the truth of
the message, the good news about Jesus,
who he was, what he did, all he offered.

Well, we do pay attention to our questions.

I don't think hard questions about faith,

honest struggles about Jesus should be ignored.

Doubts have a hallowed and healthy
place in any lively faith.

But neither do we settle for a faith that is content
to remain lukewarm.

That dares to believe too little.

If Jesus is indeed who he said he was, if the good
news is true, nothing matters more.

Vibrant conviction, sheer joy about Jesus, is not
an aberration, but that is what you *expect*.

And such conviction helps our work.
Churches don't grow and thrive when they
content themselves with a paltry faith or a
cautious indifference.

That's yet one more reason I'm excited about
RenewalWorks, that program we launch today,
the inventory and survey
we are asking you to take.

Your taking time to do so will help us identify
how better to address your questions.

Take seriously your doubts.

Deepen your faith.

Jesus' question is not academic, not merely
theoretical, for, as he goes on to talk with Peter,
we see he is clearly wanting
a commitment, a deeper decision.

But who do you say that I am? he asks,
wanting us to move from casual to committed,
from blasé to urgent.

May his question lead you not to an anxious
mental scramble, but a decision to believe with all
the heart you can muster.

May that question lead you to new conviction,
to answers that even will change your life.