

But who do you say that I am?

Isaiah 50:4–9a

Psalm 116:1–9

James 3:1–12

Mark 8:27–38

Text: Mark 8:29

He asked them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered him, ‘You are the Messiah.’

Introduction

What is the most important question you have ever answered? Was it about marriage? Career choice? A course of study? Some say that the questions are more important than the answer because questions seek and frame and expose while answers often change and shift over time. I was reading an [article](#) about living life simply; the title captured its sentiment, *Reflect on What You Truly Need and You’ll Make Your Wants Few*. The author stated that identifying your greatest need was “of utmost importance because no matter how much stuff you accumulate, you will never be fully happy until you identify and fill that one, basic, greatest need. Thus, the author asks, “What is that one need that when left unmet throws every other part of your life out of balance?”

I found the question striking and my immediate response was “faith in Jesus Christ”; without him the rest seems like window dressing. My habit, for example, is to have a prayer time at the beginning of the day—if I skip prayer because I think I am in a hurry the rest of the day is thrown off balance. As you know, all questions are predicted on certain assumptions. For instance, this question about identifying that one need which when unmet throws every other part of your life out of balance, assumes that you can identify what it is. It assumes that we can figure out why life at times feels empty or off balance or meaningless. And the gospel—the good news that is Jesus Christ—asserts that we are unable to make the correct diagnosis about what is at the bottom of that sense humans have of life being out of balance.

I have pointed out to you on other occasions that Jesus rarely answered the questions directly people put to him often because of the question’s assumptions. Jesus often reframed things with questions of his own by way of answer. Today we are reading a question Jesus puts to us, “But who do you say that I am?” Apparently Jesus thinks it is an important question. Jesus’ assumption is that the answer is crucial for our lives. I believe it is the most important question you will ever answer.

1. First, I invite you to note that there were lots of answers to this question but only one answer was correct. Jesus first asked, “who do people say that I am?” These first disciples then gave the answers that they were hearing all around them, answers that they overheard others proffer. “Some people say you are Elijah all over again.” Elijah was to herald God’s new age. “Some people say you are John the Baptist.” John had fearlessly urged repentance on his hearers. “Some people say you are a prophet.” A prophet announces God’s judgement as well as God’s mercy and the future only he can give his people.

“Fair enough, that is what ‘they’ are saying,” replies Jesus, “it’s time for you to speak for yourselves. Who do you say that I am?” Speaking for the twelve Peter cries, “You are the Messiah (Christ).” In Matthew’s account Peter’s answer also includes “the Son of the living God.” (You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God). Mark has given us this detail in the opening sentence of his gospel, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” As we find elsewhere, the other gospel writers make explicit what Mark, in the brevity of his style, indicates implicitly.

Jesus goes on to affirm that Peter’s answer is correct. In Matthew, Mark and Luke we are told that following the disciples’ answer Jesus sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. Why? The term Messiah (Christ) had wide currency in first century Judaism to sum up the hopes engendered by the Old Testament. National liberation was a strong popular part of that hope therefore Jesus sees announcing that he is Messiah as a hindrance rather than a help in communicating Jesus’ distinctive understanding of his mission. For now. Jesus himself is the one who will break the silence when he is being questioned by the ruling council after his arrest in Jerusalem. (Mark 14:61-62)

To be the Son of God is to possess the very nature of God. And to possess the very nature of God is to incarnate God’s purpose, God’s will. When Jesus pronounces the paralysed man forgiven, critics accuse him, “But only God can forgive sin.” “You’re right”, says Jesus, “only God can forgive sin, and I have just forgiven it. Either I am the crudest blasphemer or I speak and act uniquely with the authority of God himself. Now which is it?” Months later Thomas will cry out in the midst of confusion and frustration, “Just show us the Father and it will be enough.” Jesus will reply, “To see me is to see the Father.”

“You are the Christ; i.e., the anointed One, the Messiah.” Ever since Isaiah 53 — “he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities, like a lamb that is led to the slaughter ...—ever since Isaiah 53, discerning Israelites who knew God’s way and will knew that to be an obedient servant of God would always entail harassment and suffering. Peter knew this. Yet Jesus seemed so alive, so fresh, so full of life that he appeared indestructible. Jesus had to be an exception. Surely the Messiah is here to end human distress. Peter rebuked Jesus for saying otherwise. Jesus’ strong rebuke of Peter is telling Peter that not to acknowledge him, Jesus, as suffering Messiah is to deceive oneself and to frustrate the work of God. Jesus speaks to Peter as harshly as he does because he can’t allow his disciples to persist in a misunderstanding that misleads people and impedes the work of God.

Disciples of Jesus Christ do not believe that the truth, the decisive truth, the whole truth is told about Jesus when he is said to be a helpful teacher and a moral guide. The Church has never been built on the suggestion that Jesus is the high point of humankind’s aspiration after the good, the true and the beautiful. We do not believe that Jesus is the lucky winner in that treasure hunt that is sometimes called “The Human Search for God.” The community of disciples does not arise from a public admission that Jesus is the best answer to that missing piece that will put your life in balance.

The root human problem isn’t lack of better teachers and moral guidance; it isn’t a lack of a model of human good to aspire after; it isn’t that we need a more informed spirituality; it isn’t a

lack in discernment for what is most important. According to Jesus the root human problem is a corrupted heart. The good news of great joy that thrilled early-day Christians was that they'd been given a Saviour.

2. It is also important to take note of the personal nature of the question. "Who do you say that I am?" The question calls for each of us to respond to Jesus. Jesus is talking to you. I remind you of the nature of I – you relationships. The two persons in such relationships are unsubstitutable. You may have many people you call friends but each friendship is unique because two unique persons forge the friendship that only those two can forge. Jesus isn't looking for people generically to be his disciples he is looking for you. Who do you say that I am. And we each must give an answer.

I have heard the question posed—who is Jesus for you? This is akin to Jesus' query, 'who do people say that I am? It is an armchair sort of question. Lots of answers can be given. (Keep in mind that no answer is still an answer.) When Jesus asks, who do you say that I am, the 'I' and the 'you' are in direct address with each other. I was at one of my grandson's home recently and the doorbell rang. It was a young neighbour boy who asked my grandson if he would come out and play. Now you know that the implication of the boy's question was, would he come outside and play with me. This is a very different question than when his mother asked my grandson, sensing he had reached the threshold of video game time, 'why don't you go outside and play.' Which question do you think is more likely to propel my grandson to head outside and play. You know the answer, the personal address of the one who is going to play with him.

According to the gospel, Jesus is God addressing us. When Jesus is asking us directly, who do you say that I am, we don't get to define him. Jesus isn't taking a poll to see what people think of him. Jesus will go on to say that he is going to Jerusalem and will suffer and die and be raised on the third day. He is on a mission to save us from our sinful defiance of God—"I came to seek and to save the lost," said Jesus. When Jesus asks, 'who do you say that I am,' the Saviour of the world—Israel's Messiah—is asking you, won't you receive me as your saviour. How we answer is crucial. It is put this way in John's gospel, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

Or as Jesus will put it, "Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." I point out to you that when the disciples hear these statements from Jesus they don't hear it as a threat. They hear it as the warning of someone who loves them deeply and does not want any of them to come to harm. Like a lighthouse that warns of shoals that can lead to shipwreck our saviour shows us where the shoals are that can cause spiritual shipwreck. The one who asks, 'who do you say that I am,' loves each of us beyond our imagining.

3. I also invite you to note the relationship implied in the question. Jesus gives us salvation by giving us himself. In his question Jesus is inviting us into this relationship. The answer you give undergirds the relationship. Will you receive Jesus for who he truly is into your life. Will we answer as the disciples—you are the Christ, the Son of God. The implications of this answer shapes everything about our lives.

A few weeks ago my Irish friend Stephen Williamson preached here virtually. In his remarks of personal greeting he said he was ‘privileged to count me as one of his close friends and valued my friendship very much.’ And I can tell you in my remarks, along with the virtual sermon I sent to his congregation, I said much the same. You hear that and observe that those two preachers are good friends. But when I hear it, all the joy of the many personal experiences flood over my heart to overflowing; for me it is very, very personal. This is how I invite you to hear Jesus’ question—it is so very, very personal. “Who do you say that I am?”

4. Martin Luther liked to say that, “Everyone must do his own believing, just as everyone must do his own dying.” As the church continues to manage its ministry and mandate amidst pandemic restrictions, the question that our Lord asked has direct relevance for the future of the church. If we answer as the Apostles—you are the Christ, the Son of the living God—then our commitment to Jesus’ lordship of our lives will call from us the Apostolic commitment to the church. Obedience to Jesus is to love one another as he loved us. To love Jesus is to love his body—the church. Our Lord’s question—who do you say that I am—is one each of us must answer and continue to answer.

I take no joy in the statistical reality that the United Church of Canada is in steep decline; I am not comforted by the actuality that other denominations are also declining. Did COVID restrictions on church attendance simply show us what was soon to be the reality for the church anyway? It is distressing to me that Peter’s confession “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” is dismissed by so many in church leadership as an optional view of Jesus.

What are called mainline denominations began centuries ago with great promise as they exalted the gospel and magnified Jesus Christ and met human need. The United Church of Canada is the largest inheritor of the Methodism that began in the open-air preaching of John Wesley. In his journal, after preaching one day, he wrote, “I offered them Christ.” Wesley believed as the Reformers, that when the gospel is preached Jesus makes himself known to the people. If the church is simply an institution that offers superior morals, or better teaching for getting the best out of life, or happy friendships with nice people, or a better kind of justice, then all we are offering the world is ourselves as exemplary. I am with John Wesley—we offer the world Jesus Christ.

We have to keep reminding ourselves that we can’t coast on the faith and faithfulness of our foreparents. Each generation of Christians must answer Jesus’ question afresh. Our Lord’s promise to build his church is not a guarantee to preserve any denomination. His promise was never made to an organization. His promise, rather, guarantees that he will ever cherish, protect and preserve his people, his followers, his community, his fellowship. He will protect and preserve the fellowship that looks to him and clings to him in the midst of an unbelieving world.

Jesus asked them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ What will be our answer? He asked them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered him, ‘You are the Messiah.’