
Who is this Jesus?

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 27 August 2023

Exodus 1:8-2:10 • Romans 12:1-8 • Matthew 16:13-20



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Some of you were at the funeral Friday for Rosemary, who died last week at the age of 100. A long life and a fruitful one. She was loved by many people. She had a great faith, and was a stalwart volunteer for many years in this parish. Her life was lived in service to God and God's people. She was a wife, a mother, a grandmother, a Sunday school teacher, a champion figure skater, a lovely woman, a sweetie. As I did not know her personally, I had to learn from other people, and I heard all these things about her. She was all these things and I'm sure many more.

I am reminded of her because of the question that is at the centre of our Gospel today: "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" Jesus asks this question of the disciples after they have been travelling about the countryside for some time, and he wants to know what kind of impression he is leaving behind. Do the people understand who he is? Do they think he is just another rabbi or a sort of travelling

salesman? There are many answers that the people could give to the question, “Who is he?” He was Mary’s son. He was Joseph’s son. He was a carpenter. He was the fellow from Nazareth (and can anything good come out of Nazareth?). He was the miracle-worker. He was the fellow who eats with tax-collectors.

And, as Peter replies when the question is directed to him specifically, he was the Son of the living God. Jesus is all of these things. But it is good to think a bit about how we would answer the question, because it goes to our relationship with God.

Who do *you* say Jesus is?

You may think of Jesus as your friend, and what a friend we have in Jesus, as we often sing. Jesus-as-personal-friend is a somewhat new concept, one which fits our more casual age. I don’t think you would have found the people of the church two hundred years ago thinking of Jesus as a friend, exactly. He would have been seen as Lord and Master first, and that is also true. But the idea of friend is valuable because our God is a personal God. We can pray to him, and talk to him, in a very personal way. This is unique among world religions. Gods are usually far-off and remote, taking care of the big things like creation and sending punishment upon the wicked. Our God does those things, too, but God also knows us intimately. He knows every hair on our heads; he knows our every thought — and he cares for us and loves us no matter what we do. So, what a friend we have in Jesus, indeed!

But you may be more comfortable with a more respectful approach, and that’s fine too. When I enter the church, at any time of day, I bow to the altar. Many of you do the same. I do it out of respect for the one who created the world and who blesses me with a good life and work to do and people to serve. God is greater than any of us can possibly imagine. Although I know he is there for me in a very personal one-on-one sense, and although I talk to him all the time, my attitude towards God is one of awe and gratitude and wonder. The Biblical admonition to “fear the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 6:2 and other places) comes to mind. “Fear” in this case means respect and obedience, not so much terror — although no one would want to face God’s righteous wrath!

Back to Peter. He has been walking around with Jesus the man, eating with him, camping out with him, facing many of the same discomforts and trials. His would have been a very personal and down-to-earth view of Jesus. And he was as fallible and slow-to-learn as the rest of the disciples. Yet when Jesus questions him, Peter states boldly that Jesus is the Son of the Living God! I think Peter is actually quite a good model for us in this. We can know Jesus in many ways all at once.

And Peter’s reply is interesting, for as Jesus says, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven” (Matt 16:17). And surely we do not truly know Jesus except through divine inspiration with the help of the Holy Spirit, who teaches us all things. Someone

may tell you, “Jesus is the Son of God,” but it does not mean much unless you have opened your heart to Jesus and thereby learned the true meaning of who and what he is. Some people read the Bible as literature rather than as God-inspired text, and the words will not truly speak to them if their hearts are closed to God. But to one who has accepted Christ, the Bible is a treasure of revelation. This is akin to making disciples. We may tell people about Jesus, but what we say is only words until God turns their hearts to truly hear and accept the Word. Then we may know Jesus, and know that he is the Son of God.

Keep these certainties about you, and hold on to them. God the Father is with us. Jesus is God’s Son, through whom we have access to our Father. The Holy Spirit is the gift of God to us, to guide us always. And when anyone asks you who Jesus is, you can answer. In his name, amen.