

ROMANS 12:1-8 (p. 920)

AUGUST 23, 2020

MATTHEW 16:13-20 (p. 797)

BLAINE

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Bless us Lord, with your Holy Presence. Fill our minds with the Quiet Joy that comes from your Peace. Touch our hearts, please, with your Spirit. And open our eyes to a Vision of your Kingdom. For we ask this in your Son's Name. Amen.

"WHO DO YOU SAY I AM?"

Do you realize that questions, are one of the very best tools available, for acquiring information? It's true! And according to Psychologists and Sociologist, Philosophers and Theologians, they are also a great way to get people to stop and think! A good Rhetorical Question, for instance, could create a dramatic effect, rather than solicit an answer! Or it might just make a point! Do you know what I mean?

That's why Preachers use Rhetorical Questions all the time! Maybe you've noticed? They might end a sentence with, "Do you know what I mean?" or, "Maybe you've noticed?". Or start one with, "Do you realize?". A Rhetorical Question often leaves a thought just hanging in the air, doesn't it? A thought which might beg an answer, right? Or at the very least, a response! "Who do people say that I am?"

That's actually a very important question, isn't it? A foundational question really, one pretty basic to the Christian Faith! "Who is this Jesus? What do people say?" But I wonder if it's Rhetorical, don't you?

Jesus and His Disciples are on the outskirts of the Secular World. Literally, as well as figuratively. They are currently in the far northern reaches, near the great Roman City of Caesarea Philippi. They are in the Golan Heights, for you, geography buffs, in modern-day Syria. And for you Theologians, they are in Gentile territory, surrounded by non-believers. They are far away from home, if you will, when Jesus turns to His Disciples and asks, “Who do people say that I am?” So, do you think the location matters? I mean, it is mentioned in the text!

What’s the buzz out on the streets, asks the Lord. When you’re in the marketplace, in the common areas, in the checkout lane at the grocery store, what is it that you hear? In the latest Harris Poll or Letters to the Editor, what is the average person saying about Me? How would you answer Him? What do you hear people saying about Jesus? You know, in your conversations with family and friends!

I picture the Disciples quickly looking down at their sandals, don’t you? I imagine them shuffling about, rather nervously! Maybe some start looking out the window, trying to avoid eye-contact all together? None of them know how to answer Him, do they? Or even if they should! What do you think they are thinking? “Well Jesus, the average Roman Citizen doesn’t actually talk about you all that much! Except of course the occasional heckler, who thinks you cause Civil Unrest! There are some Scribes and Pharisees back home who do, a lot in fact. But believe me, you don’t want to know what they have to say!”

Or maybe not? Maybe it was just the opposite? Maybe the Believers are excited to share what they've heard? "OH! OH!" "I know! I know!" "Some people say that you are John the Baptist, reincarnated!" Others say you might be one of the Great Prophets, brought back from the dead—Elijah, or possibly Jeremiah!" Maybe the Disciples are anxious to impress Jesus, so the answers come in rapid-fire succession? Maybe everyone is leaping into the air, flailing their hands? What do you think? "Who do people say that I am?"

I notice that the Disciples are careful not to mention any of the cruel titles that they hear out on the streets. No one says anything about Jesus being called a Glutton, or Blasphemer, or a Lover of Wine. They don't tell their Rabbi that many think He is a nut case, or point out that the Religious Elite see Him as a direct threat to Orthodoxy and Order! No, they simply mention a few time-honored Heroes of the Faith, don't they—John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, one of the Prophets.

But I am curious! How would you answer? What do the people around you say about Jesus? Think back to your last few conversations around town. Consider one of your recent discussions at work, or at the club. How do people respond when you talk with them about Jesus? What do they say? How do they feel? What's your personal experience? Can you see why I think they might be shuffling around, staring at their feet? You do talk to others about your Faith, don't you? And then Jesus really ratchets up the question, doesn't He! "Who do you say that I am?" And suddenly, it's not Rhetorical anymore, is it? Now it's personal, right! "Who do you say that I am?"

In the Faith conversations that I know you have with others, who do you say that I am? Jesus is asking about when you share your faith with those around you, as well as what is deep down in the depths of your heart! “Who do you say that I am?” How do you answer that? Do you answer that? And what are the implications as you do? Or if you don’t? What does that answer, to that one little, simple question, really mean?

We’ve been traveling together for some time now, says the Lord. I see you here at Church. I hear you when you pray. And I know you hear Me, as you study My Word! So, tell me, do you understand? Do you comprehend My mission to the World? What it means? Why I’ve come? You know the things I’ve taught. But do you actually get the purpose? You’ve listened to the Parables, seen the Miracles, witnessed my Work, and felt my Power! You know what I preach! You’ve seen me in action, time and again! So, “who do you say that I am?” And all those hands, that earlier, shot up into the air, suddenly drop back down, don’t they!

And I think right here is often where Believers start to squirm in their seats, don’t you? Or start to glance out the window. This is the moment when we look down at our feet, and begin to shuffle nervously about! “Who is that you, you, say that I am?” What’s your take, personally? What do you believe? What is it that you, in your conversations about Me, which I trust you have, say to others concerning Me? And any hope that this is just a Rhetorical Question instantly vanished, didn’t it?

This is a real question, isn't it! A serious question! Direct and to the point! It's "the" Question in fact, asked by our Lord Himself, to each one of us personally! And how we answer it has serious ramifications, eternal ramifications! Jesus is looking us right in the eye, isn't He, and asking what it is that we say about Him! Not if we speak at all! That's a given! So, what's your answer? Who is Jesus?

I'm not asking what nine-out-of-ten Israelites on the streets of Benzie County believe, says our Lord! I want to know how you, personally, feel! I'm not asking about how My life plays into the Messianic Expectations you were taught in Synagogue or Sunday school! I don't want you to weigh all the theological pros and cons and arrive at the perfect Christological Statement of Truth, one that of course will fit on a bumper sticker! I am not interested in your Denominational Hermeneutic, or your Doctrinal Stance, or your pre-memorized Catechism Answer! What I want to know, asks Jesus, is how you feel, what you think, about Me, personally, right here and now! "Who do you say I am?"

And that changes things drastically, doesn't it? It puts a whole new spin on it! It did, indeed, just get personal! Suddenly, the big Existential Question of Life has become your big, Existential Question of Life! And that's different, isn't it, very different? It's not Rhetorical at all! You have to decide for yourself! You have to answer! You can't just watch from the sidelines, or hide in the safety of the anonymous crowds! It's "put up" or "shut up" time for you, for everyone!

I am not asking for a Learned Dissertation on the meaning of Absolute Truth, says the Lord of Life! You don't need to come up with Profound Revelations, unknown to man since before the Beginning of Time! I'm not looking for Deep, Reflective, Theological Nuances even, or lively and creative debate! That all may be good, in its place! But what I want to know is really quite simple! What do you believe? What is Truth for you, from where you stand? Or, where you currently sit! "Who do you say I am?"

Can you answer that? Can you answer it today, right now? Can you articulate what you believe? When someone says to you "Hey, you go to Church, right? Do you really believe all that stuff about Jesus being the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the Living God?", how will you respond? When someone asks what you think about our world today, or about the end of it, you know, when Jesus comes again?" what will you say? Do you buy all that talk about Him dying on a Cross in order to save those who put their faith in Him? Do you think Heaven is real? How about Hell? And just what exactly is your position on how God decides who goes where? Who is it that you say Jesus really is?

The Psychologists and Sociologists tell us that we, in the modern world, have developed a sense of "Perpetual Detachment". We have what they call an "Onlooker Consciousness". People tend to stand back and just watch the world go by! We detach, they say, objectify, abstract. We assume the role of a Perpetual Tourist, just passing through, never really landing anywhere for long! I wonder if that is worse now that we live in a Zoom Culture, an "Onlooker Consciousness"?

In fact, in an effort to be tolerant, to accept other worldviews, many today never actually take the time, or spend the energy, to define what it is that they actually believe! Or why! Oh, we banter ideas back and forth! We argue over what we like and don't. We might even delve into a deep, Existential discussions on the meaning of Life, or Truth, or Absolute versus Situational Ethics from time-to-time! Some people can even list the Basic Tenants of Christianity—compare and contrast the Four Major Teachings of Buddhism, or the Six Basic Precepts of Islam, or the Eight Distinctive Emphases in the Teachings of Jesus! Heck, many can spout the Party Line, or the Protestant Line, or the Denominational Line, or whatever line we think there ought to be!

But is that really a Declaration of Faith, a statement of what you believe? Isn't the question actually much simpler than all of that, and much deeper as well, at least for a Confessing Christian? Isn't the question really "Who do you say that Jesus is?" On what, or in whom, are you willing to bet your life? On what, or in whom, are you willing to bet your Eternal Life? What commitment matters most? What relationship matters most?

And before you answer, remember that, "I don't know," or "There are many different points of view," or "Who's to say what's right," is to actually embody that modern, socially-acceptable, detached point of view! "Not having a point of view", never wrestling to a position, is not "intellectual humility"! It is rather being a coward! You still have a point-of-view. You just don't articulate it! Which then, when you think about it, actually denies that Jesus is Lord, doesn't it? And a deafening silence replaces the eager voices of would-be Disciples! You see, the question is anything but Rhetorical!

I think a lot of us tend to assemble an arsenal of Pat Answers to hide the fact that we are not sure what we mean when we say, “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God”! Some of us memorize a verse or two of Scripture, so that we don’t seem biblically illiterate! We want to appear strong in our Faith, right, so we boldly proclaim things like, “Jesus is the answer.” “It must be God’s will.” “That’s just one of those things that we will not understand this side of Heaven.” However, that one, small, yet really big question still remains, doesn’t it? It not only needs to be asked, but also answered! “Who do I say Jesus really is?”

If I were to stop the sermon right now, and hand out 3 x 5 cards with that question at the top, what would you write in response? Would you have an answer? Would you have enough space on the card, or way too much? Are you even ready for a question like that? Have you ever considered it before? Because you need too! What is the significance of Jesus’ life and death, for your life and death? What does it mean to you, if anything at all, that he walked on this earth, healed and taught, that He was humiliated and cruelly nailed to a Roman Cross on your behalf? Who do you say that Jesus is?

I have to say, I find it a little comforting that not everyone in this passage recognizes Jesus as the Messiah right away. Discipleship is a journey, apparently. However, it is a journey that each one of us needs to take. And at some point, we need to answer Jesus’ question! Eventually, we will all bow before God’s Judgment Seat, just as it says in Scripture! Every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess just who Jesus is! So, if that’s the case, then doesn’t it make sense to figure out our answer ahead of time?

Peter's answer is the very foundation of the Church, the Rock on which everything else is built! Maybe he made his Confession of Faith immediately? Maybe he made it with great gusto? Or maybe he had to search his heart for a while, sort through all of his thoughts and feelings for what seemed like an eternity before answering! But he did finally arrive at a special place spiritually, at the very core, the foundation of Christian Faith! "You are the Christ," Jesus, "the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." And notice what happens then! Jesus starts building the Church!

Did you know that here, and Matthew 18:17, are the only places in the Gospels where the word "Church" appears? On this Statement of Faith, on this Confession, on this understanding of who Jesus is, we are called into being! And Jesus promises that the Gates of Hades will not overcome us! Nor will any worldly disaster, including some viral pandemic! There is a lot of fear in the world right now, over many things! Some are concerned with the decline in Church participation, and have been for many years! Others worry over the apparent Apathy of many Believers, which has exploded in our lifetime! And we are told, right here, right from the very beginning, that there will be spiritual attacks, that the Gates of Hell will come against us! But we are also promised, here at the beginning, that Evil will not prevail!

We have been formed into a Body, and called into action, based on the answer to a question, the acknowledgement of who Jesus really is! That question implies a follow up one though; "What difference does that Truth make in your life?" And the answer to that truly matters, doesn't it! And all of God's people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

O Lord, God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, God of Moses and Aaron, God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, we Praise and Worship your Holy Name! You are our Creator, the molder of who we are—our Redeemer, the One who makes a way for us to come back home—and our Sustainer, the source of power and strength on our Journey of Faith. You are the Maker of Heaven and Earth, all things above and all things below. And so, to you, we lift up our prayers. Father, we are a people of questions! And sometimes these questions even weave through our prayers. Why is there suffering in our world? Why is life so difficult at times? Why do bad things happen to wonderful people? Amid these questions Lord, and because of these questions Lord, give us the insight and the courage to hear your question to us; “Who is it that we say Jesus is?” You have heard our silent prayers Lord, just now, so you are aware of the questions on our minds today. We have shared with you the things that are troubling us, as well as those joys that lighten our hearts today. And you know the deep meditations within us, and the questions that reside there as well. In fact, you know these things even better than we know them ourselves! So, each of these we offer up as well.

We ask for your love and compassion Father, and your healing touch in the Name of your Son Jesus Christ. And for your comfort, and your support in the lives of.....We place before you the names of these dear loved ones, Lord, asking for your Power and Love to sweep through their lives like a wildfire! We place this Church and this County, and this World before you too, asking for peace and wisdom to abound. And we lift up all of your people, in all times and places, your entire Creation, Father, into your Loving Arms. And we do this now with the very prayer that Jesus taught us saying, Our Father...