

“Will The Real Jesus Please Stand Up!”

Mark 8:27-38

September 17, 2006

If you are my age or older you may remember a very popular game show from the 1950's and 60's, "To Tell the Truth." The premise of the show was quite simple. There was a panel with three people on it, one of whom was a person who had a particular job or was noteworthy for something. The other two would pretend to be that person. The celebrity panel would ask them questions to try and figure out who the real person was. When the time was up the celebrities had to vote for who the real person was. When they had cast their votes the game show host would dramatically say, **“Will the real _____ please stand up!”** Usually the impostors would start to stand up, to raise the tension and then sit back down, leaving the real person standing for all to see. Of course the fun of the show was to try and guess who the real person was.

Something like that is going on in today's Gospel passage from Mark. Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do the people say that I am?" A variety of answers are given: some say you are John the Baptist, back from the dead; some say you are the Prophet Elijah, here to announce the messiah; some say you are a prophet, like those in the olden days, saying, "Thus says the Lord..." Will the real messiah please stand up!

So far so good for the disciples, they can answer this kind of question standing on one foot. All they had to do is report what they heard OTHER people say about Jesus. Answering the question, "Who do THEY say that I am?" is a remote, academic question, easily answered, no commitment involved, nothing to risk, nothing to lose proposition.

Jesus, being Jesus, can't leave it there. He presses harder and deeper. Okay, you've answered the easy question. It really doesn't matter that much what other people think about me, but "Who do YOU say that I am?" I can hear the disciples all muttering under their breaths, "Ohhhhhhhh, Jeeeeeeesus! Why do you have to do this all the time? Why do you have to put us, put ME on the spot?"

I can see Andrew and Bartholomew, John and James, all the disciples standing there shuffling their feet, trying in good schoolboy fashion not to make eye contact with the teacher, because as any schoolboy knows, if you make eye contact with the teacher they'll call on YOU! Finally, good ole impetuous Peter has an inspiration, a literal inspiration according to Jesus later. He shouts, "You are the Messiah!!!"

The other disciples must have all breathed a sigh of relief that they didn't have to answer now, but they also must have been awestruck by the possibility that Jesus was the long awaited messiah! Perhaps, they like Peter, looking back in hindsight at all the miracles and healings, remembering all that Jesus had said and did, found themselves saying, "That's it! Jesus, this very Jesus we sensed was holy and different, who we left all to follow, he is the messiah!"

This is the pivotal moment in Mark's Gospel. Those who once were blind, now can see. Indeed, immediately before our Gospel passage today Mark tells the story of the healing of a blind man in Bethsaida. This is not an accident or serendipitous coincidence. It is what commentators call a parallelism, a passage that is meant to anticipate what follows immediately after it.

This is a very unusual healing. In most of Jesus' healings the healing is instantaneous. Jesus says or does something and presto-changeo the person is healed. Here it is a two stage healing.

First, Jesus gently takes the man by the hand and leads him out of town. He puts saliva on the blind man's eyes and touched him. Then he asks the man, "Can you see anything?" He can, but it isn't clear. He tells Jesus, "**I can see people, but they look like trees walking.**" Well, that's a big improvement, when you've been blind, but things are still pretty fuzzy.

Mark seems to be saying that is what those early disciples of Jesus were experiencing when they left all to follow Jesus. They saw something in Jesus, but they weren't quite sure what. They saw intimations of greatness, of holiness, of mystery calling them from their ordinary lives, to become fishers of souls and proclaimers of the Kingdom of God. But even after following Jesus for some time they still only had a fuzzy idea of who and what Jesus was.

2,000 years later I'm not so sure our eyesight has improved all that much. The church for all its timeworn creeds, hymns, prayers and liturgy still can not really see Jesus with 20/20 clarity. Oh, we pretend we do. We settle for what we think we've seen. We like to convince ourselves that the image we have of Jesus is totally in focus. Preachers like me pontificate on who Jesus is and what Jesus would have us do, but honesty compels me in this moment to say, "Don't believe us!", at least not totally! The image of Jesus we present is touched up with our own biases, interpretations, wishes, dreams, hopes and desires. Even when we get the words right we're often as much wrong as we are right. Perhaps at best, we, like the blind man from Bethsaida, can say, "Yes, we can see Jesus, but he looks like a tree walking."

I pray that you are not filled with despair at this thought! I pray that you don't just throw up your hands and say then what's the use of all this rigmarole? Why don't we all just sleep in? The answer is simple. It beats being completely blind! I suspect that if Jesus had not touched the man from Bethsaida a second time and given him perfect sight, he still would have praised God for being able to even see "tree like" walking people! It certainly beat not being able to see people at all!

Let's get back to good ole Peter and his proclamation that Jesus is the messiah. Peter has answered correctly but as we learn, even when he's right he's wrong. You see when Peter says Jesus is the messiah he is not talking about a divine redeemer who is the second person of the Trinity. He has in mind a Davidic king who will do three things: 1. Rebuild or cleanse the temple in Jerusalem. 2. Defeat the gentile enemies and restore the Davidic kingdom. 3. "...Bring God's justice, that rich, restoring, purging, healing power – to bear both in Israel and out into the world." (N.T. Wright) Will the real messiah please stand up!

Peter may have been right about Jesus being the messiah but he was still seeing things in distorted fashion. This is revealed when Jesus starts to explain that while yes he is the messiah he must **"undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again."** Given Peter's views on what a messiah was to be, he is horrified by what Jesus has said. He takes Jesus aside and "rebukes" him. Can you imagine that! A disciple of Jesus rebuking Jesus! It seems unimaginable to us today, but maybe we should look deep down into our hearts and souls and see if we have not in our own way gently rebuked Jesus. After all, maybe Peter knew what we suspect,

that the kind of messiah Jesus is has a lot to say about what it means to be a follower of Jesus! Will the real messiah please sit down!

Jesus' reaction is hard and quick, **“Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”** This can indeed be a problem. Our blindness to who and what Jesus is and what it means to be a follower of Jesus comes from focusing too much on “human things” and not on “divine things.” Now, this is not to disparage “human things”, after all we the “Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Jesus for all his divinity was fully human. The problem comes when we can't see the divine for the human. It is then that we can't see the proverbial forest for the trees!

Theologians for the last hundred years or more have pointed out that every description of Jesus likely says as much about the person who gives it as it does about Jesus. I believe there is a lot of truth in this. Jeroslav Pelikan, in his marvelous book *“Jesus Through the Centuries”* traces all the different ways that people in different times and places have seen Jesus and they are indeed many and varied! Since we are near the end of this sermon I don't have time to go into any depth but let me just read the chapter headings. Notice all the amazing variety of ways that people have seen Jesus: Rabbi, The turning point of history, the Light of the Gentiles, the King of kings, the Cosmic Christ, the Son of Man, the True Image, Christ Crucified, The monk who rules the world, the Bridegroom of the soul, the Divine and Human model, the Universal Man, the Mirror of the Eternal, the Prince of Peace, the Teacher of Common Sense, the Poet of the Spirit, the Liberator, and the Man who Belongs to the World.

There is probably a little truth in all of these, but they are like so many trees walking. Obviously this is not a comprehensive list, but it is a thought

provoking presentation of how there is a huge variety of ways to answer Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?"

All right I've danced around it long enough. I was hoping if I put it off long enough I'd run out of time to answer Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" Keeping in mind that all views of Jesus are provisional and at best fuzzy, I, like everyone else must answer the question Jesus puts to us, "Who do I say that Jesus is?"

I tend to have what theologians call a "low Christology" rather than a "high Christology." I do not believe that Jesus was divine in the sense that if you took a DNA test on him you would discover the DNA of God, but I do believe that in Jesus, particularly in his death on a cross and in his resurrection by the power of God, we catch our glimpse of the Divine. One of my favorite descriptions of Jesus from the New Testament comes from the book of Hebrews. Jesus is the Pioneer and Perfector of my faith. What little I know of God I have found in following Jesus through the fog of my doubts, rationalizations, fears, and hopes. Like the blind man at Bethsaida, I have felt the touch of Jesus from time to time in my life and I have seen him walking, albeit like a tree. I have seen enough to be intrigued and enticed to follow and I have seen enough to from time to time to be filled with fear as Jesus says from the cross, **"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and follow me. For those who want to find their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel will find it."** I have seen enough in my attempt to answer Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" to pray for the "second touch" of Jesus' hand that will bring 20/20 vision of divine.

So it is that I leave you with the haunting question from Jesus' lips that keeps us reading our Bibles, praying by our beds, coming to church to study and worship God "Who do you say Jesus is? Amen.