

Pentecost 16 (Proper 19B)
Trinity Parish Seattle
September 13, 2015

[Isaiah 50:4-9a](#), [Psalm 116:1-8](#), [James 3:1-12](#), [Mark 8:27-38](#)

“Who do people say that I am?”

And, “who do YOU say that I am?” Two questions that Jesus asks Peter in our gospel today.

Can you imagine asking someone these questions about yourself?! I’m not really sure I want to hear what someone would say! “What’s the word out there? What are people saying?” Yikes. Do we really even want to know?! Can we bear to hear what they will say?!

We spend so much of our life trying to figure out who we are, cultivating a persona, becoming our ideal selves, sometimes even trying on new images with a new hairstyle or clothing that helps us bring some coherence between what we feel inside and the impression we make on the outside.

So this question, “who do people say that I am” seems kinda risky, doesn’t it! Oh no! Am I going to like what I hear?! You put yourself in a very vulnerable place asking someone that question – “Who do people say that I am? Who do YOU say that I am?” You just might get back something you didn’t want to hear!

Peter’s response to the first question – who do PEOPLE say that I am? – is telling. “Some say you’re John the Baptist. Others say you’re Elijah or one of the Prophets.” That’s all fine. They identify Jesus with a recently murdered anti-establishment rabble rouser preaching repentance, and with the tradition of the prophets – Elijah, who called down fire from heaven, and prophets who prophesied against kings and rulers. Nothing wrong with any of these figures. Peter’s response makes it clear that Jesus is creating a particular kind of impression on the people – someone who stands outside the halls of power, but has unique powers of his own, and offers a direct challenge to the political and religious elites of his day.

But then comes the more pointed question: “Who do YOU say that I am?” Peter doesn’t hesitate, but looks into Jesus’ eyes and says, knowingly, “You are the Messiah.”

Meschiach – the long-awaited one who will set all things right, deliver Israel from her enemies, establish justice and righteousness in the land, and return the throne of David to its rightful heirs! Israel’s expectation of a Messiah goes back to the prophets, only a few hundred years before Jesus. And it is a clearly military, and triumphal image of the one in whom Israel’s hopes for sovereignty and security will be fulfilled.

And then the gospel writer says that Jesus sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him – part of a literary device used throughout the Gospel of Mark that scholars refer to as “the Messianic secret.”

And what comes next is important. He begins to tell Peter and the disciples that he will “undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.”

What?! Great suffering?! Be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes?! Be KILLED and then rise again?! What is this all about?! It doesn’t fit with anyone’s expectations of who the Messiah will be.

How can this be? The Messiah will be welcomed and cheered with open arms as the enemy is vanquished and Israel’s pride and sovereignty are restored!

Suffering?! Rejection?! What can this possibly mean? It doesn’t fit with the image of who we expect (and want) Jesus to be! And Peter begins to rebuke him – “You can’t say those things, Lord!”

A heated argument ensues. Jesus rebukes Peter, and says, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

It takes a while for the disciples to learn to see with spiritual eyes. Salvation, it turns out, will not come through a political figure who rides triumphantly into Jerusalem to the cheers of throngs, and before whom the enemies will tremble in fear and flee.

Jesus says to them, “If any want to be my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

Our very human temptation – and I think we see evidence of this still today – is to believe, like Peter, that we will be saved by some heroic figure who miraculously makes everything right again – puts the mess behind us, boots out the foreigners, cleans house in Jerusalem (or Washington), and stands up before the people and says, “We’re gonna take our country back – and it’s gonna be awesome!”

Yeah! “And my health care program? It’s gonna be fabulous!”

(Don’t get me started!)

There are people who think that kind of Messiah is the answer. But it just doesn’t work that way. And what Jesus begins to offer is a different image, an altered perception of who Messiah is. And yes, it involves suffering – and rejection – all the things we try so hard to avoid, but are part of life.

Jesus says that all who follow him must take up their cross and follow him. Those whose goal is simply to save themselves will lose their life; but those who lay down their life for his sake and the sake of the good news will save it.

The cross – what a fitting symbol it is of this paradox. Yes, on the one hand the cross is an instrument of torture and death, which makes it a bit odd that we dress it up in fine metals and jewels as a piece of jewelry or decorative art. And the cross has been and sometimes still is misused as a symbol of power over others.

But the cross as a symbol has a much deeper significance for our lives. Its two axes are a powerful reminder that we live at the intersection of life’s many contradictions. We sit at the intersection of the human and the divine, time and space, certainty and uncertainty. The cross invites us to enter into the paradox, to engage the contradictions and conundrums, and to find even in life’s most serious and difficult challenges the path to life.

G. K. Chesterton once said that “... the cross, though it has at its heart a collision and a contradiction, can extend its four arms for ever without altering its shape. Because it has a paradox in its center it can grow without changing. .. The cross opens its arms to the four winds; it is a signpost for free travelers.”¹

¹ G.K.Chesterton (1874-1936) in *Orthodoxy*, p. 34.

Fr. Ron Rolheiser wrote a little book a few years ago called *Forgotten Among the Lilies: Learning to Love Beyond Our Fears*. In it he says that “The cross of Christ is like a well-cut diamond [which, when you turn] it in the sun... you get a variety of colors and sparkles. Among other things, it brings out the price of true love, the power of vulnerability to bring about community, the presence of God within human suffering, ...how death can be triumph, how one is tempted to cry out in despair just before triumph, and especially how God loves us unconditionally.”²

Jesus’ first disciples eventually embraced this challenge to take up their cross and follow him. And in doing so they discovered that the path to new life ran through the most human of experiences – seen through a new lens and experienced from a new point of reference. There was no escaping the realities of these experiences, even, yes, suffering and death itself. But they learned to see them not as defeats, not as meaningless absurdities, not as evil visited upon them; but as a participation in Christ’s own redemptive life, death and resurrection.

The challenge for us when we hear Jesus’ invitation to come, take up our cross and follow him, is not to recoil into a state of terror and denial and decide rather for the feel-good prescriptions of false messiahs. What we are called to is the difficult but life-giving work of sacrificial love, following our Lord Jesus Christ

I’ve told it before, but the story fits so well here today. Carolyn and I were in Moscow in 1990 during the death throes of the Soviet Union. I went to church at Kazan Cathedral just off Red Square for Orthodox Easter. In that packed church I observed an older woman shaking her finger at a young man in a Soviet army uniform as he came forward for communion. She didn’t think someone like him had any business in this place. He couldn’t be sincere. He must be a spy. But not saying a word in response to her protests, he looked forward silently, and simply made the sign of the cross, a quiet, courageous acknowledgment that he, like all of us, stood at the intersection of life’s paradoxes and contradictions, and that he had embraced the way of the cross as the way of life. His simple gesture was enough for her, and she withdrew as he made his way to communion.

² Ron Rolheiser O.M.I., *Forgotten Among the Lilies: Learning to Love Beyond Our Fears*, 2005

So today, all of us are being asked by Jesus, “who do you say that I am?” and depending on how we respond we just might be prepared for the part about taking up our cross and following him. And at the same time we are also always, I believe, in our own way asking the world around us the same question: “who do you say that I am?”

And just what is it that you would want to hear? I’ll just leave us this morning with a question to ponder, and it is this: “How would our lives change, what would we do differently, if the thing we really wanted to hear someone say is, “You? You’re a follower of Jesus. You’re a follower of Jesus.”