

The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, August 23, 2020

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Confessing Jesus

Matthew 16:13–20

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph 1:2

At Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked the disciples, **“Who do you say that I am?”** And **“Simon Peter replied, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God’”** (Matthew 16:15–16).

Who is Jesus?

That’s *the* question, isn’t it? The most significant question you’ll ever be asked. The most significant question anyone will ever be asked. And it’s a question *everyone* must answer sooner or later. Everyone. Some of you may remember it as the first question asked on your confession of faith when you went through adult or youth instruction here at Our Savior. How would you answer now? Do you remember what you wrote then?

3.

Who is Jesus?

That question may not have seemed quite so significant back when Jesus came **“into the district of Caesarea Philippi”** with the disciples (Matt 16:13). Maybe there were some people who still hadn’t heard His name; some for whom Jesus was a complete and total unknown; some who hadn’t yet been confronted by Him. But word about Jesus was getting out—word about His miracles, like the feeding of the five thousand or the healing of the Canaanite woman’s daughter. In our day, there are very few who haven’t heard something about Jesus.

Jesus first asks an indirect, impersonal question. He says (v 13), **“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”** He often refers to Himself as the Son of Man, a title for the Messiah from the Old Testament, so he’s basically asking, “Who do people expect the Messiah to be? What are they saying about Me? Who do the crowds think I am?” It comes across almost like an opinion poll, taking the temperature of the room.

Opinions are varied. The disciples are quick to answer, but there's not a clear consensus on the Son of Man. **"Some say He's John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets"** (v 14). They know the Son of Man is an important figure, a great man, equal to the prophets of old. People can tell that Jesus is someone special, but they can't quite put their finger on exactly who He is.

Then Jesus moves in close. He gets personal. No one can be neutral. No one can plead ignorance. No one can simply hide behind what "the people" are saying: (v 15) **"Who do YOU say that I am?"** Jesus asks for a confession. He invites us to lift up our hearts and joyfully give answer. The heart believes; the mouth confesses. The two go together. What we believe, we will speak, and we speak what we believe.

Who do you say that I am? Who is Jesus?

There's no avoiding this question. Sure, some choose to duck it now, and others act like it was never even asked. But the day is coming—and coming soon—when everyone, and that means you, will have to answer it. And it isn't going to be anything like taking a pop quiz in high school. No multiple choice. No shrugging off a wrong answer as if it's no big deal. And it's not going to have anything to do with your opinion or your preference, as if you were picking your favorite flavor of ice cream at Kimball's. He doesn't ask, "How do you feel about Me?" or "Give it an educated guess—who do you think I am?" or "Who am I to you?" but "Whadya say? Who am I?"

And it's not just directed at *you* in the singular. The "you" is plural. It's the Church—the whole Christian Church on earth along with the saints and angels in heaven who are asked. What do they confess? What do *we* confess?

The temptation is to give a reasonable answer. To go right down the middle. Not too hot, not too cold. Not offending anyone. To go as far as to say that Jesus is a great man but stop there. Or maybe the temptation is for us to act like detectives. We try to sift through the historical evidence, judging it based on human reason and logic, and then piecing together the puzzle. Scholars have spent centuries on what have been called quests for the historical Jesus—without coming to any clear answer about who He is. If we rely only on our own reason and senses, we'll end up with a fuzzy, nondescript, good teacher, nice guy sort of Jesus. We end up with a Jesus made in our own image, Jesus as I think He should be, instead of Jesus as He really is.

Who do you say that I am? Who is Jesus?

It's not an academic question. Jesus expects an answer—not tomorrow or in a hundred years, but today. I fear that we don't take this question seriously enough in our lives. It's a question that really should penetrate every day of our lives and every hour of our days. When we get up in the morning and when we lie down at night, Jesus is there, asking, "Who do you say that I am?" Asking it as we head to work in the morning and walk on the way and sit at the dinner table: Who do you say that I am?

2.

Thank God that St. Peter isn't shy. He's a bold confessor of Christ, bold here to speak for the whole Church. "**You are the Christ, the Son of the living God**" (v 16). It's significant where Peter makes this confession. Caesarea Philippi, in the north, was a notorious pagan worship center. It was a city known for its temples, from the Baal worship of the Canaanites to the temple built for the god Pan. Caesarea Philippi—a city of many gods and many lords. Little wonder then, that Jesus asks His disciples the decisive question in this region, in the face of the false gods of the day. They may have even been looking at a temple of a false god. "There's one who claims to be a god; who do you say that I am?"

Here St. Peter confesses that those gods are not living gods, but that Jesus is the Son of the living God. How did He know this? Jesus says, "**Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven**" (v 17). St. Peter didn't work this out for Himself. It wasn't just him put his reason and senses to work figuring out who Jesus is. It was given to Him. It was placed into His mouth. How did Peter know this? Because it had been revealed to Him by the Father. I don't mean that it was revealed in some mystical, ethereal way, as if it was floating in the air. It was revealed through Jesus, through the things that Jesus has been doing and saying. Peter has been with Jesus for quite awhile. He's been watching and listening. God has been working through this revelation of Jesus to bring Peter to this confession of faith.

Then comes the wonderful blessing that Jesus gives: "**I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven**" (vv 18–19).

What does this mean? It means, first, that Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the living God, has the keys of the kingdom. It also means that He's giving out the keys of the kingdom, so that forgiveness may be spread to all. So people may have forgiveness, life, and salvation through the good news of who Jesus is.

Like Peter and the other disciples, we're going to be face-to-face with the one asking the question someday. One day He's going to come again in glory, and every day is practice and preparation for that day. If we don't know who Jesus is, if we're unpracticed in confessing Him, then I'm afraid we'll just end up babbling when we see Him face-to-face, "Uh, um, I wasn't expecting the clouds of glory and all that."

1.

So who are faced with this confession now?

How do we confess Christ in the face of His cross? Peter confessed that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. But when you look at Him on the cross, it isn't obvious that He's the Christ. In fact, it seems to be the very opposite. Are we prepared to confess Him to be the Christ, the Son of the living God even when He hangs on the cross?

What about the crosses in our own lives? What about the sufferings we endure? What about our losses, our illness, and the turns of misfortune that we experience? When we are faced with such things in our own lives, what will we say about Jesus and who He is? In the face of our own crosses, He certainly doesn't seem to be the Christ, the Son of the living God.

What in the face of our sins and death and the devil? Are we prepared to confess that He is the Christ, the Son of the living God? Think of Martha, whose brother Lazarus was in the grave. Jesus asks whether she believes that He is the resurrection and the life. Your brother is in the grave; do you still believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God?

All of this is preparation for the Last Day when Jesus comes in glory in the company of the angels, with the apostles and the entire Church.

In the Gospel of Matthew, the next time Jesus is clearly confessed to be the Son of God is when the centurion at the foot of the cross watches Him die. He says, "**Truly, this was the Son of God**" (Mt 27:54). Yes, Jesus is the Son of God. He is the Son of God who came down in the flesh for you and me; the Son of God who bore in His own body the sins of the world; the Son of God who suffered death that we might live; the Son of God who faced all the powers of hell so that the gates of hell would not prevail against His Church.

In contrast to the dead, non-living gods out here, He is the God who lives. He was crucified but on the third day He rose again, not an idol of metal or wood but God in flesh and blood, alive.

Who is Jesus?

JESUS IS THE CHRIST, THE SON OF THE LIVING GOD, MY LORD.

This is what we confess, not by our own reason or strength, not by our own deductions or experiences, but because this is the confession that has been given to us. We don't need to make a confession that is unique to ourselves. We don't confess our own ideas or thoughts about Him. Instead, we join with the Church of all times and all places. We confess Jesus as He has been revealed to us. We confess Him before others. One day, we will confess Him to His face: "You, Jesus, are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7
