

Matthew 16:13-20 The Answer
Romans 12:1-8
August 27, 2023

If there is a center in the gospel story, it is Peter's confession, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." The last few Sundays we have spoken of a series of events, including the Feeding of the Multitude and Jesus Walking on the Water as being in the middle of the story, constituting a turning point in the career of Jesus. If we are more precise, it is this confession.

For the people involved in the history of things, this title had specific meaning. It referred to the expectation of a Jewish political leader who would restore the monarchy in Jerusalem with a descendant of David on the throne, and also the independence and sovereignty of their nation.

One can only guess if this is what Peter had in mind. If so, then Jesus would become a challenge to followers such as Peter, because establishing Israel's independence and restoring the monarchy is precisely what Jesus did not do.

Thankfully, the historical questions about the restoration of Israel are not front and center for us because, after Jesus was crucified and raised, his followers continued to believe that the title, "Christ," was his in ways that rise above history, and followers of Jesus have continued in that belief to this very day.

The question that led to Peter's answer, "who do you say that I am?" also resonates down the centuries, for it is asked of us as well. Since we do not believe that Jesus is Christ because he restored Israel to its own sovereignty or someone in David's line to the monarchy, then what *does it* mean, this confession, attributed to Peter, and central to the Christian faith, "you are the Christ, the Son of the Living God?"

Before we answer, let us take stock of things. They, Peter and his companions, both those who followed Jesus around Galilee and Judea and witnessed his life, *and* also the ones like Paul and Mark and Luke and Apollos and Priscilla and Aquilla, and all the rest who came along in the early days, lived in the era of the beginning of the Roman Empire.

They were aware of the geography of the Mediterranean Sea, and were familiar with the politics of the region; the significance of Roman citizenship and of the imperial bureaucracy; they knew about provincial governors like Pilate and tribute paying kings like Herod, and were aware of the presence of the military.

They knew the roads and trade routes and the different groups of people they would meet along the way. In time they knew about Jewish War from A.D. 66-70 and ended with the destruction of the temple. I am sure they knew their history and cultural life in greater detail than what I can present here.

Like them, we are aware of the historical, political, religious and cultural situations of our times. We know about North American geography, at least generally, and about the history of our country, about World Wars I and II and 9/11, about the wildfires in Canada and Hawaii and the tropical storms in California and Texas. We know of our cultural divides; religious, social, political, economic, all the rest.

And like them, we are confronted with the same questions: Is there a God? Where did all this come from and where is it going? What is right and does it matter? What is the meaning of life? The truth is that questions like this have multiple answers, but if we widen the scope, zoom out enough, these questions can be summed up in the one asked of Peter, “what do we say about Jesus? And there are basically two alternatives; yes, Jesus is the Christ, in agreement with Peter and his colleagues; and no, he is not.

It is the spirit of the times to admit that Jesus was an important historical person and a man who worked for good and who tried to help the ordinary person, empowering the powerless, bringing about healing and unity, but that the world was left basically untransformed.

In the era of the Ukraine war and covid, and persistent poverty, of wildfires and tropical storms, both literally and metaphorically, we have to agree that if world transformation is what we mean, then it is hard to agree with Peter. And certainly there are many who

believe that Jesus was a good man, better than most, but not the Christ, certainly not God.

But it is also true that billions of people do still agree with Peter, and their confession is the same. We are among them. What *is* meant, “Jesus is *Christ*?” The first thing to do is use the language of the Bible, which is that Jesus is the Christ because of the forgiveness of Sin and the Resurrection of the Dead, that is, because he broke the power of sin and death, rising above the history, culture, and politics of any age.

This faith has several implications. That is to say that as a result of it, we affirm the triumph of life and goodness, mercy and love. And we affirm *that* victory in the face of the cross, in the face of the apparent failure of the transformation of the world in ways that would make that victory actual in both our personal lives and in the community life we share.

Like Peter, we make the confession without completely understanding it or being able to know for sure if the way we apply it to the present situation and to our personal situations is in fact right. What we acknowledge and affirm, is God and God’s action, not our own ability to know and to be and to act in God’s place. We believe that the the victory of life and goodness is complete in Jesus, who is therefore the Christ.

Furthermore, we seek to understand as much and to do as much good as we can. When we find that we have been mistaken or fallen short, we are willing to

be changed in accordance with God's Spirit. We seek to live out the rule of love in every situation, and we will not give up no matter the difficulties or the nature of our failures, or the sense in which the odds seem stacked against faith. This is Peter's faith and Jesus tells him that his faith is the foundation of the Holy Gathering, the Church. We affirm this faith.

Much more could be said. Words fail us, but let Paul speak for us, for in the epistle reading for the day we are given a sound sampling of how this confession, when we make it our own, plays out in our lives:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. 2 Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

3 For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. 4 For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, 5 so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. 6 We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; 7 if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; 8 if it

is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

This is not a comprehensive statement. Even in Romans, Paul goes on, but it is sufficient for the day. And now, though each of us has joined with Peter in his confession, "You are the Christ," one is never harmed by a renewal. It is healthy for us to allow this question to be asked of us, and to reconsider it every day. Although that becomes unrealistic as well, but for this one day, we can consciously allow ourselves to be asked anew of Jesus, the central question of our lives. And to ponder its meaning.

"Who do you say that I am?" and to answer again:

"Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God"

[Back](#)

[Home](#)