

WHO? WHAT?

Living God, you accept our stumbling faith, our misplaced answers, our false horizons, and through them build a way of peace; empower us to bind the wounds of the world and loose the debts of oppression, that all may confess the grace that is your work alone; through Jesus Christ, anointed for the world.

A Collect for Proper 16A, Prayers for an Inclusive Church

THE TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Proper 16A: Isaiah 51:1-6; Psalm 138; Matthew 16:13-20

AUGUST 27, 2017

ST. MARK'S-IN-THE-VALLEY

EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND PRESCHOOL

Los Olivos, California

THE REV. RANDALL C.K. DAY, D.MIN., PRIEST AND RECTOR

THE GOSPEL READING: MATTHEW 16:13-20

When Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

As we hear this gospel reading this morning, it sounds like we are being given some black and white information – some facts about the way things are or were.

I'd like us to look more closely.

And the first detail to notice is in the first line of the reading: "When Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi...."

Caesarea Philippi, today in

Syria, in the Golan Heights, was a city with a long history and had shrines and temples of gods and rulers throughout. Occupied by the Greeks and then the Romans, the Jewish King Philip II, also known as Philip the Tetrarch, a son of King Herod the Great (whom we hear about at Christmas), named it Caesarea in honor of Roman Emperor Augustus – and in honor of himself. Herod and Philip were client kings – allowed to rule by the

Romans – and they erected temples and statues to honor their patrons (and themselves).

I mention this to say that as Jesus and his traveling companions were in “the district of Caesarea Philippi” they were surrounded by these temples and palaces and shrines – as if they were walking down the Mall in Washington, D.C. with the various impressive and established monuments and structures pointing to wealth and power and influence.

So it is here, surrounded by so much evidence of the all-too-real strength of Roman imperial might and glory that Jesus asks the disciples: “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And then: “But who do you say that I am?”

Of course they dutifully respond – initially offering up John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the prophets – but they could have said: “frankly, you’re not that well-known, especially in a place like this.”

And maybe that was what Jesus was reading on their faces, hearing in their responses.

So he homes in, asking: “But who do *you* say that I am?”

What we find in the gospel reading is Peter responding: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God,” which is known as “the Confession of Peter,” now marked

by a major feast on January 18 on the church’s calendar, expressed in stained glass and in various stone monuments. The institutional church has long interpreted and used this confession and Jesus’ favorable response to Peter: “you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church” as the basis for institutional authority. In Roman Catholicism, in particular, this phrase is seen as the founding of the papacy.

But living, as we do, in a post-institutional era, the reality of which is only deepening as leaders seem to mock the very institutions they represent, we can go back and look at the questions Jesus asked: “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” and “But who do *you* say that I am?”

Clearly, Jesus was contrasting his way, the way of the itinerant rabbi who had no place to lay his head, who moved through the world, not within the walls of established synagogues, with the power and the glory that was surrounding them in Caesarea Philippi.

Peter’s confession was used to baptize the power and glory of the Roman Empire and turn it into the institutional Church, but was Jesus hearing Peter’s response differently? Was he hearing Peter recognize that true power lay not in these structures that surrounded

them, but in the person Jesus actually was with them, a very human and very spiritual presence who, in utter simplicity revealed the fullness of God through what he did?

When he asked these questions and commended Peter's response, we can be sure Jesus was not imagining successors of Peter crowned with the papal tiara encrusted with gemstones.

But I can imagine Jesus was questioning his followers and asking them to question as well, asking them to seek life beyond the monuments and shrines and that whole static, narrow life that is typical of human false selves writ large.

Looking around at the palaces and temples, Jesus was attempting to teach that life was so much more....

And his response to Peter was just that, a call to be more than he already was, to be the bedrock self, the true self that God was making available for him – as God makes that true self available to everyone.

And through it all, was a lot of change – change in how we would view the world, change in how we would view ourselves and, most of all, change in what we would do, what our action would be in the world.

Systems theory points to the

observation that to ask a question changes the system.

It is possible Jesus didn't want or need a response – and it is interesting to reflect on the fact that his questions – especially the first one – brought out a variety of viewpoints. This reminds us that we view reality differently from person to person and from time to time in our lives... and what we see (if we look) is often rich and layered and complex. Truly, Jesus had within him elements of John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah and the prophets before and since.

That question is still being answered: now being expressed in the multiform nature of the church – in women and men and children in every culture with a vast range of different gifts.

We are answering with our lives today the questions Jesus was asking.

When Jesus asks questions, we can hear him saying: “are you open to possibility?” And in his responses to us, we can hear: “are you ready to be a different person – different people all together?” He set Peter on a quest for his depth, his inner strength, his true stability – realities that were not yet there in him, but would be.

We use a lot of words to attempt to define and narrow our experience of life – to get it into some understandable and

controllable framework. We use words that are inadequate, misleading, that have many interpretations and nuances in different languages....

Our lives, and our life together are not about the words we say but in the change we accept and the actions that arise from our

actual encounter with the unlimited, undying love and generosity of God, given into the world – this whole real world – through Jesus Christ, Jesus who lived and lives in us, in all people, in the whole creation as Christ the fully-available, life-giving, compassionate, universal Spirit of God.



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www.smitv.org