

"Who?"
Pentecost XIII
Proper 16
27 August 2023
Trinity+St. Peter's Episcopal Church
San Francisco, California

Isaiah 51:1-6
Psalm 138
Romans 12:1-8
Saint Matthew 16:13-20

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The Joke

It was in my senior year in college at a school that was preparing us for our entry into seminary. There were classes in Hebrew, Philosophy, Greek, and Theology – but there was a place for humor as well. In a theological survey class, our professor told us a joke based on today's gospel, and it serves as a point of departure for us we begin to answer Jesus' question in the Gospel, "Who do people say that the Son of man is?" Or later, "Who do *you* say that I am?" So the Reverend Professor went on with Jesus asking, "Who do men say that I am?" And they answered him, "Some say that you are the Ground of All Being, the Omega Point, the Ultimate Concern." And Jesus said unto them, "Huh?" It was a takedown of contemporary, or not so contemporary theology by a conservative Lutheran theologian, and it was a sign, in our nervous laughter in response, of our own search for who Jesus is. It's a poignant question, and one that is asked with increasing relevance in our own time, when much of what Jesus calls us to do is either ignored, or explained away.

The story points out all the places in which we have sought Jesus, or looked for the nature of the Christ. It is an ambitious search, a difficult task, one that leads us to many different places. The readings for today give us some method to this search, this seeking for Jesus and his nature, his presence among us.

Listening to God

The question that Jesus poses is not unknown to Isaiah, for he seeks an approach as well. Our reading of this poem from Second Isaiah is divided into two strophes (verses 1-3, and 4-6). The remainder of the larger pericope (51:1-23) continues that general pattern. If there is a general theme that the prophet wants to set before us, it is one of looking and listening. Each of the strophes in our reading begins with that invitation. In his commentary on Second Isaiah, J. Oswalt sort of jokes with us as well.

"The first strophe has as its purpose the encouragement of those who are seriously pursuing righteousness. These are persons who would be particularly prone to discouragement. Their compatriots whose hearts are hardened (Listen to me, you

fainthearted, far from the victory of justice:) These will not be especially troubled by God's apparent failure to keep his promises. After all, they never thought he would in the first place."

Isaiah sees those, however, who are looking for God, and who don't know what to do with their disappointment. To this attitude Isaiah brings a familiar offering – comfort. The first strophe asks us to look at Abraham and Sarah, for God comforted them in their distress, as God comforts Zion. Out of Sarah's despair, God comforted her with an heir – and not only an heir, but also a nation.

The second strophe reminds God's people to listen for God's teaching, God's word, and God's prophetic presence. The people invited by God to listen are God's people, partners in an intimate relationship (one might even say a conversation) with God. If comfort was the byword for the first strophe, hope stands in for the second. And this hope stands in a desperate place. *"Though the heavens vanish like smoke, the earth wear out like a garment...my salvation shall remain forever, and my victory shall always be firm."* These are words for our time as well. Looking for God in our own lives, and listening to God in the voices of others seems to be the key here.

Knowing ourselves in Christ

Paul has spent a great deal of time up to this point reminding the church of who it is that actually constitutes the church – Jews, Gentiles, men, women, children, slaves, free. Now he addresses them as a community called to be and do together. He calls them a "living sacrifice." This reading reminds me of a phrase in the Rite 1 Eucharistic Prayer of the Book of Common Prayer, "And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee." We are made worthy of being such a sacrifice by the renewal of our minds – so that we might know what it is that God wants us to do.

Having that certainty about our true self, Paul then wants us to see how the community is knit together so that it might accomplish the will of God. Like Isaiah, he encourages us to look at our real selves, the various parts of which we are made, which parts working together make for a life that might be seen by others. So it must be for the church as well. Paul makes one of his lists, enumerating the differing gifts present in the church: prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, giving, leading, and compassion. Has anything been left out? Offering up ourselves we can offer up some of these gifts. Offering up as a community we might, as a body be able to offer up all of them. And thus he provides that we might look and listen to ourselves, and in the context of our own lives as individual, and in community both see and hear Jesus – a gift for others.

Devoting ourselves to the Question

Matthew uses another term, "the Son of Man", as opposed to Mark's "I". Matthew's Jesus reaches back into the history of Israel to help Peter frame his response, as well as the responses of the others, "John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah." In these responses, Jesus is seen as standing amongst the prophets, the latest manifestation of which was John the Baptist. Peter goes beyond that. "You are the

Messiah." What does it mean that Jesus was the "Anointed One"? And here we see Jesus standing amongst the anointed ones of Israel – prophets, priests, and kings.

The vision is not Peter's own, but a gift from God – a revelation from God. With his confession, however, do we then need to stop seeking an answer, or words with which to frame an answer? In our preaching, in our devotions we need to continue to address the question. Our time is either asking it, or ignoring it. What troubles me most is that our time is painting Jesus in colors that he would not recognize or want. So we are left with it. Who do you say that he is?

This is our homework for the week, no rather for the rest of our lives, seeking Jesus and knowing him in the events of our time and our living. It is seeking Jesus and knowing him in the needs and gifts of others. It is seeking Jesus and knowing him in the righteousness offered to us in our own lives. Seen in this perspective we might change the question to, "Who do people say that you are?"

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