

The Question Behind the Question

Today's Gospel reading reaches a critical point in the ministry of Jesus. It can almost be seen as the concluding scene to the first part of Jesus' earthly life. Not too long after this exchange, the second half of Jesus' ministry begins with the Transfiguration and Jesus changes His focus on reaching His destination of the city of Jerusalem where the final showdown with the authorities will take place. Many of these disciples had been with Jesus for more than two years now and have experienced and witnessed Jesus' teachings, healings and miracles. As they are proceeding from last week's location of Tyre and Sidon in Gentile territory, they go through Caesarea Philippi. It must be noted that this was a city rebuilt by Herod Philip in honor of the emperor and himself. There were temples and statues honoring the emperor, Roman gods and Philip all around. Plus, we need to keep in mind that the Romans viewed the emperor as a god. Announcing that someone else could be divine risked receiving the death penalty from the Romans.

So, the question that Jesus first asked, "Who do people say is the Son of Man?" is a rather safe question, one that asks the apostles what other people are saying who the Messiah is. I could imagine that the disciples were all eager to shout out their answers like third graders being asked a question by their teacher. But then, Jesus changes the question from a general, what are other people saying, what is the gossip kind of question and makes it personal on two levels. Jesus asks them who do they think that Jesus is? Those same disciples who were eager to answer the first question suddenly became silent and started looking to become as less noticeable by Jesus as possible. I could imagine the disciples finding different ways to avoid making eye contact with Jesus, hoping that He would not call on them directly. Then, Peter in his charge-forward characteristic way gives the answer.

If we take a moment and really examine the questions that Jesus asks and not hurry to the Peter's answer, then we hear some deep questions behind what Jesus asked. When Jesus asked what others are saying about the identity of the Messiah, the disciples gave answers of people who were dead. John the Baptist would have been the only one who could be considered as a contemporary of them, all the others who were mentioned had been dead for centuries. In essence, Jesus is saying that if this long-awaited for Messiah is someone who is dead, then what were they doing following Him? What did they really think of Jesus? Was He just this itinerant preacher who did some miracle healings and gave them a new perspective on life? What were they hoping to get out of following Him?

By changing the first question from a general question to a more personal question, Jesus is hinting at the answer. He is telling the disciples that if these dead guys did not deliver as being the Messiah, then they should be looking elsewhere for the Messiah. By using the 'Son of Man' descriptor for the Messiah in the first question and Himself in the second question, Jesus is helping to make that connection for the disciples. It is then that Peter, with the help from above openly declares Jesus to be the Messiah.

Then, in possibly one of the more debatable actions that Jesus does, He says that upon this 'rock' the church will be built. Before we get into to what the rock refers, we need to also understand the Greek word 'ecclesia' which Matthew used and is translated into English as 'church.' Ecclesia does not necessarily refer to an organized institution, but more broadly to a community or assembly of believers.

Some in the Christian community have understood Jesus to say that upon Peter the church will be built. That Jesus is, in effect, naming His earthly successor to lead the fledgling movement after Jesus leaves. However, if you look at the history of the early church, these first disciples did not understand it this way. If you look at the

Book of Acts, Peter did not have a prominent role in leading the church. Jesus' brother, James, was the one who was mentioned as the leader of the church in Jerusalem. So, if even the early church did not recognize Peter as head of the church (though he did have a prominent role in teaching and spreading the Gospel), how did they view Peter's confession and how should we understand what Jesus meant?

Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah is the cornerstone of one's belief. It is the starting point of Christianity. Paul stresses this point throughout his various letters. This is the 'rock' to which Jesus was referring; not necessarily Peter. Any one of the apostles could have answered that question because, as Jesus said, God provided the answer to Peter. The next step is to see the mission of the Messiah in the way that Jesus did and not the way that was prevalent at that time. Jesus saw the mission of the Messiah as to the whole world and for more than just freedom from another nation. Jesus saw the Messiah as someone who frees people from the bondage of sin and death, freeing us from control by Satan, showing us a better way, a way that leads to everlasting life.

One thing that I think we miss in this confession, this statement of faith of Peter is the second part of it. Peter, in the first part acknowledges that Jesus is the Messiah. But the second part is just as important - that Jesus is the "Son of the living God." This needs to be understood in at least two ways. First, that God is the Father of Jesus - Jesus came from God and has a divine nature. This part is readily accepted. Unfortunately, we tend to stop there and do not consider the ramifications of the adjective used for God. Peter says that Jesus is the Son of the living God; this is the only time in the Bible when an adjective is used in the phrase "Son of God." What does it mean that we have a 'living' God? It means that God is involved in God's creation. God didn't just create the universe, nature's laws and give us free will, then check out and let time play out on its own. God has a design, or desire for the universe and is active in

helping it to reach that goal. While God has reined in some of His power so that we have the ability to make choices, God's desire for us remains steadfast. Unfortunately, humanity has shown that it prefers a different path, choosing a path that is self-centered and self-serving; being like God was not enough, humanity has wanted to be God. This path eventually leads to death, which is a total and complete separation from God. God is trying to get us back on the right path and is continually trying to help us along that path in many ways. This path was set by Jesus and by His death and resurrection, securing the final destination of that path. By sending the Holy Spirit to us to show us the path, guiding us along the path and back to it when we stray; by sending others to help us, teach us, walk alongside us, God shows us that He is the living God, willing to give us more than what is required of us.

It should be mentioned about the keys to the kingdom which Jesus said He was going to give to Peter. At the time of Jesus, the scribes and Pharisees had the authority to decide what was allowable and what was not allowed within society. They had the authority to establish acceptable actions of believers. This authority rested on them being able to interpret the Scriptures and apply them to the current circumstances. What Jesus was doing was telling the disciples that they will have this kind of authority. Later in the Gospels, Jesus basically cautions them not to use this authority to place undue burdens on believers as the Pharisees had done without offering any way to ease those burdens. It wasn't until the early third century when the keys to the kingdom was linked with the forgiveness of sins.

At this point in His ministry, Jesus is kind of giving the disciples a 'mid-term' test to see what they have learned by being with Him and witnessing the miracles and teachings which He had done. In a way, Jesus is also hinting that how He will fulfill the mission of the Messiah will be different than what was expected, giving us much more than what had been hoped for from the Messiah at that time. The foundation, the

bedrock of our faith begins with the confession that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. What is then built upon this foundation of rock will be strong and steadfast, able to resist all temptations and attempts by the evil one to separate us from that rock. May we use the grace of God to help strengthen our trust in God so that whatever may come our way, we will be able to stay on our journey to our eternal home.

YouTube links:

Gospel and Sermon: <https://youtu.be/o26J-3AMSaq>

Service: <https://youtu.be/23NBZ8GRucw>