

# WHO DO SAY THAT I AM?

---

## Great Questions (Part 6)

Text: Mark 8:27-33; Luke 19:28-44

I have in my hand a book with the rather audacious title, *The Complete Book of Questions*. It implies that every question worth asking is in this book. It is subtitled "1001 conversation starters for any occasion". I have used it on many occasions to spark small group discussion because it raises provocative issues and opens windows into each other's lives.

I went looking for the question that is at the heart of our reflections on this Palm Sunday. It is the question that Jesus poses at the turning point of his ministry. He says to his inner circle, "Who do you say that I am?" It is not just one of the good questions. It is not just an interesting question. It is THE question, yet it wasn't in *The Complete Book of Questions*.

Not all questions are of equal value, not even the Great Questions of Jesus in this series. This question is the question above all questions that we need to answer, "Who you say that Jesus is?" It is *the* question that transcends Jesus' conversation with his disciples in Caesarea Philippi and Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. What ties both of these incidents together is that Jesus' followers and the crowd missed the answer because of their false expectations.

### Read Mark 8:27-33: Luke 19-28-44

False and distorted expectations. This can be the great relationship killer because false expectations blind us to the person who is right before our eyes.

My guess is that all of us at one time or another have had the experience of someone looking at us through the eyes of their projected desires, for what they wanted or expected us to be, and never took the time to see us for who we are. For 10 years I served as senior pastor of a church in the San Jose area, commonly known as Silicon Valley, in Northern California. I followed a much-beloved pastor who had significant shaping influence on this congregation. Stan was a tender-hearted shepherd of the flock who had carefully taught the Bible, patiently bringing a liberal congregation around to a Christ-centered focus. Stan retired and I followed. At the time I became the senior pastor of the church, there was a very influential man serving in a significant volunteer role on the church staff, who would become my nemesis throughout my tenure. He was a retired IBM executive who faithfully served the previous senior pastor with his complementary gifts of administration. My preaching style was quite different from Stan's deliberative delivery. They too complained that I speak too fast. My teaching had a sharper edge. I believed in ministry of the whole body and not just

lodging care-giving in the office of the senior pastor. To my nemesis I was failing as a shepherd. I was not living up to the image that had been shaped by my predecessor and his mentor. He would say to me, "We don't need someone who is a prophet in the pulpit, we need a tender-hearted caregiver." I often felt invisible to this person. I wanted to say to him, "Do you see me? Do you see who I am? Can you allow me to be a gift to this congregation? If you just see me through your projected ideal, you will miss the value of my life."

Can you relate to this story? Have you ever been on the job and felt like your supervisor never got to know you because they only saw you through their agenda? Parents may only see a child through the lens of their longings and expectations which really are the fulfillment of their own dreams, and miss the uniqueness of who they have in their home. Marriage partners can be like ships passing in the night, because of some idealized picture of what they think the other should be. I almost brought our marriage to an end in our first decade because I had a list of what Lily was supposed to be doing to please me. Believe me, she wasn't living up to my standard. I wasn't pleased. By seeing her only through that grid I could have missed the gift of what we have together now.

A major reason for Jesus posing the question, "who do you say that I am" was to penetrate the false and distorted expectations that they had of him. The first Palm Sunday was shrouded with the false hope that would lead to profound disappointment. How does a crowd go from shouting "Hosanna" on Sunday to howling "crucify him" on Good Friday?

But before Jesus turns to his disciples with his pointed question, he sets them up with a general version of the same question. Jesus chooses to raise the questions about his identity in a region dominated by Roman influence. Caesarea Philippi had been settled by the tetrarch Philip but named in honor of Caesar Augustus, thus Caesarea Philippi. So Jesus may have chosen this location to affirm his lordship in contrast to where Caesar was heralded as lord.

"On the way he [Jesus] asked them [his disciples], 'Who do people say that I am?'" (Mark 8:27) What is the word on the streets? How am I playing in Peoria?

This may have been the first time that Jesus had openly raised the question of his identity, but it is certainly not the first time the question had come up. No one could have ever done the things that Jesus had done, nor said the things that he had said without people asking, *Who is this person? Who does he think he is anyway?*

You might recall that when the four friends lowered the paralytic into the presence of Jesus, he said to him, "My son, your sins are forgiven." The religious leaders present thought to themselves, "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" When Jesus stilled the storm, his disciples said, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves

obey him!" Whether it is delivering the Gerasene demoniac, or raising Jairus's daughter from the dead, it provoked the inquiry, *who is this?* The question of Jesus' identity is on almost every page of the New Testament.

Napoleon summed it up well, "I know men, and Jesus was no mere man."

Let's hear the reports from the populace, "Who do people say that I am?" "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets" (Mark 8:28). The disciples report, "They are saying some pretty flattering things about you. They think you are hot stuff." To claim that Jesus was *John the Baptist* meant that he had been raised from the dead, since Herod had him beheaded. *Elijah* was the prophet that never saw death having been whisked away on a fiery chariot and was believed to be the forerunner of the Messiah. At the very least you are considered a *prophet*—a miracle worker who exposes the secrets of people's hearts.

In other words, Jesus was in good company, held in high regard. Even today people would say universally positive things about Jesus. Jesus has appeared on the cover of Time Magazine more than any other figure. Over a 100 years ago, the famed British writer, H. G. Wells wrote of Jesus, "More than 1900 years have passed, a historian like myself, who doesn't even call himself a Christian, finds the picture centering irresistibly around the life and character of this most significant man...The historian's test of greatness is 'What did he leave to grow?' Did he start men to thinking along fresh lines with a vigor that persisted after him? By this test, Jesus stands first."

If you want to establish the standard—Jesus is the model. If you want to endorse your movement co-opt Jesus for your purposes. We love to make Jesus over into our likeness. If you are in the business world, according to Laurie Beth Jones, "Jesus is the model CEO". The Cuban government distributes a painting of Jesus with a rifle slung over his shoulder. To the white supremacist Jesus believed in the purity of the white race. [Ironic since he was an olive skinned Jew. But never let facts get in the way of your distortion.] Norm Evans, a former NFL lineman, wrote a book *On God's Squad*. In it he says, "I guarantee you Christ would be the toughest guy who ever played the game. If he were alive today I would picture a six-foot-six-inch 260 pound defensive tackle who would always make big plays." You name it, he is the all purpose Jesus when we want to use him to support our cause.

But as the late evangelist Tom Skinner said, Jesus didn't come to support our causes on the right or the left, he came to take over. You see Jesus really isn't looking for admirers, he is looking for followers...on his terms, not ours. Flattery doesn't go very far with Jesus.

Thus Jesus turns to the question, "Who do you say that I am?"

Our over-familiarity with this question, may cause us to lose the impact. Let me put this question in another setting to see if I can capture the shocking dynamic here. Suppose I were to say to you, "People, I have served you here at Christ Church for over 7 years now. I ask you, who do you think I am?" Do you sense the audacity and implication of such a question? This would imply that I have an identity of real importance that I have hidden from you. I am a mysterious figure who carries more significance than you may have realized. The question also raises the expectation that perhaps a momentous announcement is to come.

It tells us that the identity of Jesus is the heart of the matter. I don't know for sure, but I think there was a pause before any of the disciples dared to answer the question, "Who do you say that I am?" Perhaps there was an awkward silence. There may have been a shuffling of their feet as they kept their eyes on their sandals avoiding eye contact with Jesus. Finally, Peter, the disciple with no unexpressed thoughts, speaks for the group. "You are the Christ" (Mark 8:29). Matthew adds, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16)

What was Peter affirming here? We so often speak of Jesus Christ, as if Jesus is his given name and Christ is his surname. But Peter is saying that Jesus is "the Christ", literally, the "anointed one", the long awaited, promised Messiah.

Peter gets an "Amen" from Jesus. Again in Matthew we read Jesus' commendation of Peter, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven" (Matthew 16:17) Peter, hold on to that affirmation because a hard word is coming.

Jesus accepts the designation of Messiah but immediately begins to say some disturbing things. He redefines Messiah in terms that are unacceptable to Peter and the disciples. We read, "Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him. He then began to teach them that the Son of Man *must* suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he *must* be killed and after three days rise again" (Mark 8:30-31).

How quickly things can turn. Peter was a friend of God one moment, and the enemy, the next. "He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said, "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men" (Mark 8:33).

Peter had a false and distorted expectation of the Messiah. He had made a creedal statement. "You are the Christ." On the surface he had answered correctly. On most Sundays we stand up and recite the Apostles Creed about Jesus, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and in Jesus Christ his only Son, who was conceived the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate,

was crucified, dead and buried. He descended into the hell or hades. The third day he rose again from the dead." Is it possible to recite a creed and not understand what we are saying or have it affect the way we live? Of course.

It was like Peter was simply assenting to a creed. "You are the Christ." This is the right answer to the quiz, who is Jesus? But Peter had in mind very different content to the idea of Messiah than Jesus did. You are the liberator that comes in the line of David to restore Israel to prowess and to throw off the shackles of the Roman oppressors. Peter was saying, you the one who will gather the Jewish people scattered in the diaspora and make Jerusalem and Palestine the center of the world, and establish your rule and reign of God on earth. He was also affirming something very personal. And by the way, I get to be in on the ground floor of this new regime and hold a featured position in the kingdom to come.

Jesus was articulating a description of a Messiah that he knew nothing about. A messiah who dies? An oxymoron. Jesus had set up a mental train wreck. These two ideas of messiah and death could not coexist. This is what Dan spoke about last week. Jesus can be confounding. Peter, are you confused? Jesus had to lead him into confusion in order to strip away his false image of the Messiah that got in the way of seeing Jesus for who he is.

*"He began to teach them that the son of man must suffer many things and be rejected...must be killed...and after 3 days rise again" (Mark 8:31).* Peter didn't even hear that part about rising again after 3 days. The key word here is "must." *Must* implies a divine necessity, an appointment by God awaits Jesus in Jerusalem. From this moment Jesus would set his face to Jerusalem. His destiny awaited Him there. For this purpose He had come into the world. Jesus was on a divine time table. Jesus' mission was the cross. This was not the result of political dynamics that were set in motion that got out of hand or simply that the religious leaders could not abide a challenge to their authority; the cross was God's plan. All of these other players simply play bits parts in God's drama.

Peter could hear none of it. "Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him." Messiahs don't die. Messiahs lead armies. Messiahs overthrow evil. They are not victims of other people's actions. We have been victims long enough. Peter had visualized the ticker-tape parade as Jesus came into Jerusalem. He saw the confetti streaming down from the buildings. He couldn't wait for the victory lap around Jerusalem before Jesus would assume his place as king. Peter would be right there alongside Jesus, sure to be noticed.

Perhaps on that Palm Sunday as Jesus' entourage entered Jerusalem, Peter was still holding out hope that he had misunderstood. The day was playing out just as Peter had envisioned it. "When he [Jesus] came near to the place where the road goes down

the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen:

“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”

“Peace in heaven and glory in the highest.”

Again Jesus accepts the adulation. It was right to honor him in this way. When the Pharisees attempted to silence the crowds with, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples!”, Jesus responded, “I tell you if they keep quiet the stones will cry out” (Luke 19:37-40) I am He whom you have long expected.

But Jesus says, I am coming in a very different way that you have expected. Jesus knows that these shouts of praise will turn to disappointment. Unmet expectations will yield a chorus of “Crucify Him, Crucify Him.” As Jesus descended the serpentine road that overlooked Jerusalem from the near-by mount of Olives, we read, “As he approached Jerusalem, and saw the city, he wept over it and said, “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now is hidden from your eyes...you did not recognize the time of God’s coming to you” (Luke 19:41, 44).

How sad! You missed me, Jesus is saying. You didn’t see me. You held onto to your own image of what you wanted me to be, because of that you will reject me.

Peter had uttered the right words, “You are the Christ”, but he didn’t have the right content. In asking, “Who do you say that I am?”, Jesus is not looking for a Sunday School answer. He is not looking for admirers, but followers. Peter to this point and I think right up to the end, was more an admirer than he was a follower.

We answer Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am?” not from a textbook or a creed, but with our life. On the eve of Jesus’ crucifixion Peter is again confronted with the implications of the cross. He demonstrates that he still has not taken in the impact of Jesus’ impending death. In the Upper Room on the night we call *Maundy Thursday*, Jesus dramatized the implications of the cross by taking on the form of a servant and began to wash his disciples’ feet. With a towel wrapped around his waist and a wash basin in hand he knelt before his disciples. Peter is next. “No”, said Peter, “Lord, are you going to wash my feet...You shall never wash my feet” (John 13:6, 8).

What is going on with Peter? The very resistance that Peter exemplifies is a key to the answer to the question, “who do you say that I am?” What is Jesus saying to Peter about his identity and Peter’s response in this incident?

1. Jesus said to Peter, I am the one who is humble and lowly of heart. Jesus’ act of service upended Peter’s understanding of value and worth. In Peter’s mind the way the world was arranged was that the lesser served the greater. There was a certain

order to things that made sense. The disciples entered into the Passover meal still jockeying for position, carrying on a conversation about who was the greatest among them. Who was going to get the seat next to the power when Jesus ascended to his throne? Now the greater is acting as the lesser. The greater is serving the lesser. In Jesus' kingdom you descend to greatness.

2. Jesus said to Peter, I am the one who is vulnerable and puts my life on the line. Even Jesus can be needy and vulnerable. In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus pours out his heart to his father, needing assurance that He has not been abandoned. "Abba, Father, let this cup pass from me, nevertheless, not my will but thine be done." Here Peter is on the receiving end of his Lord's service to him. To be on the receiving end is to be put into a very vulnerable position. It is far easier to be the strong one who condescendingly gives to another in need, than to be the needy one, who must rely on another person's kindness. Archbishop William Temple said, "Man's humility does not begin with the giving of service; it begins with the readiness to receive it." Peter needed to learn the vulnerability of being served before he could truly serve.

3. Finally, Jesus says to Peter, I am the one who gets down into the grime of people's lives. Perhaps the deepest reason for Peter's resistance was Jesus came down from the pedestal and placed his hands in the dirt of real life. We want to keep Jesus polished on the mantle reserved for religious times. We don't want a Jesus who mucks around in the rough-and-tumble of real life.

George MacLeod put it powerfully, "I am recovering the claim that Jesus was not crucified in a Cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves; on the town garbage heap...at a place where cynics talk smut, and thieves curse, and soldiers gamble. Because that is where he died. And that is what He died about. And that is where churchmen should be."

"Who do you say that I am?" That question can only be answered by our life. Jesus intends for us to follow him to the cross. Jesus' kingdom is to be marked by being sacrificial servanthood, being vulnerable and needy before our brothers and sisters, and being willing to get involved in the broken places of life. We serve a crucified God.

There is a powerful story that came out of the former Soviet Union that points to the attractive power of the sacrifice of Christ. In their periodic efforts to eradicate religious belief, KGB agents would infiltrate the nation's churches on a Sunday morning. One agent was struck by the deep devotion of an elderly woman who was kissing the feet of a life-size carving of Jesus on the cross.

"Babushka [Grandmother]," he said. "Are you prepared to kiss the feet of the beloved general secretary of our great Communist party?"

"Why, of course," came the immediate reply. "But only if you crucify him first."

Let me close this message with a phenomenal summary of our text and the answer to the greatest of question. It comes from an unlikely source, the lead singer of the band U2, Bono. An interviewer asks Bono: **Christ has his rank among the world's greatest thinkers. But Son of God, isn't that far-fetched?**

**Bono: No, it's not far-fetched to me. Look, the secular response to the Christ story always goes like this: He was a great prophet, obviously a very interesting guy, had a lot to say along the lines of other great prophets, be they Elijah, Muhammad, Buddha, or Confucius. But actually Christ doesn't allow you that. He doesn't let you off the hook. Christ says, No. I'm not saying I'm a teacher, don't call me a teacher. I'm not saying I am a prophet. I'm saying, "I'm the Messiah." I'm saying: "I am God incarnate." And people say: No, no, please, just a prophet. A prophet we can take. You're a bit eccentric. We've had John the Baptist eating locusts and wild honey, we can handle that. But don't mention the "M" word! Because, you know, we're gonna crucify you. And he goes: No, No, I know you're expecting me to come back with an army and set you free from these creeps, but actually I am the Messiah. At this point, everyone starts staring at their shoes, and says: Oh, my God, he is gonna keep saying this. So what you're left with is either Christ was who He said He was—the Messiah—or a complete nutcase. I mean, we're talking nutcase on the level of Charles Manson...I'm not joking here. The idea that the entire course of civilization for over half of the globe could have been changed and turned upside-down by a nutcase, for me that's far-fetched...**

That is why the greatest question you can ask or answer is, **"Who do you say [with your life] that the Jesus is?"**

# WHO DO SAY THAT I AM?

---

## Great Questions (Part 6)

Text: Mark 8:27-33; Luke 19:28-44

1. Have you ever had an experience where you felt that someone did not see you for who you are because they had false expectations? Describe that experience and how that felt to you.
2. How do you think many of your friends and acquaintances might answer Jesus' question, "who do people say that I am?" What is the common wisdom about Jesus?
3. Why is the question, "who do you say that I am?", such an audacious one?
4. What was Peter's misunderstanding of Jesus? Why do you think it was so hard for Peter to accept a suffering Messiah?
5. What is the difference between a creedal response to this greatest question, and one that is answered with our life?
6. What would it mean to answer Jesus' question with our life?
7. According to Bono, what got Jesus killed?
8. What convinces you that Jesus was who he says He was?