

Sermon for Proper 16A

The text: Matthew 16:13–20

Today we are faced with the most important question in life that any human being will ever have to answer: Just who is Jesus? Our Lord asks us that very question in our text – the fact that he asks it twice shows its importance. ‘Who do the people say that the Son of Man is?’

The disciples answer: *‘Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’* Some people thought that Jesus was John the Baptist, who had come to prepare the way for the Saviour. Others thought Jesus was one of many Old Testament prophets who had promised a Saviour would come. The people had many different ideas of who Jesus was, but none of them recognised Jesus’ divine nature. The religious leaders of the day even believed the opposite, claiming Jesus’ power was from the devil because he ate with sinners and did not give ‘good’ people their due recognition but challenged the religious establishment. Some thought he was a great teacher or a perfect example to follow. That’s some of the things people say about Jesus today. Most people today believe Jesus existed – but they have very different ideas about his identity, such as the Christadelphians, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Muslims or Jews. They believe in Jesus; that is, they believe some historical truths about him. But James reminds us in a very chilling way that we are not to have a kind of historical belief in Jesus. James writes to the Jewish Christians scattered throughout the empire, and in chapter 2 of his letter says: *‘You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that – and shudder’.*

So Jesus says to the disciples: ‘Who do you say I am?’ He asks us that question too.

Peter answers, *‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God’.* The other answers had talked about a Saviour who was coming. But Peter saw Jesus as the Saviour who was right there with him in the present moment. Peter looked at Jesus and saw God standing before him; the living Lord who became truly human like us to be the sacrifice to pay for the sin of the world, and to defeat death itself by rising from it. Peter doesn’t just believe things about Jesus, he trusts in Jesus as his saving Lord in the present moment. *‘Who do you say that I am?’* Through today’s gospel reading Jesus is still asking that same question to you and me. *‘Who do you say that I am?’* Be careful how you answer! Jesus isn’t just asking: ‘Do you think I’m alive?’ Jesus wants to know: ‘Am I the living Lord of your life?’ There is a difference between believing things about Jesus, and trusting in him as the Lord of your life. *‘Who do you say that I am?’* Jesus asks. ‘Am I indeed the living

Lord of your life? Or am I just some ancient dead guy whose body disintegrated long ago in the sands of Palestine?’

Jesus doesn't only call us to believe stuff about him, but to daily trust in him as our saving God. There is a difference between believing things about Jesus and trusting in Jesus as the ever-present living Lord of every moment of our life. Luther's explanation to the first commandment 'You shall have no other gods' attends to this distinction: 'We are to fear (respect), love and trust God above anything else'. This is an important point for all the commandments are related to this one. How we regard the commandments as God's word and will, then, will reveal the level of regard we have for Jesus.

I think that one of our strengths as Lutherans is our focus on grace – that there is nothing a person can do to make themselves right with God or earn his love or forgiveness; that he loves us unconditionally and he has paid for our sins – through Christ alone. There is nothing I could do that would change his love for me.

Perhaps one of our weaknesses as Lutherans is our focus on grace – that is, when grace is our only focus. Perhaps we read 'there is nothing I could do that would change God's love for me' as meaning 'there is nothing I need to do'. Perhaps we hear that God loves us unconditionally and has saved us by grace as meaning 'It really doesn't then matter how I live'. But when we forget God's law, we forget the specific ways in which we as humans sin. We fall into the temptation of explaining away our sin. 'I was just having a bad day' or 'They deserved it'. Or we might relabel our wrongdoing in more acceptable language – for example, harmful gossip becomes 'helpful information', and jokes that put others down are 'just a bit of fun', while those who are offended should just lighten up – even though through the eighth commandment God calls us to defend the reputation of our brothers and sisters, congregational leaders, and even our pastors, whether they be in conversation down the street, our discussions around the kitchen table, or at a public meeting, and to explain their actions in the kindest possible way. When we lose a correct focus on the gospel by focusing only on the gospel, we can easily slip into the habit of justifying our sinful thoughts, words and deeds by explaining how it doesn't matter if we've broken God's commandments – and even to say they don't apply to us in particular situations. As someone said to me recently: 'I know it's wrong, but ...' And I felt like saying, 'You were going really well there until you said "but"'. When we fall into this temptation, I think we risk regarding Jesus as little more than John the Baptist or one of the prophets, because, if we explain away our sin, we forget how urgently we need Jesus' saving help. We make a Saviour out of ourselves by justifying ourselves. Today, Jesus asks us, in effect: 'Who am I in your life? Even though you call me "Lord", am I really Lord of your life?'

Those who do not only believe things about Jesus but trust in Jesus, make the same confession of faith as Peter: *'You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God'*. We know in our hearts that Jesus is not only the Saviour of the world but we confess he is my saviour. He is the Living God who became fully human like you and me, and he bled on the cross to wash away our sins, a cleansing we have already received in baptism where we were united to this living Christ and also his death and resurrection. He has cleansed you from not just some, or the worst, but all your sins; his precious blood was the price paid to save you, to purchase you as his own.

In the traditional liturgy, the church reflects on and responds to the following questions after our confession: 'Do you believe that Jesus Christ has redeemed you from all your sins? Do you desire forgiveness in his name?' That's because Jesus has given authority to his church to forgive and retain sins, just as he says to Peter in our text: *'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.'* Christ is not merely a historical figure – John the Baptist or one of the prophets – but he is our living Lord, present to us. He is the one making the proclamation. So as the minister speaks these words, 'By the authority of Christ and by his command I forgive you all your sins', it is truly our living Christ ever personally present to you, actually making this proclamation to you. Simultaneously, he makes the declaration the pastor does. When a family member, work colleague, or friend confesses to you, or you to them, and you forgive them in Jesus' name, he has loosed in heaven what the Christian has just loosed around the kitchen table, at the workplace, at the sports club, or at playground. That's why he says what is bound or loosed on earth will be bound and loosed in heaven.

This binding and loosing points to an even more precious reality of our living Christ's presence: His proclamation of complete forgiveness to you is not just an announcement, but an enactment and an empowering. The word 'forgiveness' actually means to send away, dismiss, depart from, untie or unbind. The picture is of untying a horse and letting it gallop free. That's what Jesus does for you in the absolution, in the meal of absolution, his holy supper. Between last Sunday and this morning, you and I have sinned. Don't justify or re-label it or attribute it to personality – it's sin! But Jesus has died to wash us clean and put us in a blameless standing before his Father through his saving work on the cross – and now, through the absolution, he delivers the benefits to the cross to each one of us personally: he frees us from sin; he loosens the chains of sin and cords of death from us; he cuts us free; and he sends our sin away from us, so that through the power of this gospel, we are free to love and serve God, each other, and the world. And so, the third question in our confession flows from the second: 'Do you intend to strive daily to lead a holy life, just as Christ has made you holy?'

On the last day, when we face the Living Lord, I doubt that anyone will wish they had spent less time listening to Jesus. He has freed us to love and serve God by hearing his word; learning it and even devouring it, for as he says: *'Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God'*. We have been freed to find out more about the commandments as God's will for a blessed and holy life so that we can enjoy his gifts in the way he intended.

Luther explained the third commandment 'Honour the Sabbath day and keep it holy' to mean: 'We are to fear and love God so that we do not neglect the preaching of his word but gladly hear and learn it'. (And that means not just learning about it, but being shaped by it, living it, modelling it in our lives to others.) Christ, present through his word, gives us faith to look at the commandments and to desire the right use of God's name to talk with him in prayer, the honouring of authority, the desire to help our neighbour in all their physical needs, the desire to uphold the preciousness of sex in the security of a male–female married relationship. He gives us the desire for us to help others keep what is theirs and make a living for themselves rather than focusing on what we might be missing out on. He gives us the desire for honesty and for good reputations to be built up rather than torn down. He gives us the desire to be satisfied with what we have, rather than always wanting more.

Jesus' question is still present tense: *'Who do you say that I am?'* The one born in a stable of a virgin mother? The one who cured sick people and raised several dead people back to life? The one who died on a cross 2000 years ago? All of that is true. But Jesus is the Lord of our lives today. He is present now to guide us and lead us in becoming less of ourselves and more like him. He loves us today, is with us today, and forgives us today. He takes away our sins, to fill us with the power of his endless life and the freedom that God has always wanted us to have – the freedom to be of one heart and of one mind with the Lord of heaven and earth – the one whom even the gates of hell shall not prevail, for he has opened the door and is indeed himself the door to everlasting life. Amen.