

Pentecost 15, A Proper 16, 2023 -St Aidan's Patronal feast. – *The Rev. Julie H. Smith*
Exodus 1:8-2:10; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20



“Who do people say that I am” is the question that leads off our Gospel lesson today.

I remember visiting with a member of St. Bede's in my first year as their vicar (2008-2014) this member was one of the “shut-ins” who lived at a senior independent apartments in the Forest Grove OR.

Her name was Ester. She did not come to church services because she had macular degeneration and a hearing disability.

Ester had not yet met me, nor had she seen me yet.

When I entered her apartment, she hesitated as I greeted her with a gentle embrace... we were eye to eye.

“*you're not at all what I expected,*” she blurted out.

... you were expecting someone taller perhaps

“*well and older she said*”, Well I am 56 . . .

and that was 15 years ago – I'll let you do the math. ...

“*Well you certainly don't look it*” she said.

Jesus didn't look like the Messiah the disciples were expecting either.

As Ester and I visited we shared the things people do when they are getting acquainted. Things about her past, family and where she lived before, her family, her health and interests, what she does in her daily life.

This is how we get to know each other... through activities and relationships. We find out about how God is working in each other's lives through our emotions and sharing with each other individually and in groups.

What do you do, what do you enjoy doing . . . do you have family . . . all defines us who we are.

But for first Century Mediterranean's, they did not get to know each other the way we do.

Nor in the ways that we think are most important to us.

Ancient Mediterranean's are what anthropologists call dyadic or "**other-oriented**"they are people who depend on others to provide them with a sense of who they are.ⁱ

This is why it was important to identify whether someone is "of Nazareth," or "of Tarsus" or from some other place.

Jesus identifies Peter as "Simon Peter, son of Jonah" Those labels would tell a person the information they needed to place the person in question properly on the honor scale as well as all the other pertinent social information people needed to know, to know how to interact properly with the person.

The most common example of this is when Jesus calls Philip and Nathaniel. Philip finds Nathaniel and tells him, "*We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote – Jesus of Nazareth, son of Joseph.*" And then Nathaniel says, as you may recall: "*Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?*"

Their concern was **not** to know this person emotionally as we might think but *how others* thought of them – it was from an honor perspective, **not** how the person thought of themselves.

The question is not our contemporary existential questions ...“Who am I? ...Why am I here? . . .

But rather they would ask the question of Jesus in the way

we read it in the Gospel this morning . . .

*“Who do **people** say, ‘the Son of hu-man-ity’ is?”*

The identification comes from the perspective of significant people or others ...not from your own self identity. (such as I am an Episcopal priest, a chaplain, a teacher, retired etc.)

Jesus asks the disciples first, what they have heard *others* say about him. . . who others say he is –his context.

And they reveal what they have heard; that some say he is John the Baptist, but others say Elijah, or one of the prophets.

-Then Jesus turns the table and changes the question to –“*but who do **YOU** say that I am?*”

And Peter who jumps in without fully understanding the implications with the response, blurts out:

“You are the Messiah, the son of the Living God.”

Peter, the alter ego of the disciples the one who says what others are thinking but perhaps afraid to say....

Certainly, Peter's answer and response to Jesus shows the importance of his role in the early church. Yet this general address by Jesus to the disciples and the response by Peter also suggests that each of us as followers must offer a personal response.

A confession of faith calls upon us to articulate our belief, affirming in ourselves that to which we hold true.

Peter gives voice to the meaning and very thing he believes and is willing to say it out loud...

"This is who I say you are!"

What makes this so risky a proclamation is *where* this takes place in the story. This is the defining moment of Jesus' true identity, and it happens in this place called Caesarea Philippi. Why Caesarea Philippi, well it is known as a seat of power for pagan rulers and pagan gods.

What makes this story so significant to us is in our world today and in the Northwest in particular, is we are in a culture that is un-churched and many have no faith background or religious training. Some know a little about who Jesus is, other than a key religious figure at best.

So ...we too, must make the same confession as Peter; we must say, "You are the Christ" and then continue to learn what it means to make that claim.

When Jesus is claimed as the Christ our faith is brought into existence Aiden and Cuthbert were examples of the faith especially at a time when Celtic Christianity was being spread on the British Isles the midlands and Scotland.

Aidan a monastic and later Bishop of Lindisfarne lived a life of Christian service.

To quote Bede:

“He neither sought nor loved anything of this world, but delighted in distributing immediately to the poor whatever was given him by kings or rich men of the world. ...Whenever in his way he saw any, either rich or poor, he invited them, if pagans, to embrace the mystery of the faith; or if they were believers, strengthen them in the faith and stir them up by words and actions to alms and good works.”

Cuthbert was influenced by Aidan, had a vision of his death and subsequently entered religious life as a monk in the austere traditions of Celtic monasticism. He became a the Prior of Melrose Abbey and later Prior of Lindisfarne. It is said that he was a “healer of the breach” at a time when the Celtic and Roman Christian factions were threatened to divide. Accepting the decisions of the Synod of Whitby (633-4) that brought the usages of the English Church in line with Roman practice. Today some would say this was not necessarily a good thing preferring the Celtic practice of Christianity. . . .

Along with today’s gospel message and these examples of the faith by Aidan and Cuthbert we also must respond to the question: ***“Who do you say that I am?”***

Our response...***You are the Christ***” must also include that we claim and make every effort to embrace the full mystery of the faith.

It is not just ***who*** he is but ***what*** his life, death and resurrection mean to us, and God’s role in all that make us Christians.

For me Jesus the Christ is transcendent and permeates my life most often through other people, like Ester who can't see to read without her machine to magnify her books in order to read and who tells me she is inspired by another women at the facility where she lives. She describes this another woman who has been blind from birth, who reads Braille and finds her way from her apartment to the dining room every day, all on her own....

It is comforting to know that Jesus recognizes the incompleteness of Peters understanding of who he is. Peter has a way to go more challenges ahead for him as he takes a giant step toward understanding who Jesus is.

But still isn't privy to the unveiling of God's nature.

I still don't fully comprehend who God is. I imagine that may be true for you as well.

But we have been given a mission to follow the great commission Jesus gave us to love for one another and to care for those in need of food, shelter, clothing, healing and to value all people even if they are undesirable in some way.

It is up to us to continue to commit and to recommit our lives of faith, claiming who Christ is to us, living our faith the best we can –ever changing that may be.

Amen.

ⁱ Malina & Rohrbaugh (*Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*)