

**WHO IS JESUS CHRIST FOR YOU TODAY?
AND WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES THAT MAKE?**

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 15, 2024

Jesus asked two questions of his disciples at the beginning of today's gospel reading: "Who do people say that I am?" and the second, "But who do you say that I am?" This morning, I'm going to talk about the significance of these questions for you and me. But before I get there, I'd like to take a little time to go down a bit of a side path. When you or I open our Bibles to the New Testament Gospels, we see there the words of Jesus, and a narrative story presented. We can take it for granted that what we see on the page is indeed the exact words of Jesus and the stories of what he did. But it's not as simple as that.

I want to comment on how our Bible came to be, and specifically how we ended up with the words of Jesus that are recorded in the Bible. This information is relevant for our understanding of the Bible as we read it, discuss it, or hear it proclaimed.

The New Testament, our Christian scriptures, begin with four Gospels, four books written by four different authors who each wrote about the Good News of Jesus. Each one telling the story of his life here on earth. When we speak of the "words of Jesus," we are referring to his words initially written down on papyri manuscripts. Eventually those manuscripts were put together in the Bible. But when Jesus spoke, his words were not immediately written down. They were repeated orally from memory over a thirty-five-year period as they were relayed from person to person to person, and group to group. Initially the Gospel stories and words of Jesus were told to fellow Jews in Aramaic and Hebrew. As the community of

disciples continued to grow, it included gentiles who spoke Greek. So, the oral stories and words from Jesus were repeated in Greek.

Eventually, after thirty-five years these remembered stories and words of Jesus were put into written form. The first Gospel was the Gospel of Mark. This Gospel, and the other three were written in Greek, the language of commerce in the world. After Mark was written, twenty years passed before Matthew and Luke were written, and then John was finally written between 90 and 110AD.

So far this sounds like a bit of a complicated process in coming up with our Bibles. But it's about to get even more complicated. The Renaissance painter Michelangelo Caravaggio painted *The Inspiration of Saint Matthew*. It portrays Matthew writing his Gospel. The image is a beautiful one. It portrays Matthew sitting at his desk, quill pen in hand, writing. His bare, dusty feet are seen. Behind him an angel stands, whispering in his ear.

Now, although this is a beautiful, striking scene, it is not accurate. First of all I'm sure he wasn't listening to any angels. But more importantly, his desk would have been more cluttered. There would have been maybe two additional documents spread out on his desk, one of them being Mark's Gospel. You see, the writers Matthew, Luke, as well as John all referred to Mark's gospel when they wrote. And then they also probably referred to another document that scholars have called "Q". "Q," stands for "Quelle," a German word that means "source". A source document that even precedes the Gospel of Mark. Most scholars have agreed that there was probably an original document that recorded the sayings of Jesus, which had long since been lost to time and decay and happenstance. But unlike what would have been the case, in Caravaggio's painting, Matthew's desk is bare, save the single parchment on which he is writing.

You can see that referring to two-thousand-year-old written words as being the “words of Jesus” is much more complicated, and not as simple and straightforward of a process as you might think. Now, let’s get back to today’s Gospel of Mark, and “the words of Jesus” recorded there.

Mark, Matthew, and Luke all record Jesus asking the same two crucial questions of his disciples: “Who do people say that I am?” and “Who do you say that I am?” Who do the people say that I am? The disciples responded, some say you are John the Baptist come back to life. Others say you are one of the great prophets of old. Who do people say that I am? The Pharisees would have said that Jesus was the one who played loose and free with the Law of Moses. The priests would have said that he was a threat to their Jewish religious system. Pilate would have said that he was a rabble-rouser who was a threat to stability and peace and order.

But then Jesus asked the more important question of his closest disciples: “Who do you say that I am?” Judas Iscariot would have said that Jesus had some strange financial management practices. John would have said that Jesus was the one his heart longed for. Some of the others may have said, “Well Jesus, who are you? To be honest, I’m not really sure.” In the scripture we are told that Peter responded for the rest of them. Here’s what he said: “you are the Messiah” – you are the long-awaited deliverer of our people.

You see, Jesus’ question – “Who do you say that I am?” – when asked of different individuals, will elicit slightly different responses, depending on the respondent’s context and time and culture. Two thousand years ago Peter responded, “you are the Messiah.” When you or I hear the word Messiah, it means something very different than what it meant to that Galilean fishermen Peter and the other original disciples. To them, as Jews

in Palestine and Galilee, the Messiah spoken of by their Hebrew prophets, was a king who would come to deliver the Jewish nation from oppression.

But to you and me, Jesus being the Messiah may mean that Jesus is the one who came to die on a cross to deliver us from slavery to sin. Or, Jesus as the Messiah could mean that he came to reveal God and show us the way to live life in its fullness; to show us how to usher in God's reign of life and love and peace and justice.

"Who do you say that I am?" Here's another way to ask this question: "Who is Jesus Christ to you and me, today?" Who is Jesus Christ to you, right now, right here, on this Sunday? For some people living in the twenty-first century, Jesus Christ is someone to look upon with apprehension and mistrust, someone who disturbs the trajectory of their lives. For others, they look at Jesus Christ with some dread, viewing him as the judge who will return one day; the one terrifyingly spoken of in Revelation as riding a white horse with a fiery sword in his hand. To still others, Jesus Christ is the beloved One spoken of in the Song of Solomon; the lover who woos and embraces us.

But standing here this morning I am asking you personally this question, "Who is Jesus Christ to you today?" I want you to think about it; wrestle with its implications. I'm going to give each of us a couple of minutes to ponder that question in our minds and hearts and souls. Let me begin with a prayer. As we enter into a time of silence, may this prayer be your prayer. Settle into your chair. Get comfortable. Close your eyes if you are comfortable doing so. May this prayer be yours: "God, I am here, and you are here. As you and I pause together in this silent moment, I open as best as I am able, the thoughts in my mind, the emotions of my heart, and the whispering of your Spirit in the depths of my soul. Who is Jesus the Christ for me today? Who is Jesus Christ for me on this Sunday morning?"

(SILENCE)

Who is Jesus Christ for each of us today? The answer to this question will determine the answer to a crucial follow up question. Here it is: “What difference does this make for how I live my life?”

Two questions for you: “Who is Jesus Christ for me today?” and “What difference does that make in my life today?”