

Pentecost 10A

August 21, 2011

Rev. Ken Wratten at St. Stephen's San Jose

Exodus 1:8 – 2:10 The birth of Moses

Psalms 124

Romans 12:1-8

Be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God.

Matthew 16:13-20

Jesus said to them, "Who do you say that I am?"

Jesus asked his disciples "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" It appears that Jesus wasn't very impressed with that first answer. That first answer reflected people's attempt to define Jesus through the prophecies and people of Jewish history. It is important to notice that Jesus did not tell his disciples who he was, but he asked them what they had figured out for themselves, based on what they had seen him do and heard him teach. Even of his first followers, Jesus required that they freely, on their own, recognize who he is. So if there are times you are working out just who Jesus is in your life, you are in the same place his closest friends were.

So Jesus asked them, "Who do you say I am?" In the Greek text, the form of the word "you" is an emphatic use. So this statement is saying, "Okay, that's what other people are saying, but who do you say that I am?" And Peter speaks for the group: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." This was the first time that anyone had claimed Jesus to be the Messiah.

The Hebrew word Messiah is equal to the Greek word Christos, where we get the name Christ (Jesus the Christ). Both words mean in English: anointed. Jesus is the one anointed by God for a special purpose. And the meaning from OT scripture was that one would come, anointed by God, to rescue Israel from oppression.

Impulsive Peter was the only one bold enough to answer Jesus' question. And this time his impulsive response served him well. The answer to "Who do you say I am" was that Jesus was the one to deliver them from their oppression; and Jesus was divine: the Son of God.

What is your answer to Jesus asking "who do you say I am?"

When I was a boy, I got very unclear teaching of who Jesus was. I knew he was kind, and knew God, and did miraculous things, like walking on water. That was about it.

When I was in my twenties, I joined some men's bible studies, and moved a little past my childhood Christian education. I learned about Jesus being a person who could connect us more closely with God. I was not at all clear how that was supposed to happen, but I knew that I did feel closer to God when I read bible stories about Jesus' life.

A little later in my life I went to a Baptist church for a few years, because there were rumors spreading around my home town that exciting things were being taught there, and exciting things were happening there. People were driving from 20 miles away (which is a long way in NY State) to attend services there. We went to some services, and found out that the sermons were in language I could understand, and said non-academic things that actually meant something to me. I was being told that Jesus Christ was a human being, but like no other human being, because he also had all the power, and glory, and wisdom, and love of God living in him. He was God, who while still in heaven, was ALSO living in human form on earth, to teach us and model for us how He wants us to behave, and what kind of relationship He wants with every human being. We humans got it wrong, and He wants to fix what we got wrong. He is not a God of rules, He is a God of love – self-giving, agape love.

Later on I was invited by my parish rector (back in the Episcopal Church then) to attend a Cursillo weekend. That event taught me that Jesus wants to be, and can be, my best friend and my confidant and spiritual partner in life, if I invite him to be. I now look to him to guide me through challenges, decisions, and celebrations in my life. There are times I jump in and take over, but I think I am getting better about seeing Jesus that way.

What events have formed your understanding of who Jesus is? What role have you allowed Jesus to play in your life? What study have you done to learn more about who Jesus is? On this continuum from Jesus being a kind, holy man, to being the divine power you look to throughout your day, where is Jesus today? How is that understanding of Jesus different than it was when you were a child, or ten years ago? How can we as this faith community keep growing in our understanding of who Jesus is?

This week I ask that you explore Jesus' question to you: "Who do you say I am?"

Peter's understanding of who Jesus is was praised by Jesus. In fact Jesus' response was to bless Peter, which was the only time Jesus ever blessed any of his disciples. But Jesus also told Peter that his understanding was a gift from God, and not something learned. This tells us a very amazing truth; that our faith is not the result of the study we do. **Our faith is a gift that results from our openness to God.** (Another way to say this is that as students of Jesus, we are people of faith seeking more understanding; we are not people seeking understanding so we can discover faith.)

When we get to heaven, God will ask us what we did in our lives about His son. Everything we read in Scripture tells us that what we do about His son shapes us. Paul says that these decisions about Jesus 'transform' us; they renew our mind so that we are able to know God's will. This is so important that it doesn't only affect us in our next life in heaven, but it changes us in this life too.

What we do with Jesus Christ matters. What we decide to believe, and who or what we decide to follow and worship, matters. This is a process of being open to God in mind AND heart. The decision we make about Jesus Christ shapes our being, and it shapes our eternity.

May you and I keep growing in our relationship with Jesus, every day of our lives. May we be stones of steadfast faith that God uses for expansion projects on His Church. Amen.