

WHO ARE YOU, JESUS?

Psalm 100, p. 552
Revelation 1:4b-8, NT p. 245
John 18:33-37, NT p. 113

Sunday of Christ the King
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“Who are you, Jesus? Are you a king?” All of the gospels record this question from Pilate. In all of the gospels, Jesus answers, “You say that I am” – which doesn’t really answer the question. For 2000 years, people have been trying to find the right answer. Who are you, Jesus?

Last Sunday was supposed to be the end of the year with the Gospel of Mark, but I decided I wanted to spend one more week with this earliest written story of Jesus. The book is short, to the point, mostly action instead of long speeches. The writer doesn’t paint the disciples in glowing colors of faith – on the contrary, they’re quite clueless about who Jesus is and how all this is going to work out. Jesus pays attention to the poor, to the ordinary people who surround him, teaching, healing and feeding them. He gets angry sometimes, especially when people in need are kept from coming to him to receive help. Mark is also the story of what the death and resurrection of Jesus mean for his followers and for the early church, but instead of being spelled out clearly at the end, the clues are hidden throughout the book. Who is Jesus, in Mark’s story? He is a riddle to be solved, a secret to be discovered, a way to be lived.

The first verse calls him Jesus Christ (or Messiah), Son of God, so the readers have a heads-up. The demons come the closest to identifying him correctly as “the Holy One of God” and “Jesus, Son of the Most High God.” The voice from heaven twice identifies him as “My Beloved Son.” Other than those five places, the gospel just gives partial answers to the question until the very end.

Who is Jesus? The gospels use many names to describe him. Most often in Mark's gospel, his disciples, the scribes and Pharisees, and various other people call him Teacher or Rabbi. They come to him for healing, though they don't actually call him a healer. After nearly every healing, Jesus would warn people not to tell what had happened, so that is part of the mystery. Obviously, they didn't honor his request. The people in his hometown just knew him as "the carpenter, son of Mary." There were questions about whether he had the spirit of John the Baptist or the spirit of Elijah or another prophet. Peter called him the Messiah, the Christ, though he didn't understand what that would mean for Jesus. On the way to Jerusalem, blind Bartimaeus shouted for "Jesus, son of David," a very political title.

"Who are you, Jesus?" Jesus called himself "the Son of Man." That could mean that he considered himself just a human being. It could refer to the vision in Daniel about a heavenly being that looked like a man, one who was given authority to rule and judge, and power to defeat all human empires. Jesus often used the phrase Son of Man as he predicted his suffering, which is another part of the puzzle. How could a victorious king die before he reigns?

At his trial and crucifixion, Pilate, the soldiers, and the religious leaders would all call him "King of the Jews," in a master stroke of irony. They meant to mock Jesus, and yet they were telling the truth in a way they could never understand. Finally, at his death, the centurion at the foot of the cross identifies him as "the Son of God."

"Who are you, Jesus?" Painters and writers and musicians have often described Jesus as a king, with crown and scepter, sitting on a throne. That image seems to me to be at odds with the way Jesus lived, though it is certainly Biblical – not so much in Mark, but in Matthew in the story of the last judgment and throughout the book of Revelation.

The concept of king or divine ruler might not be as helpful to us as to our ancestors in faith, yet we hint at the concept when we confess that “Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior.” As Savior, he brings us into right relationship with God. As Lord – similar to the idea of king – he calls us to a new way of life as we try to live as he commands. In this simplest of creeds, we are saying who he is for us. “Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior.”

That sounds good on Sunday morning, but what does it mean the rest of the week? How does it help when we’re really tired after a long weekend that isn’t finished yet, and the stove needs to be cleaned and the boxes packed and the tables moved? How does Jesus as Lord and Savior give us hope when the layoff notice arrives? Does the Sunday of Christ the King mean anything in the hospital when the prognosis is doubtful? At the end of Mark, the angel at the tomb told the women that “he is risen and is going before you into Galilee. There you will see him.” The risen Christ is going back home, and so should they.

And so should we. It’s in the kitchen where we find him, in the work place and the unemployment line. We find him in the hospital and in the painful darkness of night. We see the face of Christ at Community Meals, and in the face of each neighbor. This Sunday of Christ the King assures us that what Jesus did 2000 years ago as Son of Man, he still does as the living Christ. He came to those who needed him: with healing; with good news that God had not forgotten them; with forgiveness of sins; with new life; with new purpose for all who responded to his call; with new relationship to God as Abba, a Father who is close at hand. He came with new challenges for religious leaders and new challenges for the power of the empire. He was an example of living in service to others, and he called his followers to live that way too. He comes to us, participating in the suffering of the world and in our suffering, and assuring us that he is with us in all times and places, not just on Sunday. He comes with

hope that all the world will eventually honor the justice and peace of God's rule.

That doesn't mean we'll understand Christ completely, only that we begin to know him. The late nineteenth-century medical missionary, Albert Schweitzer, wrote a book called, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. After about 400 scholarly pages, he concludes with this thought:

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: "Follow thou me!" and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and as in ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is. ¹

"Who are you, Jesus?" We'll never know all there is to know about Jesus, about the living Christ – at least not in this life. But as we live his way of self-giving love, we will come to know **him**, the one who is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end of our faith. We'll know him as the servant king whose reign is unending love.

Let us pray. We thank you, God, for the love and justice of the risen Christ, who comes among us still. May we have eyes to see him in our neighbor and ears to hear his call to service, joyfully living as his disciples this day and always. Amen.

¹Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. Translated by W. Montgomery. From the First German Edition "Von Reimarus zu Wrede," 1906. With a Preface by F. C. Burkitt, D.D. First English Edition, 1910. Published in Great Britain by A. & C. Black, Ltd. The electronic edition of this document (*The Quest of the Historical Jesus* by Albert Schweitzer) is copyright © 2001 Peter Kirby. p. 402-3.