

Questions Jesus Asks:  
“Who do you say that I am?”  
Mark 8:27-30

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<sup>27</sup>Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, “Who do people say I am?”

<sup>28</sup>They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.”

<sup>29</sup>“But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

Peter answered, “You are the Messiah.”

<sup>30</sup>Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him. Mark 8:27-30

(Also found Matthew 16:13-20, Luke 9:18-20)

This conversation is recorded in three of the four Gospels: Matt/Mark/Luke. Each of these Gospel writers places it in a slightly different context, but what they have in common is this: this is the hinge or major turning point in the life and ministry of Jesus. His Galilean ministry is coming to an end and his journey to Jerusalem and the cross is beginning.

The disciples have been hanging out with/following Jesus for some time now. They have seen Jesus take a boy's bag lunch and feed thousands...touch a blind man and restore his sight, turn water into wine, make the lame walk, the deaf hear, the dumb speak and the sick become well.

They have heard Jesus teach with such authority that the scribes and Pharisees are speechless. They themselves have been drawn to him in such a way that they have been compelled to leave behind livelihoods. In one case, two brothers abandon the family fishing business in order to "fish" now for people! Yes, Jesus had changed *their* lives in significant ways as well.

We should note that it was customary that students--disciples-- (Grk: learners) of rabbis (which means “teacher”) would ask the questions of their wise teachers, not the other way around!

But Jesus is no ordinary rabbi. This question is unusual also, in that, one usually asks what others *do*, not who they *are*. In this instance, the disciples may have certainly pondered this question, at least since the stilling of the storm. Then

they wondered amongst themselves: "Who is this, that even the wind and waves obey him?" (Mark 4:41)

Here Jesus asks two questions; the first is open-ended:

Who do people say that I am? the crowds.... what are they saying?

If Jesus were alive today all he'd have to do is check his Facebook or Twitter feed!

Instead, he's checking in with his closest friends/followers.

Surely they could give him some insight into his popularity ratings.

What does the latest poll reveal??

Well, the disciples reported, according to the latest Galilean poll:

33% say you are John the Baptist.

28 % say you are Elijah

20% say you are Jeremiah

14 % say you are some other prophet

5% are undecided

+/- 3% margin of error

There is no shortage of possible responses. To liken Jesus to any of the above mentioned figures is an indication of Jesus' preeminent standing in the popular mind. Yet even these comparisons are inadequate. While flattering, they fall short as they ultimately deny Jesus' uniqueness.

Theologians today have equally expressive descriptions of Jesus:

"a perfected human person" (Karl Rahner),

"the human face of God" (John A.T. Robinson),

"the man for others" (D. Bonhoeffer)

"the crucified God" (J. Moltmann) or

"the greatest salesman who ever lived" (Bruce Barton, businessman).

My favorite comes from a 4 year old girl who says: "Jesus is God's best friend." (p. 101-102 M. Copenhaver)

After listening to this, Jesus kicks it up a notch. He makes it personal. He changes the question slightly, so that it hits much closer to home:

Who do YOU say that I am?

One word. A big difference!

Who do YOU say that I am?

I don't know about you but I have vivid memories of being a student. Most of the time I was prepared, but there were occasions when the teacher or professor asked the class a question, and I wished I had Harry Potter's invisibility cloak! I would sink down in my seat--as if that did any good!

I would avoid eye contact with the questioner. I would rack my brain for a reasonable answer and pray to God that I would not get called upon.

Much later in life I came to the realization that "I don't know" is an acceptable answer, but we are schooled to think that it is not. Suffice it to say, there are occasions when we feel as if we have not done our homework and we are unprepared.

This is not a pop quiz that the disciples forgot to study for....

No doubt they had all thought it about it, and perhaps even discussed it among themselves. But now, the question is out there. It is the elephant in the room. But it cannot be ignored.

I can imagine that a few of the fellows may have coughed, looked down at their feet, avoided eye contact, or whatever, Peter was up for the challenge! While Peter was known to occasionally suffer from foot in mouth disease, this time Peter nailed it! He got it right!!

*"You are the Christ, the son of the living God!"*

What did it mean to call Jesus, "the Christ, the son of the living God"?

The word "Christ" means "anointed one". In that culture, only three categories of persons were anointed--think of being 'baptized', not with water, but with olive oil.

They were prophets, priests, or kings.

Jesus' teaching up until now had focused largely on the Kingdom of God, so yes, it is appropriate that this Kingdom have a properly anointed King.

On the game show *Family Feud*, hosted by Steve Harvey, contestants are asked to guess how 100 people responded to various survey questions. In one episode, a contestant had to provide the top answers to the following survey question: "When someone mentions 'the King,' to whom might he or she be referring?"

Here were the four top answers:

1. 88 people said "Elvis Presley"
2. 7 people said "God or Jesus"
3. 3 people said "Martin Luther King, Jr."
4. 2 people said "The Burger King"

*James Gilmore, "We Have No King but Elvis," White Horse Inn blog (9-14-12)*

The name "Christ" in Greek is the translation of the Hebrew for "messiah" which means "anointed one". It was commonly believed that the one promised in the OT would be endowed with miraculous powers, be mighty and wise, holy and free from sin, the true king of Israel who would destroy their enemies and deliver Jerusalem from the oppressors. Then he would gather the faithful and rule in justice and glory. (J Edwards, p.250)

Peter got the right answer, he attributed to Jesus the correct title, but he misunderstood what kind of a messiah Jesus would be. Jesus fulfilled much of the previous "job description", however he was not going to marshal military might in order to establish his rule. Instead Jesus will practice self-sacrifice and service. He will "win by losing" and live by dying. Jesus will teach the disciples the true meaning of Peter's confession. (J Edwards, p. 252)

I wonder what the disciples thought and how they felt when they heard this question personalized.

I think for them, the question and the answer was not academic. Jesus is not looking for an intellectual answer.

I think the question --for them and for us--is relational.

The disciples had likely already answered this question of Jesus' identity, in their hearts. Why was it so hard to give voice to their answer?

Think about it...in a close relationship, we know it can be difficult to be the first to say, "I love you", to another. One's voice may crack, one's palms may sweat.

*Why? Because however true it is, to say it aloud makes it real. In making it real, the truth has the power to change the nature of the relationship.*

*If it is true, once spoken aloud, one can no longer ignore the implications of this truth for one's life. The relationship will never be the same! (Copenhaver, p. 100)*

Jesus did not press people to make decisions about him. I think Jesus was comfortable with allowing us time and space to be with him, to observe, to ask questions, to grow in our understanding. Jesus cares about human relationships.

In a documentary on Jesus, by the British Broadcasting Corporation, the presenter, Jeremy Bowen, stated, "The important thing is not what he was or what he wasn't—the important thing is what people believe him to have been. A massive world-wide religion, numbering more than two billion people follows his memory—that's pretty remarkable, 2,000 years on." *Alan Wilson, Nyon, Switzerland; source: Alex Webb, "Looking for the Historical Jesus," BBC News Online,(3-26-01 column)*

Bowen couldn't be more wrong. Who Jesus is and what he did is the foundation of our faith. And Christians do not "follow his memory"! Peter rightly declared that Jesus is the Son of the *Living God*! The leaders of every great religion- Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and so on, every notable philosophy—is dead. Jesus Christ is the only one who conquered death, who is a Risen, Living Lord!

Either Jesus was who he said he was, or we are of all people, are the most deceived.

CS Lewis concluded that there are but two options:

*"I want to prevent anyone from saying the really foolish thing people say about Him, such as "I am ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God." That is the sort of thing that we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said, would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg--or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for fool, you can spit on Him and kill Him*

*as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call him Lord and God." (p. 103/Copenhaver)*

Jesus himself said: Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. (John 15:13)

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. (I John 3:16)

Father Pedro Arrupe, a Jesuit priest (from the Basque region of Spain who was a Jesuit priest (1902-1991)) maintains that "finding and falling in love with Jesus really changes everything in a way that is totally transformative of our lives." He goes on to say...

Nothing is more practical than finding and falling in love with God.

*"What/who you are in love with, What/who seizes your imagination, will affect everything.*

*It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning, what you do with your finances, how you spend your weekend, what you read, who you know, what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy and gratitude.*

*Fall in love [with God/Jesus], stay in love, and it will decide everything."*

How would I answer Jesus' question: Who do I say that Jesus is?

Jesus is the Lover of my soul.

How would **you** answer Jesus' question: *Who do you say Jesus is?*

Let us pray:

Lord you love each one of us so much more than we can even imagine. We know in our heart of hearts, that we are sinners in need of your amazing grace. Help us to respond to your overture of love on the cross to confess our need for you, and accept the gift of eternal life.

If you declare **with your mouth**, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in **your** heart that God raised Christ from the dead, you will be saved. (Romans 10:9)

Fill us with an insatiable love for you. Transform us by your Spirit, we pray in Jesus' powerful and precious name, Amen.