

"Jesus, The Christ" - Matthew 16:13-20

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen

The text for meditation for this morning is from the Gospel of Matthew, which I read before. Let us pray: "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer." Amen

+++++

Brothers and sisters in Christ;

Who is Jesus? I hope that we have a pretty good idea on that. This is a Christian church, after all. A Lutheran congregation at that. One that is on the more theologically sound end of the spectrum. To ask, who is Jesus? is the kind of question we should be asking out there, on the other side of the doors, out in the world, because the world does not really know Jesus, nor does it really want to. So if that question should be asked on the other side of those doors, when was the last time you asked it? How was your question received and what sort of answer did you get? And, as a sound Lutherans, how would you answer it yourself? Who is Jesus?

There are a few of questions in this morning's Gospel reading. And, make no mistake about it, some of those questions are also loaded. "Who do men say that I am?" "Who do you say that I am?" Jesus first asked the question to His disciples at Caesaria Philippi, a town at the foot of Mt. Hermon. The pagan god Baal had once been worshipped there by the locals. Then the pagan god Pan by the Greeks. Herod the Great built a big marble temple to Caesar Augustus. And, no matter what you call those pagan gods or how you dress them up, they are still pagan, they are still dead, and they cannot do a single thing for you or against you on their own but they sure can move you away of your worshipping the true Lord and God Jesus Christ.

So it was right there, at the place where Caesar was confessed lord and god, that Jesus turns to His disciples and asks, "Who do men say that I am?" The answers were varied and predictable. Some say John the Baptizer, returned from the dead. Some say Elijah, who as supposed to appear before the Messiah. Some say Jeremiah or one of the prophets. They all kind of dance around the real issue; Jesus is a holy man, a great religious man among religious men, someone sent by God.

Just like people say today when they want to say something nice about Jesus without actually confessing the big thing. He is a great teacher, an example, an inspiration, a buddy, a

friend, a healer, the good shepherd. All of it nice, and it is even true too. But it is not enough. Not even close.

Who do all of you say that I am? Now He gets to the heart. Never mind what the public opinion polls say, what about you? Simon Peter speaks up for all of them. He always does. Good old Simon. You know, he is like the pesky kid in class who has all the answers and never is quiet. "You are the Christ (the Messiah), the Son of the living God." Peter gets it right, at least on paper. Jesus is the Anointed One, the Messiah of Israel, the fulfilment of all God's promises to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and the prophets. And He is the Son of the living God. You could not get a more correct, more orthodox, more theologically sound answer than that.

"Blessed are you, Simon son of John. You did not think this up on your own. This came straight from my Father who is in heaven." Simon the son of John got it right but not by his own efforts, he does not earn merit badge for this.

Now you get this right, this is real Lutheran theology right from the lips of Jesus. To confess Jesus as Christ and Son of God is not ours to do, by virtue of our own religious cleverness, brightness, and intelligence, for we confess, "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to Him." Or even confess Him. "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit," says 1 Corinthians 12:3. If that were not the case, only the smart could be saved. I am glad that that is not the case. So the Good News is that there is hope for the rest of us. For everybody in the world.

We hear and we see the denial of Christ everywhere in our culture and we are amazed because we do not see how it could be so. How can a man choose death when he is offered life? How can he choose condemnation and guilt over freedom and a clear conscience? We do not understand the rejection of Christ and the shameless denial of the things of God!

Coming back to Peter and Jesus. When Peter confessed that Jesus is The Christ and the Son of God; Simon is a solid rock. In fact, Jesus calls him exactly that - Petros - Peter, the Rock-man. "Rocky". We could really play with that, have some fun with it. Simon "Rocky" Johnson. It sounds a little bit cool. Something Hollywood-ish. You can almost hear the theme music playing in the background. "You are "Rocky," and on the rock of your confession, which God the Father put in your mouth, I will build my church, my gathered people."

Now it needs to be clearly understood that what is rock solid is Peter's confession, not his person. There is nothing solid about Peter at all. The church is not some personality cult of Peter, or any other man, whether pope, bishop, or televangelist. In the very next paragraph, Peter the confessor is Peter the denier. He later even denies knowing Jesus to a little servant girl. Hardly

living up to the name Rocky. More like Muddy. Muddy as in Adam. Which is really what the name Adam means, the red muddy earth. Peter, as a person, is like a rock gone to mush, that is like Adam, the man of the mud, the first denier.

A church built on Peter would be on slippery mud. A temple for an idol. The church is built on the rock of Peter's confession not on his person or any person other than Jesus. Peter as confessor does not point to himself but to Jesus. And you cannot be more rock solid than the crucified and risen Jesus. Even the gates of Hades - sin, death, devil - cannot prevail against such a confession.

A house is only as sturdy as the foundation it sits on. The hidden strength of the Church is down at her foundation. Not her glorious cathedrals, her splendid liturgies, her finely-honed doctrines, her works of art or wealth, her institutions and influence, or even her vast numbers. The strength of the church is that she is built on the foundation of the prophets and apostles, with Christ - the rejected Rock - as her cornerstone. And she is bolted to the rocky foundation through the faith that confesses Jesus as Christ and Son of the living God.

Did Peter realize what his words meant that day? Not fully, not yet. When Jesus explained to His disciple that being the Christ meant that He must live out what was written about Him in the 53rd chapter of the Prophet Isaiah; that He must suffer, die, and on the third day rise, Peter pulled Him aside and scolded Him. "God forbid it! This must never happen to you!" That was not what Peter had in mind when he said, "You are the Christ." "Christ" for Peter meant God's anointed warrior, the divine terminator, the conqueror, the Davidic king who comes to put Israel back on the map again.

To confess Jesus as Christ and Son of God is to confess Him crucified and risen from the dead. There is no other Jesus, no other way to be Christ than dying and rising. This is the way Death is defeated, sin atoned for, life restored - by His death on a cross once for all people, once for all time. Those who would flatter Jesus with pious titles, but refuse His bloody death for their sins are on very shaky ground. Even "Rocky" Johnson became the devil's spokesman. "Get behind me Satan, you are a hindrance to me," Jesus said to him.

You either speak for Christ or the anti-Christ. There is no comfortable middle way, no neutral ground, no place to run and hide when the Jesus question is asked. Either Jesus is Lord or He is not. Either Jesus is the Messiah of Israel or He is not. Either He is the Son of the living God or He is not. And either the church is a communion of saints proclaiming Jesus the Christ crucified and risen for the life of the world, or it's a church of Satan.

Friends, confession is a crisis, it is the place where faith and unbelief divide up and do battle.

What you believe with your heart, you confess with your lips. Thanks be to God He does not leave it up to us to decide our own way or figure it out for ourselves. We would not, and we could not. To confess Jesus as Christ is God's gift to you, worked by the Word and the Spirit. It is given you in your Baptism to say, "Jesus is Lord." Consider yourselves "blessed." Blessed are you, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but the Father through the Son in the Spirit.

Jesus warned Peter and the rest not to tell anyone that He was the Christ. You, do not need to worry. Jesus is not talking to you here. You can tell anyone and everyone that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of the living God. The Apostles had to wait until Jesus died and rose, until the darkness and the wood and nails and the blood; until the rock was rolled away and the tomb revealed empty and the body risen and seen and touched. Then the world would have its rock solid proof, the hard evidence. Crucified and risen He is Christ, the Son of God for you.

There is nothing more certain than Jesus. Jesus the Christ. Jesus the Son of the living God. And you, my dear baptized believers, confessing Him you are as solid as the Rock who saves you. Amen.

Dear believers, that the Triune God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit pour out His richest blessings to all of us and fill us with peace. Amen