

**Who Is He?**

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Matthew 16: 13-20

Like other great newspapers *The Washington Post* has a room filled with file folders. These folders contain information on famous people who are no longer alive. Each of these famous people is identified with a single vocational notation (“home run king,” “motion picture star,” etc.). One of these is marked “Jesus Christ.” The notion is “martyr.”

Coming to grips with who Jesus is and what he means to us is the most important task we have.

It has often been noted that Jesus’ favorite teaching method was the asking of questions. There are over 100 questions asked in the four Gospels. Of his parents Jesus asked, “Didn’t you know that I would be in my Father’s house?” Of the paralyzed man he asked, “Do you want to get well?” Of the people who listened to him teach but failed to act, “Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and do not do what I say?”

No question is more important however, than the question he posed to his disciples at Caesarea Philippi: “Who do you say that I am?”

It is a fair question for us to ask today. “Who do YOU say that Christ is?” The answer to that question will have an effect on our ethical standards, our feelings about our responsibilities to God and to one another, and our feelings about our own purpose and destiny. Dr. E. Stanley Jones once said that the early Christians “out-loved, out-laughed, and out-died the people around them.” Why? They knew who Jesus was and it affected everything about them. So, who do you say that he is? Who is Jesus to you?

Is he simply a good teacher – an excellent moral example – a spiritual guru in the same class with Mohammed and Buddha? Or is there something more to this Galilean? I hope by the way I ask the question you have guessed that I believe there is something more.

**JESUS, FIRST OF ALL, IS THE REVELATION OF THE NATURE OF GOD.**

Humanity had many ideas and intuitions about the nature of God prior to the coming of Jesus. But even the most brilliant theologian was, “a blind person trying to describe an elephant.” How could any mortal capture the essence of the divine Other...the Holy Other...?” Let’s face it, humanity has come up with some bad descriptions of God.

Bad ideas of God always produce corresponding behavior. If someone says to you, “Oh, it doesn’t matter what you believe, just so you are sincere,” ask them to consider the modern state of Iran, sending children out to be slaughtered so that they can go to heaven. It DOES matter what we believe about God. Because we could not climb up to God, however, God reached down to us in Jesus of Nazareth. He is the revelation of what God is really like.

Back in the winter of 1981, then Mayor of Chicago, Jane Byrne, made a much-publicized tour through a public housing project in Chicago, named Cabrini-Green. Cabrini-Green has been described as a taste of hell on earth. Two young gangs literally controlled the lives of the 14,000 residents of that project – raping, extorting, and murdering those who got in their way. On her tour of Cabrini-Green Mayor Byrne made a promise to the residents, “You are going to live in security and safety.” Sounds like a typical political promise, does it not? But Jane Byrne did one thing more. The following week she announced her plans to actually vacate her luxury apartment and temporarily move to Cabrini-Green to see first-hand the problems of that crime-ridden neighborhood.

We are impressed by Jane Byrne’s courage. Shall we not also be moved then by the compassion of God who saw our plight and became incarnate, walked in our shoes, that he might know our need and we might know his love.

One of my favorite stories about Helen Keller concerns her introduction to the Christian message. When Helen learned to communicate, Anne Sullivan decided it was time for her to hear about Jesus Christ. Being a Bostonian, she summoned the most renowned clergyperson of that time, Phillips Brooks. Brooks came, and with Sullivan interpreting, he talked to Helen Keller about Christ. Soon a smile lighted Helen’s face and she beckoned for a chance to respond. Through her teacher she said, “Mr. Brooks, I have always known about God, but until now I didn’t know his name.”

Helen Keller was more fortunate than most people in her spiritual sensitivity. She knew God’s nature but not his name. Most people without Christ know his name but not his nature. Jesus is the revelation of the nature of God.

HE IS NOT ONLY REVELATION, HOWEVER, HE IS ALSO REDEEMER.

The renowned Swiss theologian Karl Barth, visited this country and spoke at Union Seminary in New York City. A seminary professor was shocked when in conversation with Barth, someone had asked what he would say if he met Adolph Hitler and Barth’s reply was simply, “Jesus Christ died for your sins.”

“How irrelevant, how simplistic, how utterly absurd seemed that reply to American pragmatic ears! And yet I suspect that Barth’s answer was that finally the church has only one message – Jesus Christ and him crucified.”

Jesus Christ died for our sins. That is the central message of the Christian faith. One of the “in” things today is to ask people, “What is your sign?” That, of course, is a reference to astrological signs. One person got tired of answering that over used question and started replying simply, “the cross.” What is YOUR sign? To the person embracing the Christian faith, the cross is our sign that we have been set free from the domination of sin. We can walk in dignity as children of the Father not because of anything that WE have done but because of what CHRIST has done in our behalf. Something happened on the cross of Calvary that bridged the gap between God and humanity. Jesus Christ is our revelation and our redeemer.

One thing more. HE IS ALSO OUR RISEN LORD.

Two famous Broadway producers were pallbearers at the funeral of the great escape artist, Harry Houdini. As they lifted the beautiful and heavy casket to their shoulders, one of them turned and whispered to the other, “Suppose he isn’t in there!”

He was, of course. Only one person in human history has conquered the grave and it is he whom we call Lord. "Christ has been raised from the dead," writes Paul, "The first fruits of those who have fallen asleep." (1Corinthians 15:20) What deliriously good news that is. No wonder most churches are full on Easter Sunday. That is news that turns the world upside down. Jesus Christ is risen!

In a 1984 article for the *Boston Sunday Globe*, theologian Harvey Cox noted that "in his *Divine Comedy*, Dante reports that after he had made the torturous ascent from hell to purgatory and then drawn close to the celestial sphere, he suddenly heard a sound he had never heard before." Stopping and listening, Dante wrote that "it sounded like the laughter of the universe." The Easter story, says Cox, "gives us a clue to the baffling riddle" as to why God laughs. "God laughs, it seems, because God knows how it turns out in the end..."

Somehow it seems to me that if we know Christ to be the risen Lord there ought to be more laughter in our hearts. There ought to be laughter in the halls of every Christian church...including FBC. There ought to be laughter as we gather around the table for Sunday dinner. We ought not to fear anything in this world. He has overcome the world.

A frontiersman came to a lake that was frozen over. He was fearful to cross to the other side. How solidly frozen was the ice really? In his fear he knelt down and began to creep on his hands and knees. Suddenly he heard a happy sound. It was a team of horses pulling a wagon. It was in the middle of the lake and it was moving rapidly. The frontiersman knew that if the ice could support a horse-drawn wagon, it surely could support him. He stood confidently to his feet and continued his journey with a feeling of great exhilaration. That is the good news of the Gospel. One has gone before us. He has shown us, as it were, that the ice will hold.

In one church bulletin the typist had misplaced a notice about a bus tour in preparing the bulletin. Thus it read like this: "Today's sermon portrays Christ as a Good Shepherd. He will lead all who seek him to eternal life. The bus will depart from the Community Evangelical Church parking lot at 10:00 a.m. and will return at 5:00 p.m." I'm ready for the trip. Are YOU?

He is the revelation of the nature of God. He is our redeemer for the power of sin and death. He is our Risen Lord who reigns victorious and is present with us in the power of the Holy Spirit.

That is what the New Testament says about Jesus Christ. He is all this and more. He is the Savior of the world. He desires to be your Savior...but first you must settle this crucial issue in your own mind and heart. WHO IS HE TO YOU?