

“Who are people saying that I am?” Jesus teased his disciples with this question as their wandering ministry took them into the district of Caesarea Philippi. I believe the mood was light that day; they were joking and laughing together. When Jesus asked who people were saying that he was, someone answered “John the Baptist with your head reattached!” Someone else replied, “They think that Elijah has come back, or Jeremiah, or one of the other prophets!” But, this easy banter suddenly became focused and very serious when Jesus asked one of the most probing, demanding and difficult question ever uttered. “Who do you say that I am?” Only Peter answered. “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

It is important that we hear and understand Peter’s response, not because it is correct, which of course it is, and not because it is doctrinal for all Christian faith groups. Rather, we find the significance of Peter’s answer in our Lord’s response to him. “Peter, Jesus said, “you are really blessed. Flesh and blood did not reveal this to you.” In other words, Peter’s answer does not and cannot derive from logic, historical data and reason. Peter’s response was a faith response. This is what Jesus meant when he said, “Flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but rather my Father in heaven.” Peter’s response was a response from the depths of his soul, a soul enlightened by the Holy Spirit. In other words, Peter’s recognition of Jesus as the Messiah was a gift from God. Faith itself is a gift of God. In faith, Peter knew the Messiah and that is the only way that we can know Jesus Christ.

At the turn of the last century, a man named Albert Schweitzer wrote a book called *Quest for the Historical Jesus*. Doctor Schweitzer was a medical missionary, a man of faith, who nevertheless thought with the logic of a highly-educated nineteenth century mind. Schweitzer wanted to prove, through scholarly research, that it was possible to discover and reveal the historical Jesus. Where his study and research took him was not where he wanted to go, but he concluded courageously and correctly, I believe, that the Jesus of Scripture is and will always remain an enigma, locked in a world of thought now closed to us, a world colored by the unquenchable belief that the end times were near, and that the Second Coming was just around the corner. The Scriptures that we have, the Gospel stories of Jesus, were colored and shaped into a history seen through the eyes of first century faith. In other words, the Gospel stories are interpreted history. They report events told by word of mouth, again and again, and with each retelling they were filtered through the lens of a new generation of Christians, or a new group of believers, before these events were ever written down. The earliest of the Gospels can not much predate 70 AD and may be some years later. The letters from St. Paul are earlier, but the rest of the New Testament books were written even later than the Gospels. The Jesus we know in Scripture is the Jesus of the latter half of the first and early second centuries Church. Dr. Schweitzer said that any records of purely factual data, if ever such records were kept, are forever lost.

This has been a problem to many, although it should not be. When Schweitzer pondered this, it led him to a remarkable conclusion. Salvation, he said, does not come through studying the Jesus of history, but rather from knowing Jesus in faith. In other words, knowing about Jesus is not enough, although clearly we want to and must know the stories. What is required is that the Jesus of the Gospel stories becomes the Christ of our faith. And, faith is always experiential. We know Christ as he reveals himself to us, day by day, hour by hour, in the ends and outs of life as we walk life's road together.

There are problems to be faced, of course. One is that our faith's foundation is based on claims made about events that happened in Palestine about 2,000 years ago. We can dispute which claims might be based on misinformation and which kernels of data are central and crucial, as opposed to those which don't really matter. But there can be no faith if there is no foundation on which to anchor our faith and the only foundation we have is the foundation of the New Testament. It alone can stand as the written revelation of the coming in flesh of God's Word. To say, as some do, that Christian faith today can have no connection with the Jesus revealed in the New Testament makes no sense. I think that it is simply dishonest and invites disaster. If we do not anchor our faith to the Gospel as we have received it, what prevents us from conforming Jesus to our own fashion? The Gospels are the canon. They are the ruler, the measuring stick, by which we test our experiences of Christ and validate them as truly gifts from God. Remove the Jesus of Scripture, and we run the very real risk of creating our own idol and calling it the Son of God.

And, so we struggle. We have as our anchor the Christ of an ancient generation's faith and there must always be tension as we attempt to bridge the enormous gap that separates the first century from our own. That is why it is so important that we ask ourselves the question that Jesus asked his disciples. Who do you say that Jesus is? Who do I say that Jesus is? Our answer can only come from the soul, an answer formed from prayer, meditation and worship within the context of our relationships with God and our neighbors. "Who do you say that I am?" is answered within a soul open to the Holy Spirit, that allows itself to be informed by the Gospel story of Jesus and his love, that allows itself to be forgiven by the crucified and risen Christ. "Who do you say that I am?" is a question the answer to which will grow in depth and breadth and strength of conviction as our faith develops. But always, the answer of faith boils down to Jesus' comment to Simon Peter. "Flesh and blood," in other words, human logic, did not reveal the answer. Rather, faith did; and faith is a gift from God. *Amen*