

SERMON: PENTECOST 16 September 13th, 2015

In the Name...

The comedian Groucho Marx was once leaving a restaurant when a woman came up and asked him, "Excuse me, sir, but, would you be Groucho Marx?" With his impish smile he snappily replied, "Would I be? Easily, Madam, I am Groucho Marx. But, who else would you like me to be? Marilyn Monroe?"

In our Gospel today Jesus asks his disciples to report who people think he is and there are great differences in what they have to say. To set the scene, Jesus and the Twelve had just completed a highly successful preaching and miracle tour in Galilee. Great crowds had gathered, great healings had been performed. And having experienced this great emotional high, Jesus took his disciples on a trip out of Israel and to a place known for its total depravity.

That's true. Caesarea Philippi was a city in the mountains north of Galilee. A Gentile city, ruled by Phillip the Tetrarch, it had a morally loose reputation because it was the site of an ancient temple to the Greek sex-god Pan. And, it was that in this rather unlikely setting Jesus asked his closest followers the question which goes to the heart of the Christian faith. Who am I?

Well, the disciples said, people think you could be John the Baptist, Elijah, or a prophet. Now, John the Baptist had a name and following the like of which Billy Graham enjoys today. His highly visible profile and preaching had shaken the government and even the Sanhedrin had sent a fact-finding mission to determine what John was up to. So, if people thought that Jesus was John that was quite a compliment.

To call him Elijah was also high praise. Elijah, who had spent his life fighting idolatry and who had defied the powerful king Ahab and his wife Jezebel, was regarded as the greatest prophet of Israel. And the fact that he didn't die, but, was bodily assumed into heaven by chariots of fire had made him a mystical figure in Jewish theology. It was taught that he would someday return to earth and even today, in the Jewish Passover ceremony, a place is set at the table for Elijah should he drop in.

But, at the least, at the very least, people considered Jesus a prophet and, since there hadn't been one of those in Israel for the past 400 years, that was still very special. Clearly, Jesus had made quite an impact even if people thought he was someone other than who he was.

And then Jesus asked the disciples "And who do you say that I am?" One can just imagine the awkward pause at this point. The disciples shifting glances at each other. What should they say? James and John were his cousins. They'd known him from childhood. Some had only known him a few months. Others were old friends. All of them had seen the amazing works, heard the gracious words, and been privy to the most profound thoughts. Dare any of them articulate what this all meant? And, Peter said, "You are the Messiah!"

In a few months, we will celebrate Christmas and when we do we will hear read the statement from St. John's Gospel, "And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us." By ancient

tradition, Christians genuflect when they hear those words because that single phrase sets Jesus apart from every other living being on this earth. They tell us that He and He alone was in this world, but, not of this world. He was no mere mortal man. He shared, from the beginning of the beginning, the nature of God.

It's amazing, though, how so many people who call themselves Christians have struggled with this, and yet, not only is it essential to identifying Jesus, the consequences of mistaking his identity are far reaching.

For example, in the year 650, all of what we today call Iraq was covered with churches and it had been Christian for centuries. But, by 700, only fifty years later, it was almost all Moslem. What happened? Well, the main type of Christianity in Iraq was a denomination we call Nestorian which taught that Jesus was a miraculously virgin-born man who was special to God, but, that he was not God. In other words, Nestorians failed to identify Jesus correctly. The Moslems also taught that Jesus was a miraculously virgin-born man who was special to God, but, not God. So, what was the difference? Therefore, when confronted by the challenge of Islam, most Nestorians converted. All because they didn't get the answer to one little question right. Who am I?

It's noteworthy that after Peter declared his belief in Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus immediately goes on to talk about taking up the cross - words which, at the time, mystified the disciples. The Jewish Messiah the disciples imagined was supposed to be a victorious conqueror. But, Jesus told them that there would be betrayal, crucifixion, and death. He laid it out as plainly as he could, and what did the disciples do? They gave him an argument. You see, the disciples couldn't accept what Jesus was saying about the need to become, as Isaiah prophesied, a man of sorrows acquainted with grief. A man rejected and despised in a world which esteems success and stardom. Yet, human history shows us that often the greatest victory comes only after the greatest hardship and that only a cause worth dying for is a cause worth living for.

Perhaps, it is significant, then, that the last words spoken about Jesus in his life were not spoken by a friend or a disciple. They were spoken by a centurion, a man who had fought in the wars and knew first-hand the price of victory. "Truly, this man was the Son of God." Perhaps, it takes a soldier to know a soldier and to identify his rank.

A final thought about Caesarea Philippi. Why did Jesus choose this heathen haven as the backdrop for such an important revelation? Well, in addition to the temple of Pan, the city also boasted a more recent temple built by Herod the Great – the king who had tried to kill the baby Jesus.

Herod was an Arab who had usurped the Jewish throne with Roman support, so, to appease the Jews, he rebuilt their Temple in Jerusalem. But, to assure the Romans of his loyalty, he also built a temple in Caesarea Philippi, just over the border, to honour the emperors who had been declared Roman gods. Herod was nothing if not ecumenical, or economical, one should say, in his loyalties.

This, then, was the perfect setting for Jesus to set himself against the two main paganisms of this world. The paganism of making the self into one's god - as represented by Pan - and the

paganism of making the state into one's god - as represented by the emperors. These aren't just ancient history. Each of these paganisms pulls at us daily in our society, and only if we are clear about who we follow can we bear the cross and defeat them.

Indeed, reflecting on the first three centuries of Christian history with its record of persecutions, tortures, and martyrs whose example in bearing the cross inspired others, the historian Will Durant wrote, "Caesar and Christ met in the arena. And Christ won." Caesar and Christ met in the arena. And Christ won.

So, who do we say; who do we believe; that he is? A great deal hangs on the answer.

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