

Jesus asked his disciples “But who do you say that I am?” That question is as relevant today as it was 2000 years ago.

The Messiah is not about miracles. After performing a miracle of healing or casting out a demon Jesus frequently says do not tell anyone. Of course they do but we may also wonder why he should say such a thing. We begin to understand when Jesus asks his disciples “But who do you say that I am?” Although Peter gets it right when he says the “Messiah”, once again Jesus tells his disciples not to tell anyone. Then he goes on to describe what is going to happen to him and it ain’t pretty. Suffering, rejection, being killed, and then rising again. Suffering is part of the equation. Not because suffering is good in and of itself but because standing against the powers that be, the Romans, the Jewish leaders, and the powers of Satan is going to have dire consequences. Jesus does not want people to hop on the miracle bandwagon. He does not want people to think that if they pray for a miracle a miracle will happen. God is not a vending machine that uses prayer for currency. I mean how many of you have prayed for something that didn’t happen the way you wanted? Sometimes that for which we have prayed comes to bear but in terms of our direct request God is more like a slot machine, the odds are always with the house! God hears our prayers and regardless of whether or not our prayers are answered in the way we asked prayer prepares us to accept what we might not be ready to accept, it opens us to receive the support of God when we need it. And yes, prayer changes us. There’s no way out of life except through it and there was no way for Jesus to become the Messiah, the savior of humankind, the redeemer of creation without subjecting himself to the worst that humankind could throw at him - while he remained obedient and faithful to God’s plan.

The funny thing about human beings is that we don’t hear all the words. Peter heard “suffering”, “rejection”, and “death” but completely missed the “rising again” part of Jesus’ speech. So Peter rejects the bad stuff and Jesus rebukes him. Jesus goes on to explain the relationship between losing life in order to save life.

But do we buy it? Even today his words are not entirely convincing and as a marketing ploy they fall flat. If I were to stand on a street corner and say come to Jesus, come hear the good news, all you have to do is lose your life and then you will save it – just how successful will I be? Week after week, most of us are preaching that we need to share what we have with others who are less fortunate, be generous to those who need a second or third or fourth chance, support social programs that provide a leg up or safety net to those who are falling, and offer refuge to those who are in danger. The results are internment camps for people seeking sanctuary, threats to reduce or eliminate social security, Medicare, and Medicaid, we are overrun with homeless people because there are so few shelters, and white supremacists are on the rise. Apparently we haven’t gotten the message that being a Christian is gonna “cost ya,” not the “I can give you a bit off the top” kind of “cost ya” but a chunk out of you or your pride, your pocketbook, or even you sense of security.

So who do you say that Jesus is and what does he mean to you and for you?

Jesus died for us all. None of us are worthy of his sacrifice, none of us will ever be as obedient, none of us are without sin. Even so Jesus is available to us all: rich and poor, black

and white, gifted and challenged, abled and disabled, gay, straight or anywhere in between, male and female, Jesus is for all of us.

So assuming that we say yes to Jesus and choose to share in his ministry then we are also called to share in his self-offering and that may involve suffering. If you've ever stood up for someone who wasn't popular, if you've ever taken a stand that upset the status quo, if you ever put yourself in harm's way for someone else you know what Jesus is talking about.

But it's hard, it's hard to let go knowing you might get hurt. Peter doesn't want to hear about suffering. None of us want to hear about suffering. We prefer our heroes triumphant and alive not disgraced and dead. That's why the temptations of the prosperity gospel are do powerful; the equation is seductive: if you behave properly, if you do good deeds, toe the line, and don't make waves you will be rewarded and bad things won't happen. Really? Some of the psalms lead us to believe that this is true. In their defense however, their time horizon is a bit more elastic than ours. All will be well in God's time; it just might not be within our own lifetime. All of which leaves room for the unfortunate corollary that when bad things happen people must have done something to deserve them. Jesus' own life shows us that this is not the case; we do not know why Jesus had to die. But die he did and we are called to follow his example, to walk through bad things in his name in obedience to God and in so doing we will be transformed. But that doesn't mean it won't hurt.

We do all we can to avoid suffering even when it's for a good cause. Look at Peter, Peter knew Jesus. Peter loved Jesus. Peter saw what Jesus could do and he had some idea of who Jesus was and yet when push came to shove Peter would deny Jesus out of fear of suffering.

So where do we go from here? When asked the question "who do you say that I am?" from the perspective of 2,000 years we also have to ask before or after the resurrection: Jesus the man, or Jesus the Christ?

We didn't know Jesus the miracle worker. We didn't see him heal, we didn't see him cast out demons and most of us wouldn't know what a demon would look like anyway. We didn't see him feed 5,000 people 5 loaves and 2 fish. We didn't love him as a friend or a teacher and we didn't watch him die. We know him only through the writings of the New Testament. We've heard the stories of his miraculous birth, his baptism, and transfiguration which may be harder to accept than the miracle healings. They make us wonder about who Jesus was and what he was really like, and then, if we are skeptical we wonder how did these miracles happen anyway? For two thousand years people have tried to understand Jesus but the historical records haven't given us much to go on. A whole industry has developing around finding the "real Jesus" and isolating the "real words" of Jesus. But all of that is in the past. We have no way of knowing the real Jesus but in all honesty we don't really need to know.

We do not worship the man who was a devout 1st century Jew, the man who was a charismatic teacher with a profound compassion for the poor and vulnerable, the man who attracted many followers and ended up just as dead as many other charismatic leaders. Jesus was a good man and extraordinarily obedient to God. But we don't worship Jesus for that reason. We honor him for that reason and so do Jews and Muslims. We try to model ourselves on him, to love God to be obedient to God and yes, to love our neighbors as ourselves. But no,

we worship Jesus because in his death and resurrection Jesus Christ gave us new life. Jesus' resurrection was not about bringing one dead person back to life. In the words of our baptismal ceremony by the water of baptism we are buried in Christ's death. "By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit." The world changed with the resurrection, the promise of a restored creation, and a new way of being now and forever. Jesus Christ the Son of God the living God whose transforming power is with us through the Holy Spirit and through whom we have access to God the Father and are co-heirs with him. These are not just words this is the experience of the church for almost 2,000 years.

All of which can make it a lot easier for us to pick up our crosses to follow him, to go to the street corner and proclaim the good news, to risk our ourselves in his name.

Who then do you say that he is?

Amen