

Who Is Jesus?

Mark 8:27-38

September 16, 2012

I.

This is an unusual Sunday because most of today's gospel reading appears for the second time in the same year. The parts about Jesus telling Peter to get behind him, and how we are to deny ourselves and take up our cross if we want to follow Jesus, also were in our readings during Lent a few months ago.

And so today I want to focus on the beginning of the reading where Jesus asked his disciples who people said he was, and Peter answered that he was the Messiah. That part is new.

This raises a fundamental question presented in the gospels. Who is Jesus Christ? Today we know the answer. He is the Son of God, and our Savior. It was not so clear two thousand years ago. There were different views about what a savior would do.

And here I'm reminded of a story about a woman who was really frazzled and strung out by everything that was going on. The kids were home sick, the house was messed up, people were coming over for dinner that night, and she hadn't even gone shopping for the meal.

Just then the phone rang, and a voice said, "This is Mom, how are you?" And the woman said she was exhausted, and explained all that was happening. So the woman on the phone said, "No problem. I'll come over, get the kids squared away, clean up the house, go out and do the shopping, and fix dinner for all of you tonight. I'll even pick up Charles and bring him home."

The frazzled woman said, "Great, thanks Mom, you're a savior. But who is Charles?" The voice said, "Why, he's your husband." The woman said, "Mom, you know my husband's name is John."

There was a silence, and then the voice on the phone said, "Isn't this Dorothy?" The woman said, "No, this is Jennifer." The voice said "Oh, I'm sorry. I have the wrong number." And then Jennifer said, "Does this mean you're not coming over?"

So Jennifer thought the person on the phone was her mother, who was going to save her by helping her out. But that's not what we mean when we say that Jesus is the Savior. Certainly Jesus gives us spiritual strength and helps us inwardly find peace. But he's not going to take care of the kids, or vacuum the floor, or do the shopping. We still have to do those things.

And just as Jennifer misunderstood, the same happened to Peter in our reading. He said Jesus was the Messiah, but obviously did not know what that meant. He probably thought that Jesus was going to deliver the Jews from the tyranny of Roman occupation, and make Israel a light to the nations. The messiah is mentioned that way in the Old Testament (Isa. 51:4).

As a result, Peter took issue with Jesus when he spoke of how he would undergo suffering and be killed before rising again after three days. That was not Peter's idea of what a Messiah should be, and it became necessary for Jesus to rebuke Peter and explain once again his own purpose on earth.

II.

So I ask again, who is Jesus Christ? Some people say he was just a man; although a great man. Or they say he was a wonderful teacher who proclaimed noble and lofty ideals for humanity. Others say he was an important historical figure who profoundly influenced today's world.

Beware when you hear such things. Focusing on Jesus' extraordinary humanity also can marginalize his divinity. Some people wrongly deny that Jesus is God even though they accept him as a human prophet. We also hear of scholars speak about the search for the historical Jesus. More often than not, however, those searches exclude recognition of the divine Jesus.

And this leads to the central point. Certainly Jesus was a man, but he also explicitly said that he was the Son of God (Mk. 14:61, Mt. 11:27). How could a person make such a statement if it was not true?

Let's think a little more about that. Suppose I stood up here and said that I believe in God. You all might accept that as true. Then suppose I said that I am a godly man. You might even say that was true most of the time. But what if I stood here and said that I am the Son of God?

Then you all would have a different impression, to say the least. You might wonder if you heard me correctly, and if you did then you might believe that I had delusions of grandeur, or that my elevator didn't run all the way to the top.

So consider how people reacted to Jesus when he said that he was the Son of God. They either believed it, or else thought he was delusional. Jesus could not have said the things he said then, and still be treated a great man or a respected teacher today, unless the things he said then were true.

III.

Let's look at what Jesus said. And we should understand his words in the context of his mission on earth. Jesus was not crucified because he was just suggesting a few changes here and a few changes there. He did not go to the cross merely because he was urging us to be nicer to each other.

Instead he proclaimed the coming of an entirely new spiritual order and way of life that threatened the existing religious system. And he unabashedly placed himself at the center of it.

For example, there are the exceptional claims he made about his relationship with us in John's gospel. He said I am the bread of life (6:35) and the light of the world (8:12). I am the gate for the sheep (10:7-9), and the good shepherd (10:11-14). I am the resurrection (11:23-25). I am the way, and the truth, and the life (14:5-6), and I am the vine that gives life (15:1, 5).

Then there are places in that gospel where he spoke of his messianic purposes and relationship with God. The Samaritan woman at the well said "I know that Messiah is coming. Jesus said to her, "I am he" (4:25-26). Teaching in the temple he spoke about God and said, "I know him, because I am from him, and he sent me" (7:29). Those are very direct statements.

Then Jesus said to the Pharisees, "You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world" (8:23). And to those who doubted him and proclaimed their own descent from Abraham, he said, "Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am" (8:57-58).

Later, to Jews who wanted to stone him he proclaimed, "Can you say that I am blaspheming because I said, I am God's Son?" (10:35-36). "The Father is in me and I am in the Father" (10:38). Finally, as he spoke to his disciples after washing their feet, he said, "You call me teacher and Lord, and you are right, for that is what I am" (13:12-13)

And so, on top of all that, when we consider that he also raised the dead, healed the sick, and cast out demons, we have a picture of an extremely unique person, all of which leads to an inescapable reality. And that reality is that that Jesus is the Son of God. We simply cannot regard him as a respected teacher or as a good man, and nothing more.

IV.

I have mentioned before how C.S. Lewis, the famed English scholar, made this point in his classic work, *Mere Christianity*. He said that no mortal person could make the claims Jesus made, or say the shocking things he said, and still be called a respected teacher or a good man unless those things were true.

This means that Jesus does not offer the middle ground that some people seek. There is no neutral position or fence upon which we can sit. We cannot simply recognize his human accomplishments but reject his divine origins.

So we have a clear choice. We must either accept Jesus as who he says he is, or else we must regard him as completely out of touch with reality. Jesus is either the Son of God or he was a fraud. We do not have the option to invent a view of Jesus that might suit our purposes, but that contradicts what he actually said about himself.

As a result, we actually have three choices. First, we can believe Jesus thought he was the Son of God but was mistaken. Second, we can believe Jesus knew he was not the Son of God but claimed to be anyway. Or third, we can believe that Jesus truly is who he says he is.

Let's look at these choices. We'll start with the first choice. What if Jesus was mistaken? What if he actually thought that he was God but in reality he was not? Well, history unfortunately has had its share of people who believed they were gods, and no one ever thought they were respected teachers or good men.

What about the second choice? What if Jesus was a deceiver? What if he knew that he was not God, yet intentionally said he was so that he could gain a following. Well, if this is true; if Jesus did mislead us, then we as Christians would be a gullible and pathetic bunch of people. Again, that hardly is the legacy of a respected teacher or good man.

So, unless we reject everything the Bible tells us about Jesus, the inescapable conclusion is that he is who he said he is. He is the King of kings, and the Lord of lords. He is king of our lives, and his kingdom comes from God.

V.

This means Jesus is the way through which humanity has salvation. We cannot achieve fellowship with God by any means that exclude Jesus. We can care for our families, help the community, and support charities. Those are good things, but they are not sufficient for salvation. Those who do not believe in Jesus Christ and his sacrifice will miss the blessings he has promised.

And this applies not only to the next life, but to this life as well. Even before we get to eternity, Jesus is the way to happiness, peace, and abundant lives right now.

So we can't just start with a clean sheet of paper and design something about Jesus that seems comfortable for us. We don't want a faith we can live with, but a faith we can live by. We start with what actually is. Jesus is that truth. He offers a life in God known through the Holy Spirit. In this way he sustains our eternal hopes, and we live today with the blessings of his love. *Amen.*