

Two Destiny-Shaping Questions.

Text: Mat 16:13-20

Suggested Hymns:

179, 163, 161, 331, 239

1) A decisive Question

2) A challenging Question

3) When alone is this Confession possible

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Matthew 16:13-20, ¹³ *When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?"*

¹⁴ *So they said, "Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."* ¹⁵ *He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"* ¹⁶ *Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."* ¹⁷ *Jesus answered and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven."* ¹⁸ *"And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it."* ¹⁹ *"And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."* ²⁰ *Then He commanded His disciples that they should tell no one that He was Jesus the Christ.* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Two questions lie at the very heart of our text. Your answers to these questions will determine your ultimate lot in time and in eternity.

It is not at all unusual that in the course of everyday life human destiny is shaped by the answers people give to questions. In the course of our everyday lives we all answer many questions. Some of these questions we think are important, others not; but in the end none of us really knows to what extent our own future may depend on the answers we give to these questions.

It may be a young man casually asking a young woman for a date, or a businessman asking for a business appointment, or a child asking mother where babies come from, or someone asking what your political views are, or even someone asking a question like that of Jesus in our text, ***“Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?”***

Any or all of these questions may seem important or unimportant, depending upon the circumstances; and yet, in terms of the future, they may all mark a turning point in our lives. Today we are going to consider the two destiny-shaping questions in our text. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. A Decisive Question

Take this first question, ***“Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?”*** Jesus was introducing a new note into the conversation with His disciples. The question seemed casual, but by the time the incident was closed none of the disciples could have mistaken its importance. For not only does the text itself close with great words, but the text is followed by Matthew’s announcement, ***From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day.***¹ Truly this was a decisive incident, a high point in the lives of the disciples; and from this time forward the shadow of the cross lay heavily upon Jesus. The climax of His earthly mission was near.

Next we note that there were some false answers. It is clear that this question, though quietly asked, was of importance to Jesus and to the disciples. The disciples seemed to recognise this fact at once and carefully listed the various answers that people had to the question asked by Jesus.

Matthew reports, ***“Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”*** Interestingly enough, all of the answers agreed on one thing: In the minds of the people Jesus was no ordinary man. He was a Person to whom honour and prestige was due. He was obviously a great and distinguished man. Yet none of the various answers reported by the disciples was the true answer to the question ***“Who is Jesus?”***

Some modern answers sound no different, do they? If Jesus were to ask us today what people think of Him, we would have to give a similar report. It

would be an ill-informed or deeply prejudiced person who would not give Jesus some honour, who would not concede that Jesus was an extraordinary man.

The record is clear. He was the noblest of men, an outstanding example of great humility, a teacher of great ideals, a suffering saint, the supreme example of an unselfish and charitable personality, and a great prophet. *“Who was Jesus?”* What a massive list of answers to this question one could assemble. No other person has ever been accorded such attention and prestige in the course of history. All the world today acclaims His birth — even wars have ceased for a day at Christmas.

And much of the world mourns Jesus’ death. Our nation’s business stands still on Good Friday. But still the answers to the question *“Who is Jesus?”* correct as they may be, are far from expressing the real truth about Jesus.

Missing the mark as they do, the answers given by the world to this question are nevertheless important. For such answers constitute a reproach of God’s people and a judgment upon the world. The judgment is that of John’s Gospel, as we read in John 1:9-11, *⁹That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world. ¹⁰He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. ¹¹He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him.*

Certainly, this judgment falls upon the world today even as it did upon the world which crucified Jesus. In Jesus’ day mankind refused to honour Jesus as God and Saviour, and mankind refuses to do so today. People everywhere are quite willing to do Him honour and to acclaim Him a great man, but all too few are ready and willing to receive Him as their Lord and their Redeemer from sin, death and hell. The world at large does not really know Him today.

But there is also an accusation of God’s people. *His own did not receive Him.* Jesus might have asked His disciples what had happened to the teaching of the Old Testament Church concerning the Messiah. How could the people mistake Him for John the Baptist or other great men? Was He not plainly fulfilling the Messianic prophecies before their eyes? And today He might well ask what has happened to the New Testament Church. For many of the false answers concerning the identity of Jesus have come from within the Church which bears His name.

On the Last Day, what will the Lord of the Church say to those who by their answers to His question concerning His identity dishonour Him with their recognition of Him merely as a great man and blaspheme Him with their praise?

Indeed, ***“Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?”*** is the most important question confronting every person within the Church. Every man’s future happiness in time and eternity is dependent on his answer to this question. Yet most people answer this question in a casual manner, seemingly not realising its vital significance.

2. A Challenging Question

However important this first question, even more crucial is Jesus’ second question to His disciples, ***“But who do you say that I am?”*** The situation now becomes more tense. The conversation no longer has a casual note. This question is a direct challenge.

“And you, My disciples, what do you think about Me?” Discipleship hung in the balance here as these men examined themselves. One can almost sense their quickened heart beat. Jesus was calling the whole meaning of their lives into question.

It was Peter who rose to the occasion. Ringing clearly, with frankness and conviction, comes Peter’s simple answer, ***“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”*** With this answer the disciples not only cemented their relationship to their Master, but also voiced the basis of their discipleship. In and with this confession they expressed their faith in Him as their Lord and Saviour and renewed their pledge to forsake all to follow Jesus.

Is this your reply? To us, the disciples of the 21st century, comes the same question, ***“But who do you say that I am?”*** All discussion of what people in general say about Jesus must cease, regardless of how interesting and instructive it may be. For here is a more important question. Our own discipleship hangs in the balance. The challenge is unmistakable. This is the most important question we shall ever be called upon to answer.

The question is of particular importance for the Church of Jesus Christ today because it is fighting for its very existence against the forces which range from New Age beliefs to paganism to blatant atheism which attack it from without, and

against the spirit of worldliness and spiritual immaturity which challenges it from within.

To fight this battle the Church must continually refresh its convictions and renew its confession concerning its Lord and Master, the Source of its life and power. Hence the importance of Jesus' question today, "*But who do you say that I am?*"

Obviously, merely repeating the words of Peter is not enough when a confession is called for. The official confessional statements of practically all Christian denominations state the truth expressed by Peter in some form. Almost every member of the Lutheran churches has memorised Peter's classic confession in preparation for confirmation. We all know the words. The answer to Jesus' question becomes more difficult, however, when we ask ourselves what we really mean by the words.

To answer Jesus' question with understanding and conviction requires self-examination and honest struggle with the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh. To confess Jesus as the Christ means to confess Him as the Anointed One of God, the Messiah, sent to save us from sin and damnation.

It means knowing ourselves as helplessly sinful, imprisoned by our own selfishness, pride, hatred, and lust. It means humble and contrite confession and penitence before God. Confessing Jesus as the Son of the living God is a far-reaching act, because we recognise thereby His rightful claim on our hearts and lives, our abilities and possessions. He is Lord of all. We are His people, and we dedicate our lives to Him.

Are we ready to give such an answer? And, what is equally important, are we ready to live such an answer? To give such an answer is to renew discipleship, to pledge anew allegiance to Jesus Christ, our Saviour. To live such an answer means to consecrate our time and talents, our strength and our possessions, unreservedly to His service. Not to give or to live this answer is to say that we are not really disciples at all. Clearly, our answer involves our present life and our future inheritance of eternal life.

3. When Alone Is This Confession Possible

Significantly, Jesus replies to Peter, "*Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in*

heaven.” A confession like that of Peter is made only when the Holy Spirit enters the heart and turns it from its rebellious path. It is made only when there is a genuine conviction of sin and a sincere and heartfelt need of the Saviour. It is made only when through the Holy Spirit’s guidance the sinner has found His Saviour in Christ, our Lord.

Then, and then only, does he experience the irresistible urge to tell the world the name of Him in whom alone there is salvation.

A story is told of a soldier in a battle. The artery of his arm was severed by a shell fragment on the battlefield and he was fast bleeding to death when a surgeon arrived and bound up the wound. The soldier asked his name, but the surgeon said, *“It doesn’t matter who I am.”* *“Indeed it does,”* retorted the wounded man, *“for I want to tell my family who saved me; and I want to serve you through the rest of my life to the best of my ability.”*

Only God’s Holy Spirit can convince. Is not this perhaps one reason why the Church and its people have so often been found wanting in genuine faith and devotion to Jesus Christ as the Lord and Saviour? Too often the answer to Jesus’ question ***“But who do you say that I am?”*** has been prompted by the intellect or the emotions but not by true appreciation of His saving power worked by the Holy Spirit. Intellectual adventure or emotional appeal do attract, but only the Holy Spirit can convert and make a change in the will and life of an individual.

Pray, then, that God will send His Spirit into your hearts to enable you to confess as Peter did when Jesus confronts you with His question ***“But who do you say that the Son of Man is?”***

On the rock of Peter’s confession, ***“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”*** Christ is building His Church, a Church which will stand despite the challenges from without and from within. Of those who genuinely make confession of Him as Christ, the Son of the living God, He will make a mighty host of redeemed people, a company of saints, who will testify to His holy name and do His work in the world.

What a comfort to belong to this Church! ***“The gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”*** And what a responsibility also! For to His Church Christ gave the keys of the kingdom of heaven, ***“and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in***

heaven.”² To the Church Jesus gives His Word as a means of grace, through which we offer men God’s forgiveness and peace or execute God’s judgment against unbelief.

This text is a challenge to renewed faith and dedication for all of us. Let us therefore confess with full appreciation of their meaning, the matchless words of confession, written by Dr. Martin Luther, in explanation of the Second Article of the Apostles’ Creed:

I believe that Jesus Christ - true God, Son of the Father from eternity, and true man, born of the Virgin Mary - is my Lord.

At great cost He has saved and redeemed me, a lost and condemned person. He has freed me from sin, death, and the power of the devil - not with silver or gold, but with His holy and precious blood and His innocent suffering and death.

All this He has done that I may be His own, live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead and lives and rules eternally. This is most certainly true. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Matthew 16:21

² Matthew 16:19