

Four Questions for Serious Disciples

Last week, we left Jesus in Syrophenecia, near Tyre and Sidon. There, he healed a demonized girl while deploying her mother as an example of cleanliness and faithfulness to his disciples. If you were here last week, you'll recall that he moved from there to the Gentile region of the Decapolis and there healed a man who was deaf and mute. Jesus—who by his own insistence—was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel shows compassion on these Gentiles, and more than compassion, but also displays his miracle-working power. That was the end of our reading of Jesus's sojourn among the Gentiles.

But it was not the end of Jesus's sojourn. We did not read the story of the miraculous feeding of the four thousand. I don't know why the lectionary makers omitted that story. But I can guess. We spent six weeks this summer on the feeding of the five thousand and its theological significance. Should we really come to another feeding miracle so soon? Do people need to hear about the bread from heaven, the body and blood of Jesus, the Eucharist again? Well, I think the answer is yes. But I see their point. If I could preach on that passage though, I would point out that the 5000 were *Jews* who were fed and then offered the bread from heaven. Here, Jesus does the same for Gentiles. He takes and blesses and breaks and gives—that fourfold pattern is deliberate in the story—to Gentiles. Like the woman who was clean. Like the man who was deaf. Like you. Like me. Jesus's ministry was to the Jews. It was to complete mission of Israel so that the blessing of God could be opened up to the Gentiles, as God had always intended. And while that was future—we read about it in the book of Acts—Jesus loves those unclean idol worshipping Gentiles so much that he gives them a foretaste of what is about to happen after the Spirit is poured out. The bread of heaven is for us Gentiles, too! And that's good news.

Who Do You Say that I am?

From here on in our reading of Mark, we're going to need to remember good news, because things are about to turn dark, to become serious. And the pivot is the Gospel for this week. This is the turning point. Until now, immediately, Jesus has been going here and there. Immediately Jesus has been teaching. Immediately Jesus has been performing signs and wonders. Immediately the crowds were pressing in upon him and the disciples. Immediately. Immediately. Immediately. Triumph trips over triumph as the Gospel of the Kingdom is proclaimed and the powers of darkness flee.

Until today. When we pick up the Gospel story for this week, Jesus has returned to the province of Judea, to its northern regions, under the administration of Herod Philip, one of the Tetrarchs (the one whose wife and daughter lived with his brother, Herod Antipas, and orchestrated the murder of John the Baptist—just a reminder of from a few weeks ago). He has brought his disciples to the city of Caesarea-Philippi. A city named by Herod Philip to curry favor with the Romans and also to stroke his own ego. He has brought his disciples to a city named after a king to ask the first of four questions for serious disciples.

He begins with a priming question: who do people say that I am? And the disciples rehearse the options. Some say you are John the Baptist—we read a few weeks ago about how Herod Antipas thought just that. The prophet he murdered had been raised by God and was continuing to preach. Some say you are Elijah come to herald the end of the world—a literal fulfillment of a prophecy in

Malachi chapter 4. Some say you are one of the prophets—though they will not identify Jesus directly, they will associate him with the great declarers of God’s will.

Then the direct question: “Who do you say that I am?” I imagine a long silence hear. It’s easy to report facts, and that’s all that has happened so far. But now, now comes a question for a disciple. Are you in? If so, how far in? Who do *you* say that I am. No quibbling or waffling. Take your stand. And Andrew looks at James. And James looks at Thomas. And Thomas looks at Matthew and on down the line as each hopes the next will stick his neck out. And finally Peter does. “You are the Christ.” You are the king, in other words. In this city named after kings, I declare that Caesar is not king, that Herod is not king. You are king. You are the Son of David. You are the Son of God (a royal title). You are the one anointed to deliver your people. You. Are. The. Christ. Matthew, in his telling of the story, includes Jesus’s special blessing on Peter occasioned by that answer. But here—Peter’s own preaching recorded by Mark—none of that. Just a warning. Don’t tell anyone.

Why? The reason will be plain in a moment. For now, just focus on Peter’s answer. You are the Christ. This is the right answer to the first question that every serious disciple, no matter how old we are, has to face. Who do you say that Jesus is? Not who does your church say who Jesus is. Not who does your family say who Jesus is. Not who do your friends say who Jesus is. You. Who do you say that I am? No quibbles. No waffles. No half-measures. It’s time to take a stand. It’s time to say with Martin Luther (though from a very different context) Hie stehe Ich; Ich kann nein anders. You are the Christ.

Peter gets it. The lightbulb has at last come on. He has heard the teaching; he has seen the miracles; and he knows that all the answers up to now are only partial. Jesus is not John. Jesus is not Elijah. Jesus is not a prophet. Jesus is King.

Who’s Leading?

Which brings us to the second question: who’s leading? Having heard Peter’s correct answer, Jesus then makes clear to us the readers why the disciples cannot start preaching yet. They don’t know what Messiah means. They don’t know what Jesus’s kingship is about. They think that Jesus is going to overthrow the Herods, kick out the Romans, reestablish David’s throne, sit on it, and the nations will come bring their gifts. You can’t blame them. That’s what the Scriptures said would happen. That is the day that we still anticipate, when Jesus will join his people, sin and evil will be forever eliminated, and God will wipe away every tear from our eyes. So we do not judge the disciples harshly. The disciples cannot preach this. Because it is not so much wrong as it is premature. Jesus needs to enlarge their understanding of his kingship.

This is what my leadership is going to look like: I am going to Jerusalem. I am going to be rejected by all those whom you value as authorities in our common life. They are going to kill me. And Peter says, no. that is not the way, Jesus. This is the way. You are going to kick out the Romans. You are going to take up your father David’s throne. Stop talking like this. Peter recognizes who Jesus is. He’s right in that recognition. But he will take Jesus only on his terms. Who’s leading? Looks like Peter is. You are the Messiah Jesus. Now, be the Messiah I want you to be.

Jesus turns the tables on Peter. No wonder. Be the Messiah of the easy way! is a summary of Jesus’s temptations in the wilderness after his baptism. Be a miracle worker! Display your divinity!

Be bigger than Caesar! These are the words of Satan. And Jesus names them. Get behind me Satan, for you are setting your mind on human things.

Who's leading? Peter, either way, it's not you. It's my way or the devil's way. I will not fit into your plans, and if you try to make me, you will lose me. You're right that I am the king. But I am not the king of your expectations. I am a king whose throne is a cross and whose crown is made of thorns. That is my way of leading.

This morning, Jesus poses the same question to us. Who's leading? Do you want to fit me into your plans? Or are you willing to let me rearrange those plans from the bottom up? If I am only the Messiah of your expectations, to be trotted out when you need something, I'm not Messiah at all. You've exchanged me for a lie. You've taken the devil's bait. You've recognized me as Messiah. Good! Now, will you let me lead?

Who's Following?

Which brings us to our third question: Who's following. If anyone would be my disciple, if anyone will let me lead, says Jesus, that person must deny himself. That person must deny herself. That does not mean be a door mat. It does mean placing myself, my hopes, my dreams, my ambitions, behind the leadership of Jesus. It is to consciously take the place of a follower. A disciple.

More than that, it is to take up the cross. It is, in other words, to follow the way Jesus himself took. Thanks to the Bible's influence on our culture, taking up the cross has lost much of its power. It's come to mean, to do something difficult for a noble purpose. He's looking after his ailing mother—he's taking up his cross. She's opening her home to foster children—she's taking up her cross. He's taken a new job as a caregiver when he could be profession athlete—he's taking up his cross. All of those things are noble. All of those things are good. All of those things I commend! None of them is what Jesus is actually talking about here.

The way of the cross is not the way that is difficult. It is the way of rejection. It is the way of betrayal. It is the way of death. To take up my cross is to follow Jesus all the way. For, as we say at every baptism, it is only insofar as we share in a death like his that we can hope for a resurrection like his.

It's completely counterintuitive. It makes no sense. But, it is the word which, if welcomed, will save our souls. Do you want to save your life? Follow Jesus to the point of losing it. Do you want to save your soul? Follow Jesus to the point of losing it. The more you try to cling to it yourself, the more you try to be the captain of your own fate, the master of your own soul, the more surely it will slip through your grasp. The more you try to fit Jesus in to your plans for a happy life, the more you'll lose both that life and the next. Following Jesus is hard. But it's the narrow way that leads to life.

What does it profit?

Jesus finally sharpens that last point with his last question: what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world, but loses his soul. I've kept the gender specific singular pronoun on purpose. "They" gives us a little wiggle room that Jesus does not. This is a question directed at each

of us. What does it profit *you* if you gain the whole world, and lose your soul? What will *you* give in exchange for your soul?

Richard Rich was a young man on the fringes of the court of King Henry VIII. And he wanted to move closer to power. He tried to do so by getting on the good side Thomas More, then King Henry's Chancellor (think, they guy who ran the kingdom while Henry hunted rabbits and wives). And More sent him away. You should be a teacher! You'd be good. But Rich would not be persuaded. Who would care if I were a good teacher? Your students. Your friends. God. That's what More said in reply.

Well, the years passed and More fell out of favour with King Henry VIII. The reasons aren't important here. His trial is. He is put on trial for treason, and the penalty is death. And the prosecution, led by Sir Thomas Cromwell, has no evidence. Well, Cromwell was not the first and tragically, neither was he the last to cook up evidence against a personal, political enemy. And all of a sudden Richard Rich comes back into the picture.

In the play, A Man for All Seasons, Richard Rich enters Sir Thomas's trial wearing the necklace of the Chancellor of Wales. He has made it. He has become an advisor to the king. He has gained a great deal. And he gives his perjured testimony. Sir Thomas took bribes. Sir Thomas spoke ill of the king. Sir Thomas is an opponent of the Reformation. The last bit was true but Rich never heard Sir Thomas More say such a thing. But back to the play. Having lied on the stand and condemned his former mentor to death, Rich must walk past More to leave the room. As he passes More and is unable to meet his gaze, this is what More says: "Why Richard, it profiteth a Man nothing if he gains the whole world! But for Wales?" Richard! You sold your soul for this? That's it?

So the fourth question: What does it profit you? However you define "the world" this morning, whether it be wealth or power or honor, or happiness. Whether it be personal health or security, or the health and security of your family, your children, your grandchildren. These are all good things. But when we place them ahead of Jesus's claim on our lives, we have to face the question, "But what does it profit you if you gain them at the expense of your soul?" If someone—who never comes to us with a pitchfork and flames—promised you all those things at the price of saying so long to Jesus, what would you say? Is that enough profit?

Who do you say that I am?

Who's leading?

Who's following?

What does it profit?

Discipleship is not for the weak of mind or will, that's for sure. And here's the bad news: we all get it wrong. We all at some point or other say either in words or in actions, No Jesus, you're not really my king. The way of the cross is not my way. I'll go my own way. I can do better without you. The disciples, including Peter, would all do this just a few short weeks after this very conversation. At the moment of Jesus's very literal way of the cross, the scriptures tell us, "They all forsook him and fled." The good news is this: if even the most serious disciples sometimes break faith with

Jesus, he does not break faith with them. So as you reflect on these questions this morning, do not despair. And here instead this invitation offered to all—serious and unserious disciples alike:

YE that do truly and earnestly repent you of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbours, and intend to lead the new life, following the commandments of God, and walking from henceforth in his holy ways: Draw near with faith, and take this holy Sacrament to your comfort;