

REFLECTIONS FOR THE 21ST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME ~ 27 August 2023

The Mount ~ The Residence at Littledale

“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” (Matt 16:13) – this is one of two key questions in today’s Liturgy of the Word. It is a question for us personally, for us in community, and for our Church on its synodal journey. The story in Matthew’s Gospel tells us that to answer the question we need to be aware of place, of contemplative listening, and of personal awareness.

Listening Sister Mary Stephen



In asking the question, Jesus appears to be testing the disciples. But I wonder if Jesus is really reaching out to his immediate community to help him understand who he is in his ministry, in his response to the call of the God who had confirmed at his baptism, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased” (Matt 3:17). He is now at a critical time in his ministry as he comes closer to his passion, death, and resurrection. His conversation with his disciples will help him to be more faithful in living out this trust which the Father has placed in him. He wants to know what others are saying about who he is, but his questions go beyond that.

The disciples answer Jesus’ question, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets” (Matt 16:14). Their words highlight the belief of the people that they have experienced Jesus as one in the line of the prophets – from Elijah to the Jeremiah and the other writing prophets to John the Baptist. Like these

prophets, Jesus has challenged all who are not walking in God’s way and has invited them to repentance, to conversion, and to openness to a transformative change of heart – what the scriptures call *metanoia* (μετανοέω), “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matt 4:17; 11:20).

But Jesus then asks an even more profound question, “But who do you say that I am?” (Matt 16:15). Again, we sense that Jesus truly wants to know how the disciples who are so close to him see him and, therefore, strengthen him in his living his vocation. He listens contemplatively to Simon Peter who is the only one brave enough to give his answer, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matt 16:16).

Although the title “living God” is used frequently in the Old Testament and in the letters in the New Testament, Matthew is the only writer who uses the title “Son of the Living God.” Elizabeth Johnson csj helps us appreciate the depth of the description of “the living God”:

When they entered into covenant, the people of Israel “heard the voice of the living God” speaking out of the fire at Sinai (Deut 5:26) and knew “the living God among you” as they crossed into the promised land (Josh 3:10). . . Christians, too, now included in the ancient promise, understand that they are “children of the living God” (Rom 9:26) thanks to the marginal Jew Jesus Christ, “the Son of the living God” (Matt 16:16).

Living means the opposite of dead. A well that is living never dries up but has water that is always springing up and running; its living water is fresh, alive flowing. “My soul thirsts for God, the living God” (Ps 42:2), prays the psalm writer, making this connection. .. a

sense of the God who is full of energy and spirit, alive with designs for liberation and healing, always approaching from the future to do something new. The term “the living God” evokes the realization that there is always more to divine Mystery than human beings can nail down. It prepares those who use it for astonishment.

This description becomes even more poignant when we see how this story begins in Matthew, “Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi” (Matt 16:13). Place matters. In this district which is at the foot of Mount Hermon in the Golan Heights, we find a spring named Banias flowing with fresh life-giving and life-sustaining water. I had the privilege of swimming in the spring at Banias and can still hear the sound of the living, flowing water in my memory.



Peter’s naming Jesus as the Son of the living God with the bubbling spring in the background reminds Jesus and the disciples about the words of Psalm 42, ‘My soul thirsts for God, the living God.’ Elaine Wainwright reminds us about the significance of this location for Peter’s response to Jesus’ question, “It is in the very interaction of the human community around Jesus (his disciples) in the habitat in and through which they have journeyed (the place of springs of living water) that Peter has come to his recognition of Jesus’ unique and intimate relationship with divinity. It is in such places and among such people today that we will come to a new recognition of Jesus for our time, a time of profound ecological crises.”

The disciples and Peter have answered Jesus’ questions. Jesus has heard their answers, has certainly made the connection with the Old Testament prophets and the images of God as living God, and probably says aloud the opening words from Psalm 42. Now he is strengthened in his willingness to become who he is being called to be at a crucial time in his ministry. Jesus has needed this time of contemplative listening and communal discernment.

Pope Francis takes this two-thousand year-old Gospel story to us personally:

At Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asks his disciples: “Who do you say that I am?” ... They had to take that decisive step, from *admiring Jesus to imitating Jesus*. Today too, the Lord looks at each of us personally and asks: “*Who am I for you?*” This question, addressed to each of us, calls for more than a quick answer straight out of the catechism. It requires a vital, personal response. That response *renews us as disciples*.

How do you answer Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am?” For each one, just as it was for Peter, your answer will change over time and in different places. How did you answer the question when you were first aware that you were a Christian? How did you answer when you first consciously carried out ministry in Jesus’ name? How did you answer when someone you loved deeply died? How do you answer today? Steve Garnaas-Holmes gives a modern-day answer to the question:

Jesus is God's best selfie, and humanity's true DNA.
Jesus is the great overlapping. Jesus is God's fragile hope set loose in the world,
God's vulnerability surviving among us, the living wound of the Beloved.
Jesus is the tear in the world where we see through to God,
what we look like when we let the Divine burn in us.
Jesus is the living bit of love that every empire trips over,
the peasant who shatters the world,
the victim who ruins our judgments and leaves us with nothing but mercy.

If we are made in the image of God, we find part of the answer to our question when we look at our best selves. I am moved by the response of Brother Lawrence who lived in the 17th century:

God alone can make himself known as God really is. But we go on searching in philosophy and science, preferring, it seems, a poor copy to the original that God himself paints in the depths of our souls.

Now let us turn the question around once more. What would happen if we asked God that question about us personally, "God, who do you say that I am?" As we prepare for the Synod, how would God the question for our Church, "God, who do you say that we are?" The professor and spiritual director, Ruth Takiko West, reflects on asking God these questions:

Because Jesus taught by modeling, we follow his example and ask God, "Who do you say that I am?" Because we are the imago Dei (image of God), I believe God would say that we are God's Beloved, fearfully and wonderfully made. It is important to consider what we might know about ourselves and how we interact or respond in the ways we do, or what we perceive or believe about our own faith, theology, and identity. As we endeavor to live fully into this notion of belovedness, we must be introspective and self-aware, carefully uncovering and discovering our most authentic selves while staying connected to Spirit, utilizing the resources of prayer and other spiritual practices. This is the basis of how we live out our spirituality.

As we look in the mirror and at each other and Creation, once more we ask ourselves, "Who do you say that I am?" How might we represent the Holy in the world? How do we interact with each other and Creation? . . . We must be mindful to revere the Holy in our neighbors – to share our stories about God's goodness and grace, companionship and love in the hopes of becoming the community that God has intended.

Take time this week to sit with your God and ask God the question, "Who do you say that I am?" Listen quietly and contemplatively to God's answer. Be prepared for astonishment as God comes from the future to answer you!