

Reading the Words That Are There

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Romans 12:1-8

Matthew 16:13-20

But who do you say that I am?

In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

As a child, I learned to read by reading aloud to my parents, night after night after night. Because I have always been the kind of person who would much rather *already* be good at something than do the hard work of *becoming* good at it, as a child I would frequently guess at what I was reading, making sense by context clues rather than by the hard work of sounding out unfamiliar words and phrases. My senseless guesses would never fool my parents though. They would invariably stop me, and I would realize, somewhat sheepishly, that I had gotten it wrong, at which point my parents would always say the same thing, in the same tone of voice:

“Read the words that are there.”

There is a kind of discipline to this, to reading the words that are there, a training of the mind to see what is before us. The human mind by instinct makes shortcuts and assumptions, following too much, if you will, the devices and desires of its own heart. The task is to read the words as we find them, not as – in our impatience – we would expect to find them, nor as in our pride we would prefer to find them.

This, then, is how I learned to read: by reading the words that are there.

In the passages from St Matthew’s gospel that we have been studying over the past several weeks, we have seen the disciples fail, over and over again, to correctly read the signs that Jesus is working in their midst. Three weeks ago, when hungry crowds appeared, the disciples said, “It’s too late, send them away.” Even after Jesus feeds the five thousand, when crowds appear *again*, the disciples have basically the same response, “How will we feed all of these people?” and Jesus repeats the miracle, the second time with loaves *and* fishes.¹

¹ Matthew 15:33, paraphrase

Two weeks ago, when Jesus approached the disciples across a choppy sea, walking on the water, they didn't even recognize him, this man with whom they spent every single day, and they cried out in fear, "It's a ghost!" And last week, when, as we heard, the Canaanite woman threw herself on Jesus' mercy, asking for him to heal her daughter – something he had done for many other people – the disciples' response was, what? "Send her away." She's annoying.²

The disciples are always a bit late to the party, and in all his interactions with them, our Lord is teaching them something, and he is teaching us as well. He is teaching us all who he is, teaching us how to interpret the signs that he is doing, the miracles that he is working, and the lessons that he is presenting.

He is teaching us to read the words that are there.

So we should take note that when St Peter, whose track record is – as we have discussed, very poor indeed – is given the question, "Who do *you* say that I am?" he answers it bang on the nose: "You are the Messiah, [the Christ,] the Son of the living God." Jesus took note as well, and for once Peter receives congratulation and not a rebuke, he receives in fact quite a lot more. Jesus says to him:

That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

Peter earns his name – *petrus*, the *rock* – by his act of faith, which is what the confession of Jesus as Messiah is. On this singular confession is the whole of the church built, on the correct acknowledgement that Jesus Christ is not a prophet, not just a nice moral teacher, not just a galvanizing leader and worker of wonders, but the only-begotten Son of God, Begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of very God. That is the bedrock, the unshakable ground not only of the church but of the Christian faith itself.

St Paul writes that "no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit."³ For those who are willing to open themselves to the Holy Spirit, the ability to read the words that are there concerning Jesus Christ comes solely by the grace of God. Sometimes the Holy Spirit kicks in the door of our hearts anyway, no matter how barricaded those doors may be. I have heard countless stories of men and women who came to faith over their own fervent objections... and stories of those whose faith was renewed – unexpectedly – in a quiet moment.

That is why those of every generation who join Peter in his confession stand apart, why "they are marked as Christ's own forever," as our Baptism service puts it. It is not incidental that Jesus draws an implicit distinction between what "people" out there say about him and what "you"

² Matthew 15:23

³ 1 Corinthians 12:3

say about him. Christians are always an autonomous bunch, marked by their love of God and their service to their neighbor for Christ's sake, two traits that cut across the materialism and consumerism and all the false gods of the world in which we live.

That's why St Paul, in our first lesson this morning, writes to the Christians gathered at Rome, that they are to present themselves as a living sacrifice. This is language with which we should be intimately familiar indeed. At the altar, we "offer and present unto [God] our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto [God]." ⁴ As Christians, we give our whole lives over, by the mercy of God, to his service. One could hardly do otherwise to the One we confess as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. That is what it means to confess Jesus as Messiah, that is what it means, in this sense, to read the words that are there.

Those words – made known to us in Scripture and by the Holy Spirit – those words reveal to us not only who Jesus Christ is, but also who we are, who God knows us to be. The trouble with faith in Jesus Christ is that, once you have seen Jesus for who he is, the Son of the living God, once you have followed Peter and answered the question – Who do *you* say that I am? – you have put your life into God's hands. That's a scary thing, putting yourself in someone else's hands, anyone else's hands. But as the Prayer Book has reminded us for generations, God is not like other rulers, for God's service is *perfect freedom*.

Therefore, my brothers and sisters,

I appeal to you... to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-- what is good and acceptable and perfect. ⁵

AMEN.

⁴ See also Psalm 116:17

⁵ Romans 12:1-2