

You might have noticed the cover of the order of service has some Greek words. It is always okay to ask about such things. On the nimbus—the halo around Jesus’ head—you find a take on Jesus as the great *I Am*.

The words could literally be translated as “the One who is.” And we find this exact form in Revelation 1—among several other places—as John says, “Grace to you and peace from *him who is* and who was and who is to come”

And then—maybe you figured out the Greek characters underneath the icon of Jesus. Here, He is *the Christ*. *Christ* means *Anointed One*—equivalent to *Messiah* in Old Testament Hebrew.

This is the great confession of the Church—who Jesus is. You will find a few pulpits out there engraved with John 12:21. I may have this done someday. In this passage, a few Gentiles approach the Disciples in Jerusalem—Philip specifically. And they make a request, “We wish to see Jesus.”

This is the point of preaching. The Church should always be talking about Jesus. We Christians should always be talking about Jesus. This is Paul’s normal pattern. His letters regularly contain a confession of who Jesus is. Colossians 1 may be my favorite. Several of our hymns today pick up on this passage.

“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities- all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.”

Understanding the nature, character, and work of Christ is the point of our Gospel reading today. Jesus normally taught the crowds with monologues—sermons, really. But in our Gospel reading today, Jesus asks *questions* to engage His Disciples. He takes them from the Sunday morning service to Bible class.

It is time for them to move beyond merely hearing the Word. He wants them to make a good confession. He wants them to mature in their knowledge and be able to articulate the faith. He prepares them to be martyrs.

We tend to think of those who were faithful unto death—and we are not wrong—but the word *martyr* just means *witness*. Jesus wants them to be witnesses of who He is, and what He is doing in the world.

Jesus opens this conversation by asking, “Who do the people say the Son of Man is?” *Son of Man* is Jesus’ favorite self-designation. And it is loaded with meaning. But here, the focus is more on the question. Jesus is asking, “What are people saying about Me?”

And people were saying quite a few things about Jesus. We have talked about the various subcultures in Matthew’s Gospel. The Pharisees—one of the key groups that Jesus deals with—were saying some pretty awful things about Jesus. They associated His work with the power of the devil.

For them, Jesus was out of His mind. And He was trouble. He was exclusive. He was simply going to destroy the nation with all of His talk about the kingdom of God.

The crowds—another subculture—were curious and maybe even a little hopeful that Jesus could help their lives be better. It is the crowds' answer that the Disciples give.

Now, maybe they just don't want to say all the negative and blasphemous things others are saying about Jesus. But these answers show that Jesus is important. People have expectations of Jesus.

"Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." There was hope a messianic hope that an Elijah-like figure would come.

The Prophet Malachi gives us God's Word in this regard. He says "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes." Although Jesus made it clear that this was fulfilled in John the Baptist.

The Apocryphal book of 2 Esdras—also called 4 Ezra—called for the return of Jeremiah. And Jesus' words of woe in Matthew 11 may have reminded the people of Jeremiah, who foretold judgment on the people of Judah.

Regardless, many people seemed to consider Jesus a Prophet. They put Him in the category of John the Baptist. And this report might have been flattering for an ordinary man, but it was not an adequate confession of faith.

Matthew already told us that Jesus is Immanuel, God with us. But the crowds—at their best—think He is merely another great man—another servant of the living God. In contrast, all four Gospels declare that Jesus is the unique Son of God. Jesus makes divine claims. Yet because He is clothed in flesh, the crowds just don't see it.

Jesus once had a conversation with the Pharisee Nicodemus—the teacher of Israel. The account is in John 3. You know this one. Nicodemus came to Him under the cover of darkness, wanting to talk with Him teacher to Teacher. But Jesus left his head spinning. He was so much more than a good teacher.

And many people today commit the same kind of error. Even when people believe that Jesus existed in real history—even when they think He was virtuous and a great Teacher—they typically believe that His teachings are all He has to offer. He is just another Plato or Aristotle—another Buddha or Confucius. But they also don't know the difference between His teachings and theirs.

In the Gospels, Jesus makes a much bolder claim. He is not just another Prophet or Teacher. He claims to be God in the flesh in almost every paragraph. He has power that only God can rightly exercise. He knows things only God can know. He forgives sins. He calls God the Father His Father. He claims to be the Judge of the whole world.

Really, people who see Jesus as just a good Teacher, or even as another Prophet, have to ignore the biblical text. They have to create a new idea of Jesus for themselves—apart from what the Scriptures say. And they have to deny what Jesus says about Himself.

When it comes to Jesus, the crowds—ancient and modern—just don't think rigorously enough. They might think He is good, or clever, or useful—but that's not anything close to grasping His true identity.

And maybe we struggle with the same problem. Jesus sounds like a good guy. He is worth an hour or so—every once in a while—when we can squeeze Him into the schedule.

But He isn't that important to us. He doesn't shape how we think or live. He doesn't shape our view of eternal life. And if that is the case, we don't understand Him at all.

The crowds and the Pharisees don't grasp Jesus. And so, Jesus asks His Disciples the second question. Instead of, "What is everyone else saying?" now He gets on to what they think of Him. "But what about you? Who do you say that I am?" *This* is a good question. The word *you* is emphatic here in Greek. And it is plural.

Peter answers for the Twelve. He usually does. "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Peter's confession is the confession of every true Christian, every true Church. This is the heart and center of every creed and confession. It is the point of every sermon. And this changes the whole course of the world.

Remember, the word Christ means *Anointed One*. In the Old Testament, prophets, priests and kings were anointed. Hands were placed on them. Olive oil—enriched with myrrh, sweet cinnamon, calamus, and cassia—was poured over their heads. And by this rite, they were placed into divine office within the kingdom of God.

We still do this with pastors. Thankfully at my ordination they didn't pour oil over my head. I am a bit of a neat freak, and oil all over my clothes and the carpet would never be the same. But this is what they did in the Old Testament.

And let's draw a comparison with Baptism. It is an anointing with water and the Word. It marks us as His own people, set apart—holy to the Lord—for a life of service in the kingdom.

But Jesus is *the* Anointed One. He is the Son of the living God. He is divine. And in moment, Peter will hear even more. Jesus will reveal the cross. "From that time Jesus began to show his Disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."

Peter is not going to like this. It is going to bring an awkward moment where Peter loses his way and does his best to derail Jesus. Jesus will note that Peter, so soon after his good confession, has been influenced by the devil.

This all reveals that Peter does not yet fully grasp the depth of his own confession. He has a lot to learn. And this shows us that the rock on which Jesus builds His Church isn't Peter himself. Peter is too fickle and inconsistent. Peter has so much room for growth.

The rock upon which Christ will build the Church is Peter's good confession. The rock is Jesus Himself. Jesus is the cornerstone. Jesus is the foundation. And He will use His apostles and prophets to build His Church.

Peter, the one who makes the confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, keeps growing in his knowledge of Christ and the ways of the kingdom of heaven. He sticks with Jesus. And with the coming of the Holy Spirit, he grasps what God is doing in Jesus Christ.

Much later, Peter speaks of his own struggle to understand the writings of Paul. And even though they are hard, he keeps at it. He wrestles with them. He recognizes them as Scripture. And he calls us to the same, as he commands in 2 Peter 3, "Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

Let me encourage you to take a step forward in this regard. We need to know Jesus. And this knowledge needs to be growing.

Maybe the best way to do this is to get beyond just listening—to confessing. Start talking like what you hear at Church. Let Christ be the anchor of your life. Talk like Him. Think like Him. Trust in Him. Take all of this home. We are all theologians. Let's be capable theologians. Let Him change what you have always done—your traditions, habits, practices, schedules.

Jesus begins our reading with *the* question, “Who do you say that I am?” This is one of those questions we need to be able to answer and answer well. Our eternal destiny hinges on this question. And the proper answer, the one we hear from Peter in our reading, reveals Jesus as He actually is.

Personally, I am with Peter. Jesus is the Christ. The Anointed One. The Son of the Living God. That's the answer. But like Peter, we are just getting started. There is so much more that Christ would have us know. We are not anywhere close to being finished.

I am glad that our introit today is from Psalm 2. The first and second Psalms serve as a necessary introduction to the whole Psalter. If we don't get these right, we really don't understand the rest. The first Psalm is about delighting in the Torah—in God's instructions. And thinking about them day and night. It's about planting ourselves where God's Word is read, taught, preached, and heard.

And the second Psalm is all about kingship. Let me read Psalm 2:6-12 in closing. The words are from God the Father—through King David—and they are about Jesus—even though they are written 900 years before Bethlehem.

They show us our need for Christ. They even hint at a warning for those who domesticate Jesus. He is not merely a Prophet. He is not merely a Teacher. They show us where we must stand in relation to Him. I hope they pique your interest today.

“As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill. I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, You are my Son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel. Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.”

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

+*Soli Deo Gloria*+