

“Who Is He”

Starting in the 1960s there was the popular notion that we needed to figure out who we are as individuals. People were responding to the post-WWII corporatization of American culture where men went to work in tall bland office buildings. They worked in dull cubicles and offices. They wore almost identical gray flannel suits and homburg hats. They carried the same briefcases and read the newspaper as they commuted to work on trains from suburbs of identical ranch houses. Women worked in secretarial jobs, as teachers, or nurses. The ceiling was not glass, it was stone or iron. Women were restricted by the paternalistic idea that they were working only until they caught the right man, and they would quit to become housewives and mothers.

The husband once caught would work his dreary and soul killing job, because his role was to “bring home the bacon.” If he did that well, he was a good husband, if not then he was a lout. Likewise, the woman was to have supper on the table and keep the kids in line so that dad did not have to be called in to discipline. Their roles were tidy, restricted, and predictable. For some that was just fine. The chaos of the Depression and WWII had been exhausting. People wanted peace and tranquility. These routines were comforting for many. However, underneath there was a feeling of being interchangeable. People felt like scurrying ants, rats in a maze, a hamster on a wheel.

The 1960s saw an explosion of interest in self-identity and self-actualization. People were asking themselves, “Who am I?” “Why am I here?” Men and women felt trapped in roles not of their choosing. Societal expectations felt restrictive. Many of these people were highly educated and expected more from their lives than what they felt were stifling roles. Self-help books started to crowd the bookshelves. Psychoanalysis started becoming mainstream, if not entirely acceptable in the mainstream. Uniformity of clothing and hairstyles went out and brilliant colors, long hair, bellbottoms, and miniskirts, were in. These were all attempts at self-expression and finding individual identity in the face of what was perceived as the corporate rat race.

Today’s Gospel reading is in sharp contrast to that way of thinking. We are about midway in the Gospel of Mark. Jesus is taking a break from healing, teaching, and preaching when he calls his disciples together for an intimate discussion. He asks them a telling question, “Who do people say that I am?”¹ Note that he did not say, “After much soul searching, prayer and analysis I have determined that my role in life is _____ (fill in the blank).” He asks what others are saying about him. He wants to know what the effect of his healing, teaching, and preaching is having on others.

¹ Mark 8:27b

It seems rather odd that Jesus would want to know what the crowds were saying about him. We have been taught that being the Son of God and part of the Holy Trinity he knows everything. His awareness goes beyond self-awareness to an understanding of the entire cosmos. He should know what others are thinking. Moreover, it should not matter what they think because he knows who he is and what his mission is. However, when we encounter Jesus in the Gospel of Mark, we need to set aside theology and encounter Jesus as Mark portrays him.

Mark's portrait of Jesus is not of one who knows who he is or for what he is destined. In Mark when Jesus hears "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased."² It drives him out into the wilderness. I take that to mean that this proclamation of his sonship was a surprise and something he had to wrestle with. He needed forty days in the wilderness fasting and praying to sort out what it meant.

Furthermore, as he goes through his ministry, we see that he has little fumbles along the way. For example, it takes him two tries to cure a man's blindness.³ He argues with a Gentile woman that God's mercy is reserved for the Jews. He refuses to heal her daughter, but he relents seeing the wisdom of her argument.⁴ In the Gospel of Mark, it appears that Jesus is learning how to be the Messiah. In these circumstances, asking the disciples what people are saying about him does not seem so strange.

He follows up his query about the crowds with the same question of the disciples. "Who do you say that I am?"⁵ We do not know what the other disciples would have said for impulsive Peter shouts out "You are the Messiah." Jesus, as is his custom throughout Mark, responds by telling the disciples to keep this revelation a secret. We do not know why Jesus wanted this to be kept a secret. It is an interesting question, but not relevant to us at this moment.

What is relevant is how we would respond to his question "Who do you say that I am." Or maybe more relevant would be how would we answer if someone on the street asked, "Who do you say Jesus is?" Imagine walking down the street after services when someone unknown to you stops you and asks, "Who do you say Jesus is?" We can give a safe answer such as Jesus is the Son of God or my savior. But does that come from the heart? We might say that he was a wise man who told us how to live a good life if we wanted to play it safe.

There is a myriad of ways in which we can respond to the question, "Who do you say Jesus is?" We need to be constantly exploring that question when we read scripture, pray, or just live our lives. It is a question that we need to be

² Mark 1:11 NRSV

³ Mark 8:22-26

⁴ Mark 7:24-29

⁵ Mark 8:29

living with every day as we wonder, ponder, and seek meaning. Our seeking is crucial for our souls. If we do not seek to mature in our understanding of Jesus our lives become irrelevant.

We must be as persistent and patient with our search, knowing the answer may not come right away. I also expect our understanding will change as we grow and change. Poet and novelist Rainer Maria Rilke wrote something in his book *Letters to a Young Poet* that has guided me for many years. He wrote, “Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart. Try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”⁶

Let us not live for trite questions that seem big at the moment. Let us not give ourselves over to mantras and “isms” that are fleeting. Search for the deeper answer to the question who Jesus is in your life and the life of the world. As we get closer to that answer, we will find the way and the truth that is lifegiving and what the whole world is searching for.

⁶ Goodreads website https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/7906.Rainer_Maria_Rilke accessed September 14, 2024