

"WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 E. 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
November 6, 1983

"WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?"

TEXT: "He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?'"

Matthew 16: 15

INTRODUCTION I love the exchange that takes place in the first few verses of this well known passage. Jesus asks the disciples a perfectly straightforward question, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" It's an impersonal question whose answer will not reveal much about the person answering beyond establishing whether or not that person is observant. And so we read,

"And they (presumably all of them) said, 'Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets'"

But then Jesus asks a personal question, the answer to which will reveal the very soul of the person answering,

"But who do you say that I am?"

And this time no one speaks, except one, Simon Peter, who says, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God".

DEVELOPMENT To Jesus, of course, both questions were intensely personal and crucial to the success of His life. For this exchange with His disciples does not take place in the bright morning of His career, when all wondered and many bore testimony to Him. No, it takes place in the long evening shadows, in the grim twilight.

Jesus has to know who has understood Him, for who is going to carry on the work after He's gone? Earlier, in the wilderness, He had rejected all methods for inaugurating the reign of God that would be incompatible with it - miracles and power. But years of teaching and healing later, who has understood the Kingdom and His message. Who has understood that His matchless royalty can only be won by a matchless suffering?

From one point of view the answer the disciples gave to the first question is very complimentary. Look at it again. "Some say John the Baptist" - whose return from the dead many anticipated and Herod, in particular, feared. "Others say Elijah". To the prophet Malachi, God had promised "Behold I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes." To this day our Jewish friends, at Passover, leave a seat vacant for Elijah, and if Elijah comes, can the Messiah be far behind?" And others say Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

Some Jews at the time believed that before their forebears had gone into exile, Jeremiah had taken the Ark and the altar out of the Temple, had hidden them in a cave, and before the coming of the Messiah would return and produce them so that once more the glory of God would descend on all the people. So to be called John the Baptist, Elijah, or Jeremiah was a high tribute - but also crushing, for to make Jesus only a prophet among others, even to honor Him as the first among all the teachers of all history, is to empty His life of its central meaning - the death of its efficacy and the Church of His authority.

PETER'S CONFESSION

So it must be with some relief that Jesus hears Peter's confession, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God". Then a wonderful thing happens, a wonderful thing that has happened since a billion times over. No sooner does Peter tell Jesus who He is than Jesus tells Peter who he is. "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you". There are truths that the mind can defend but never discover. "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this Rock I will build my Church".

Let's not get embroiled in the controversy swirling around that passage. For our purposes, let's simply say that Jesus, in effect, was saying to Peter:

"On such a faith as yours I can build a Church.
And because you are the first to grasp who I am,
you are the first stone, the foundation stone;
and in ages to come everyone who discovers me as
you have just discovered me will become another
stone added to the edifice."

A MIRROR TO OUR HUMANITY

Whenever Like Peter we tell Jesus He is the Christ, He tells us who we are.

Think for a moment: who - or what - tells you who you are? Some people need money to tell them who they are...or power. Take both away and they think they're nothing. Some need scholarship or athletic ability, and no few need enemies to tell them who they are. I have in mind anti-communists who need communists, or whites who need blacks, or vice-versa. Remember in March of 1968, when President Johnson announced he would not stand for re-election, half a million people in the peace movement were suddenly left without their identity.

Some people need their sins to tell them who they are. The way some of us treasure our failures, you'd think they were the holiest things in our lives.

But the moment you tell Jesus "You are the Son of God, you are the Christ", He says to you, "Blessed are you - Mary, John, Jason, Emily - for you are no longer defined by money, or power, or scholarship, or athletic ability, or by your enemies or your sins or anything else in all creation. Praise be to God, you are now as you love. You are as you receive my love and return that love by loving and caring for others."

When we tell Jesus who He is, He tells us who we are. He becomes the mirror to our humanity.

A WINDOW TO DIVINITY

But more importantly, He is a window to Divinity - the window through whom we see as much as is given mortal eyes to see of God's gracious power and mercy.

When we say, "You are the Christ - the Son of the living God", we are not saying that God is confined to Christ, only most essentially defined by Christ. Christ, if you will, is the Rosetta Stone that makes intelligible the hieroglyphics of history, the main theme that make understandable all the variations of it in our lives.

There is much needlessly complicated talk about Christ's deity. Finally, what is important is not that Jesus is Godlike, but that God is Christlike, that

God is akin in purpose and method to Jesus. What is important for us to know is that when we see Christ at work succoring the sick, empowering the weak, and scorning the powerful, we are seeing transparently the power of God at work. What is important is for us to be able to pray to God, and everything we ask or affirm of God, we know we can say, "Through Jesus Christ, our Lord."

CLOSING SECTION Whenever with Peter we say, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God", Jesus tells us not only who we are but who God is. Yes, He is the mirror to our humanity and a window to Divinity.

Whenever, with Peter, we say, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God", we become another stone added to the edifice of the Church, which, as Christ says, is finally invincible. How could He make such a claim? Because, as one Christian wrote centuries later,

"All the empires and kingdoms have failed, because of this inherent and continued weakness, that they were founded by strong men...But this one thing, the historic Christian Church, was founded on a weak man, and for that reason is indestructible....for no chain is stronger than its weakest link".

But this weak Peter confessed Jesus as "the Christ, the Son of the living God", and became the Rock. And whenever Christians do as Peter did, they become part of that community against which the wages of sin, the mortality of human beings, the corrosion of the centuries, and all the powers of death militant in the world cannot prevail. I believe it!

As Paul would say, "Thanks be to God who give us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

PRAYER O Spirit of the living God, who hast revealed Thyself to us in a Person - like us and yet so unlike us - sharing our humanity, yet rising far above and beyond it....save us from idle talk about Him, and help us to claim as Peter did long ago on the grassy hillside of Galilee, "Thou art the Christ - the very Son of the Living God".

Help us to stand in His presence - awed, renewed, and forgiven as in the Presence of Thyself.

We thank Thee, O God, for the life of Jesus - for the wonder of it, the power of it; the beauty and the glory of it; the simplicity of it, the kindness and the compassion. Open our eyes that we may see that life wherever it expresses itself in our midst and, when we see it, give us the courage to believe once again that Thou, in all thy majesty, art reigning over everything that we do or think or say.

In the name and spirit of Christ, our Lord.

PARK AVENUE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
FINANCIAL FACTS AND FIGURES

PLEDGE INFORMATION

1984 GOAL: \$ 100,000.00 from 250 or more pledges

DEDICATION SUNDAY: November 13, 1983

I. Total Needs - 1984 \$ 220,950.00

II. Of this amount, we must raise \$ 100,000.00 in pledges from members and friends of this parish.

III. Other Sources of Income:

Holiday Offerings	\$ 8,000.00
Day School	48,000.00
Plate Collections	7,500.00
Use of Church Gifts	18,000.00
Other Sources	16,450.00
Trust Fund	23,000.00

Income received from the above sources accounts for the difference between the total amount of \$ 220,950.00 and the \$ 100,000.00 we must raise in pledges from the people of this parish.

IV. Operating Expenses:

Ministerial Costs	\$ 54,900.00
Program Expenses	30,300.00
Administrative Expenses	52,902.00
Building Maintenance and Operation	58,720.00
Benevolence Program	24,128.00

Total Needs: \$ 220,950.00

Pledges of financial support will be received on and before that Sunday. Pledge cards will be placed on the Altar by the ushers and pledges will be dedicated in a special Litany of Dedication.

In 1983 (this year) we received 254 pledges that totalled \$ 99,431.00. As members and friends move away in the 1983-1984 transition, we anticipate losing 25 pledges totalling \$ 20,000.00.

For 1983, a profile of the individual giving of the people of this parish would be as follows:

PLEDGE CARDS RECEIVED	AMOUNT PLEDGED PER PLEDGE CARD
79 From \$	- 0 - 125.00
52 From \$	126.00 250.00
51 From \$	251.00 400.00
34 From \$	401.00 600.00
21 From \$	601.00 1,000.00
17 Over \$	1,000.00

While other sources of income are important, some are uncertain. Pledges from members and friends remain the chief source of funds for meeting all expenses involved in the operation of the programs of the Church.

TODAY AT 12:45 P. M.

Those who are serving as canvassers for this year's Financial Drive will meet in Fellowship Hall (third floor) for a time of instruction and inspiration.

Seventy-two persons have been enlisted to serve and we urge all seventy-two to be present, if possible.

Thanks to the special talent of Helen Wilkinson, there will be a luncheon for the canvassers after the coffee hour on the third floor Fellowship Room.

Dear Members and Friends,

The special affection which each of us has for this particular Church can be expressed in many intangible ways...in the giving of our time, our loyalty, our talents, our energies, and in the warm regard we hold for each other and for those who are our leaders.

These intangibles are vital to a Church's health and survival in this city, but financial support is vital and essential, too.

We are in that month of the year when each of us is asked to "tangible" - to decide what proportion of our personal financial resources we can commit to the life of our Church in the year ahead.

I am convinced that our Church is doing splendid work in an unique section of the world's greatest city. I also feel that we can do even more. This community in which we live offers unlimited opportunities for partnerships with Christian endeavors. We must work to make our Church an ever-growing and ever more vital influence in this city which is our home.

The program for meeting the challenges and opportunities for service in 1984 was mailed to you on Friday of this past week. We seek your response and hope that you will want to consider committing yourself to the program of service through the presentation of a pledge of financial support at the service on November 13th.

Sincerely,

Larry Morales
Chairman, 1984 Financial Canvass
Park Avenue Methodist Church

ANTHEM: "Let Down the Bars, O Death"

"Let down the bars, O Death! The tired flocks come in whose bleating ceases to repeat, Whose wandering is done. Thine is the stillest night, Thine the securest fold; too near Thou art for seeking thee, Too tender to be told. Let down the bars, O Death! The tired flocks come in."

ANTHEM: "Let Thy Holy Presence"

"Let Thy Holy Presence, let Thy Holy Presence come upon us, we pray, Thy Holy Presence. Come Holy Spirit, Thou gift of Heav'n bring love and joy to us. O Lord, God. Alleluia. Alleluia."

ORGAN POSTLUDE

The organ postlude - a final offering of our praise to God - comes after the Benediction. Time permitting, we invite you to remain to share in the beauty of it.

FOR THOSE WHO SING

New members are always welcome to audition to sing in the Choir. Rehearsals are held on Wednesdays at 6:15 pm in the downstairs Choir Room.

WORLD HUNGER GIFTS NEXT SUNDAY

Contributions for our world hunger fund are received on the first Sunday of the month.

ADULT BIBLE CLASS

If you are interested in learning more about the life of Christ and want to bridge the gap between Sunday morning and the week day in NYC, or need to find some peace and comfort in a supportive atmosphere, please join the Adult Bible Class.

The Class meets Sundays at 9:30 am in Fellowship Hall. New members are always welcome. Chapters 15 and 16 of Mark's Gospel are currently being studied.

ALL CHURCH FAIR

The November 19th All Church Fair is now less than three weeks away. Sign up today with Teddie Corsell (371-8604) to give your "Fair Share". Take on a task and have some fun in a good cause. Remember, too, that many hands make light work!

CHRISTMAS CARDS

Christmas cards are available again this year through the United Methodist Women. Take a moment to look over the selection during today's coffee hour. Remember, there's no sales tax and half of the cost is tax deductible. Place your order early.

ADULT FELLOWSHIP NEWS

The Annual Progressive Dinner will be held on December 3rd. For more detailed information, speak to Cathy Syble.

ORDER OF WORSHIP

11 A. M.

ORGAN "Priere" Boellmann

CALL TO WORSHIP

HYMN NO. 20 "A Mighty Fortress is Our God"

PRAYER OF CONFESSION (seated)

God of our life, we confess in company with one another and before Thee, that we are wayward and less than faithful servants. We have loved things and used people; remembered slights and forgotten kindnesses; called on Thee in trouble and ignored Thee at other times; praised Thee in word and failed Thee in deed; allowed the present age to mould us and left untapped the power of the age to come. Deal with us after Thy mercy for we are sorry for our sins and earnestly seek Thy pardon through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

SILENT MEDITATION - WORDS OF ASSURANCE - LORD'S PRAYER

PSALTER "May God Be Gracious" No. 576

GLORIA PATRI No. 563

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH No. 740

ANTHEM "Let Down the Bars, O Death" Barber

SCRIPTURE Revelation 7: 2 - 4; 9 - 17 Page 1076

PASTORAL PRAYER

PARISH CONCERNS

ANTHEM "Let Thy Holy Presence" Tschesnokoff

PRESENTATION OF THE OFFERING WITH THE DOXOLOGY

HYMN NO. 215 "God Moves In A Mysterious Way"

SERMON "Heroes of the Faith" Mr. Clarke

HYMN NO. 537 "For All the Saints" (Verses 1, 2, 5 and 6)

BENEDICTION

ORGAN "Toccata" Boellmann

*** Interval for Ushering

We welcome Effie French to the Lectern today. A native of Athens, Greece, a graduate of the University of Oklahoma, with a BA and an MA in Special Education and Psychology, Effie works for the Public School System of New York. Here in the church she serves on the Membership Committee, the Administrative Board and is active in the Adult Fellowship.

ALTAR FLOWERS

The flowers on the altar today are in memory of loved ones given by Judith Casciolini.

USHERS

The ushers today are Helen Wilkinson, Lynn Anderson, Kathy Burtch, Rod Hoover, Kathy Hubbard, Mary Jennings, Larry Morales and Yoshito Oda.

AN INVITATION

Coffee and tea will be served in the Russell Room following the service. Members and friends are invited to share in these moments of warmth made possible for us today by Helen Wilkinson, Gwendoline Cranston, Josefina Garcia, Diana Johnson, Jane Radnay and Cathy Syble.

CHURCH SCHOOL AND NURSERY CARE

Sessions of Church School for children are offered Sunday mornings from eleven to twelve. Nursery care for infants and toddlers is also available.

NEW MEMBERS TO JOIN

New members will be received into the fellowship of the Church in late November. Persons interested in learning more about the Church and the steps that lead to membership in it are invited to speak to Mr. Clarke.

PARK AVENUE
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

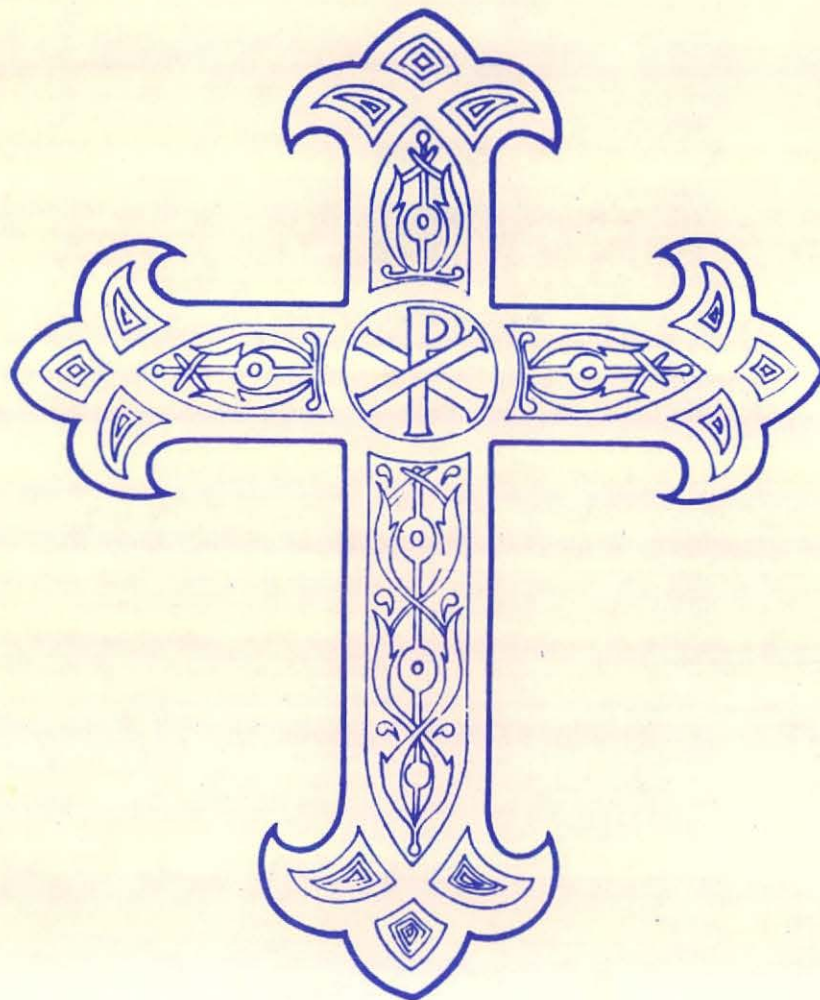
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