

"WHO IS JESUS TO YOU?"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
September 11, 1994

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INTRODUCTION

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"Rex...." said his wife, Elizabeth. "That was James Lovell. He just got back from flying around the moon...."

Harrison, of course, was just a bit embarrassed. If he had known who he was talking to he might have been more open...given him a bit more attention and respect. But he shouldn't have felt badly about failing to recognize someone who had just flown around the moon. Why people failed to recognize Jesus. Even those who were closest to Him missed the whole point of His ministry until after He was gone - died and risen again!

DEVELOPMENT

Which brings me to the Gospel scene which launches today's sermon. One day, long ago, when Jesus and His disciples were traveling through Caesarea Philippi, on their way up to Jerusalem, Jesus paused to give the disciples what we might today call a "reality check". He asked them,

"Who do people say that I am?" One of them replied, "They say you are John the Baptist". Someone else said, "Elijah" while others said that He was seen as "one of the prophets". But then Jesus asked, "But what do you think? And who do you say that I am?"

That's an interesting question. After being with Him for so long, did Jesus really believe that His own disciples weren't sure who He was? Or was He simply testing them? Sometimes we can be so blind.

It is true that even celebrities are hard to recognize...dark glasses and what have you. Billy Graham had just returned from Hawaii and was driving home with one of his associates. Somehow he got separated from his colleague at a gas station. It was well past dark and not knowing what else to do, Graham walked to a nearby 24-hour cafe and ordered soup, hoping that his friend would come looking for him. The other people in the cafe were all "locals" and they viewed Graham with some suspicion. It was winter and he was the only one there with a tie on sporting a nice tan. It was getting on toward midnight.

After he finished his coffee, Billy Graham asked the cashier if there was a taxi service in town. There wasn't. But there was a man who sometimes would drive people around for a small fee. Graham called him and the man agreed to drive him the one hundred miles to his destination. This driver was very suspicious of Graham for every time a car approached them, this well dressed stranger with a nice tan would watch it as long as he could hoping, of course, that it might be his colleague, though the driver could not know that.

Upon arriving at their destination, they went to check Billy into a motel. The night manager immediately recognized the world-famous evangelist and as you might imagine the driver was quite surprised to learn the identity of his famous, but mysterious passenger. He confessed to Graham that he had actually thought Graham was a fugitive hunted by the police because of the way he kept surveying all the passing cars on the road.

There are a lot of people who would not recognize Graham, but surely his twelve closest aids would know him pretty well. Yet Jesus asked His disciples, "Who do you think that I am?"

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Friend, this is a vital question. One wonders how quickly the disciples answered that question. After all, it's always easier to say what others think than to say what we believe. it's always easier to answer such a question by saying,

"Well....my grandmother believed this...." Or "my mother always taught this". Or, "my pastor back when I was a teenager once said this....." Or, "I once read this...."

Somehow it's difficult for us to voice our own opinions on religious questions. Perhaps this is why Jesus was led to put the question to His disciples. "Who do you say that I am?" For it's vital for every disciple of Christ to answer this critical question for himself or herself: WHO IS JESUS TO YOU? This is after all the most important question in our lives. It reveals to us how deep or how intense our faith really is. If Jesus was merely a good teacher or an itinerant healer, then it would be easy to give Him only half an ear. BUT... if He is something more than this...if Jesus is truly the very revelation of God Himself in human terms, then we are going to have to take Him very seriously.

Somewhere recently I was reading that Saint Teresa, when she was over 40 years of age and had been in a convent for a number of years one day noticed a picture of Jesus, of our Lord being scourged.

She had seen this same picture many, many times before...hundreds of times, but in that particular moment of revelation she saw it as she had never seen it before. She saw God suffering...suffering for love of her. She fell to her knees, sobbing in great pain and in wonder, and when she arose, she arose a new soul, a new person - reborn. This was the great divide in her life, the experience that changed everything. She arose, she said, with a "sense of unpayable debt." Bishop Earl Hunt, Jr. tells of this in his book, Recovering the Sacred.

This sort of thing happens when people discover who Jesus really is - for themselves personally. "But who do you say that I am?" Remember it was Peter who had the right answer, who hit the nail on the head. "You are the Messiah". How does that sound to you and how would you have answered if you were there.

Would you have said without reservation and with an open heart that Jesus is the anointed One of God. Follow along. You'll note that it was when Peter said that Jesus was the Messiah that Jesus then revealed to His disciples the plan for His ministry on earth. Plainly and clearly, He said:

"The Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, the chief priest and the Scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again".

Peter was shaken and shocked by these words and he took Jesus off to one side and began to rebuke Him. "Rebuke" is a harsh word but it basically meant that Peter felt Jesus was all wrong...scolded Him for talking that way. It was almost as if he were saying,

"Look, Jesus.....enough's enough....enough of this nonsense. Let me tell You who You are! I'm certain of this so listen to me, Lord...for a moment."

AND WE MUST ACCEPT CHRIST ON HIS TERMS, NOT OURS

And this brings us to another point that we must deal with and recognize and that is this: we must accept Christ on His terms, not ours. And that is so difficult for us. We really don't want to.

Joni Eareckson Tada, a woman whose writings have touched so many, felt her whole world collapse when she became a quadriplegic at the age of seventeen. A diving accident caused it. She found her condition impossible to reconcile with a loving God and for three years after that terrible accident she was bitter and full of questions.

She tells of a night when a friend sat with her trying to help her around a difficult corner of despair and discouragement. Something must have inspired her friend that evening because all at once she said,

"Joni....Jesus must know exactly how you feel....you aren't alone in this. Remember, He was paralyzed, too. Remember He was nailed to a cross and his back was raw from being beaten and He must have cried out in pain and yearned for a way to move or to redistribute His weight. But He couldn't move either. The nails must have paralyzed Him making it impossible for Him to move."

Those words became a source of inspiration to Joni and after that, she slowly lost some of her anger with God and slowly felt herself becoming closer to Him than every before.

Our faith requires that we accept Christ on His terms, not ours...I think that's the basic nature of faith. Yes, life is hard, difficult for us all and sometimes we slip into thinking that God ought to make our lives better for us. And in that moment we become a bit like Simon Peter. We think that we know best how God should go about His business. But Peter would soon discover that we can't do this.

Jesus turned to His dear friend, Peter and said,

"Get behind Me, Satan...for you are setting your mind on the world and not on the divine."

It seems to me that Christ...here...was telling Peter, rather bluntly, that he needed to get "back in line", for he was trying to put himself above God and ahead of Him.

LIVE FOR OURSELVES OR TO LIVE FOR HIM?

Each of us must decide for himself or herself who Christ is, and, if we see "divinity" in Him, we must do so on His terms, not ours. Which leaves us with one final decision: are we going to live for ourselves or will we take the leap of faith and live for Him? Which will it be?

Shortly after this exchange with His disciples, Jesus went on and spoke to those who were following Him on the same subject and here we hear Him telling people what it means to be a follower:

"If any want to become My followers, they must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Me"
(Mark 8: 34)

This is hard and difficult for us to do. It's hard and it's difficult for us because it runs counter to so much of what our culture tells us is important. We grow up hearing teachers and parents telling us to "be your own person". "Strive to be Number One". "You deserve the best". Along the way we're told to "look out for Number One". And this has led us into conflicts and into all sorts of problems with people taking unfair advantage of others for their own personal gain. But then the words of Jesus whisper to our hearts,

"What will it profit you to gain the whole world and forfeit your life. And what can a man give in return for his life."

Jesus calls us continually to a decision: which will it be - to live only for ourselves or to live for Him?

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When she arrives at the prison each day, she's usually greeted warmly by a number of inmates who want to share the events of their lives. She walks through the prison...waving and chatting...giving encouragement to any who are having problems. She always visits the chapel and helps out in the weekly Bible study. Often she talks with two other volunteers - Linda and Judy. Both of these women are grateful to Annie for getting them involved in such a fulfilling ministry. They find it to be both rewarding and at the same time a bit sad that the women in the prison are more excited by their ministry than the members of their own church are. They have seen many women accept Christ while in prison.

Annie Howard claims that her success lies in the fact that the women in the prison know that she represents Christ. They see His love working through her and instead of just giving them so many words, she lets them see Christ's love in action. And it's that love that makes a difference...in their lives.

When we give a bit of ourselves to others and let that love shine through, we're doing what Jesus wants us to do. And this is what following Christ is all about.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

A new season beckons. Summer is over. Coming back to the steadying center of our lives is every bit as rejuvenating as getting away from the hectic pace of life in this city. Hopefully Christ is at the center of your life and not out there on the circumference.

Who is He to you. Reflect upon it here this morning. Is He for you, like Peter, put it: the Messiah, the Son of God - Lord of your life...Master, Saviour. Or, is He just someone to hear about in church on an occasional weekend. The choice really is yours, but remember this: He is waiting for us to accept Him - on His terms, and then to follow His lead. As our closing hymn puts it:

"Jesus calls us o'er the tumult of our life's wild
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PRAYER

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ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, September 11, 1994

GREETING / VISITORS

- A. The first thing I would like to do under our "parish concerns" is to greet the visitors in today's congregation...and to add a few words. Delighted you're here with us...hope that we shall have the opportunity to greet you personally....either... or downstairs. Be free. Come, worship with us. Come, work with us. Take a moment to fill out...
- B. Doing the "Lord's work" at this busy corner of God's Kingdom since the year 1837. Roots of this church are deep....minister to a parade of people who come here from all over....minister in the spirit of Christ and it is in His loving Spirit.....wear your name tags.

PARISH CONCERNS

- A. Be sure to pick up a copy of our monthly news sheet. Some parish concerns and meetings are listed in your bulletin. Some other concerns I shall speak to...listen carefully.
- B. Moving into the Fall Season. Sunday School resumes next Sunday morning. Teachers are being recruited by Tom DeBow. Lend a hand teaching and always make sure the children feel at home.
- C. Welcome the choir back today. Lost some of our "regulars", so new singers are most welcome to audition. Speak to Dr. Woodside at the coffee hour. Rehearsals are at 9:30 Sunday morning.
- D. Church Fair. Special meeting next Sunday at one o'clock for "key" church fair persons...table captains. Jane Chaney is chair of the church Fair...anything I need to add, Jane?
- E. MEETINGS: Trustees, Monday Evening. Finance Committee, Thursday evening. Administrative Council, Tuesday, September 20th. Committee on Nominations and Personnel, Thursday, the 22nd.
- F. So many babies born in recent Summer weeks that next Sunday in connection with the Sunday School, we're going to give you a list of all new infants...names and celebrate about with about a dozen roses.

SUMMER WEEKS / HOMECOMING SUNDAY

- A. Permit me to reflect momentarily on the Summer weeks we had here..... we averaged about 98 people each Sunday...some Sundays over 100....4 Sundays "over" and 6 "under". Heat and humidity were the worst of recent summers....and I'm grateful that we did as well as we did. My thanks to William Bonwitt and Lyndon Woodside and the summer guest preachers who held things together in my absence. Summer soloists, too.

- B. The first two or three weeks of September are a time of "transition" and preparation for a busy Fall. Homecoming Sunday is set for two weeks from today - September 25th. ~~A new season beckons.~~ I always greet the prospect of a new church year with fresh energy and enthusiasm and I hope you do, too. Coming back to the STEADYING CENTER of our lives is every bit as REJUVENATING as getting away from the hectic pace of life in this City. Each September we begin another program year with joy as we gather to embrace old friends.....welc me new friends....sing, pray and worship together.
- C. We'll catch up during coffee hour these next two Sundays. Do make an effort to be in church on HOMECOMING SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 25th....you will add to the joy. Remember there's no such thing as SOLITARY RELIGION.....don't slip into the pattern of being a LONE RANGER CHRISTIAN.....

OFFERING

- A. Some look upon Homecoming Sunday as a time to check their yearly pledge to the church. By now, end of September three-fourths of it should have been sent in...hopefully. we commend this initiative to all of you to see to it that your gifts are "up to date"....
- B. Jesus said:

"It is more blessed to give than it is to receive".

NEW FRIENDS:

Look out for: Kristin Kribbs

Andrea Bardach. Neil - husband. Child is 2.

Diane Hofmocker...expecting a baby in December.
Both she and husband are bankers....Bear Stearns and Emigrant.

FIRST INTRODUCTION

The week of toil has ended. Our day of rest is at hand. May the rest and the quiet of this hour of worship refresh our inner life. And may it renew in all of us a sense of God's holy and abiding Presence.

In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

SECOND INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter now into a time of silent meditation....a time in which we prepare ourselves expectantly...that the Spirit of the living God may be made real to us in this hour of worship.

In quietness, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

THIRD INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter into a time of silent meditation as we come into the Presence of Him whom our faith declares to be the Source of all life and love, all peace and power, the Source of all hope and healing.

In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

FOURTH INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter now into a time of silent meditation. In these moments, let us ponder the pattern our lives have been weaving as we come into the Presence of Him whom our Faith declares to be the Source of all life and love, all peace and power, the Source of all hope and healing.

In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

MEDITATION

We rest our hearts in the Promise of Jesus who said:

"Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of Me, for My yoke is easy and My burden is light".

"Ask, and it will be given you. Seek and you will find. Knock, and it will be open unto you."

"I am the Way; the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father, but by Me. If you love Me, you will keep my commandments"

"For I tell you...do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat...or drink...nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food? And the body more than raiment."

"But seek ye first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well."

"For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present...to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature - shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus, Our Lord."

"And all things...whatsoever you shall ask in prayer, believing...you shall receive. And as many as touched Him were made whole!"

"Wait on the Lord. Be of good courage and He shall strengthen thine heart. For we dwell in the shelter of the Almighty. He is our refuge and our strength."

"We know that in everything, God works together for good with those who love Him!"

"But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings as eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint".

"God so love the world that He gave His only Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life".

"Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits: who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases".

"Thou wilt keep Him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on Thee: because he trusteth in thee".

"In the name of Jesus Christ, I share with you the Good News: We are forgiven".

PRAYERS / LORD'S PRAYER

O Thou, who hearest prayer, hear our prayers...for others, as well as for ourselves. Touch with healing, O God...Father of us all, those whom we mention in our prayers this hour:

- | | | |
|-------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. <u>PEARL KELLER</u> | 2. <u>SHEELY ROPER</u> | 3. <u>CORALIE BAILEY</u> |
| 4. <u>DAISY HERRICK</u> | 5. _____ | 6. _____ 7. _____ |

...beloved members and friends of this congregation. Comfort the bereaved and the broken hearted among us...and especially be close to Betty Alto who in recent days has lost a loved one. Abide among us as a healing benediction. Heal each of us at the point of our deepest need. a husband, Jack...former member of this church.

Answer the upspoken prayers now offered to thee on the altars of our hearts, spoken in the name and spirit of Jesus, who taught us to say when we pray.... For we ask all of this in the powerful name and lifting spirit of Jesus who taught us to say when we pray...

"Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the Kingdom, and the Power and the glory, forever. Amen"

The Great Fiction discussion/^{group}will meet sometime in
October (date to be decided later) to discuss A
Prayer for Owen Meany by John Irving.