

Peter's Conversation With Christ

I admit to not generally enjoying shopping, Christmas or any other time of the year, so I always look for opportunities to speed up any shopping. Recently, I was looking for a Christmas gift that I'd seen advertised in the Sunday newspaper the week before. It was Saturday, so the item would soon be going off sale. Since we were in the area, I asked my family to wait outside the store in the minivan while I quickly went in to make the purchase. I didn't know my way around the store very well. I couldn't even find the department, much less the item that I wanted, so I found a sales clerk and asked where I should look. She said, "It's over just past men's casual wear" which meant absolutely nothing to me at all. I said, "Well could you just head me in the right direction?" She said, "Sure, just go that way." I eventually found my one item and then came to that impossible decision of which check-out line would be fastest. I think I've only picked the right one twice — once in 1973 and once in 1968! Every other time it's the slowest line and catastrophes always happen, whatever line I choose. So I got in the shortest line and waited and waited and waited while my family outside in the van waited and waited and waited as well.

Just as it was coming to my turn, I discovered I had made a major shopping mistake — I picked an item that did not have a price tag on it! I had to make a quick decision. Do I forget Christmas this year, go back and get another one and start all over again, or figure it's the clerk's problem and not my problem? I decided on the latter strategy and just sort of laid it on the counter. She said, "This doesn't have a price tag on it." I said, "It's the one in the ad." She got out the ad and rang up a price \$15 less than what it was supposed to be on sale. I pointed that out to her and she then rang it up as a credit on the register and then rang it again at the right price, but the wrong tax. She had to re-ring it again as a refund and then enter it again. The register tape was getting surprisingly long for a single item sale!

I gave her my credit card. She tried to swipe it and it didn't read the number so she had to punch it in. She punched it in incorrectly, so the sale was rejected, and then she had to start all over again. When the last problem arose, she said "Jesus Christ!"

Who do you think she says Jesus Christ is, the Son of God? The creator of the universe? Almighty God? A famous baby born in December whose birth-

day is supposed to generate enough retail sales to pull the country out of a difficult recession? Or simply a name to be spoken half under one's breath when the irritations of life simply pile up too high?

Who Jesus is was the question in one of the most important conversations recorded in the entire Bible. It is almost exactly half way in the middle of Mark's biography of Jesus, in Mark 8:27-30.

Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?"

They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."

"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Christ."

Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

Jesus' first question was asked as he and his disciples were walking through the suburbs of the city of Caesarea Philippi, a most unlikely place for thirteen religious Jews to be walking. They were on their way to Jerusalem and this was not on the way, so Jesus must have really wanted to go there in order to take this rather circuitous route. The city was in fact a pagan place. A temple had been built there to honor Caesar Augustus and idolatry and paganism were rampant, essential to the economy of that community. But even before the time of Caesar, Greek mythology had said that Caesarea Philippi was the place where the Greek god Pan had been born. It was a place of heathenism, idolatry and pantheism.

Surrounded by all of this, Jesus turned and asked an unexpected question to his disciples, "Who do others say that I am?" Actually, I think it was a good

place for him to ask that question. It's a question in many ways that is better asked in places secular than places sacred. Some people think that it's

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just a church question. Some people think that Jesus and discussions about him ought always be limited to a box that has a steeple on the top. But the truth of it is, Jesus spends far more time walking about and rubbing shoulders in the suburbs and the cities where the realities of idolatry and heathenism are practiced.

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where Jesus Christ's name is often mentioned. It seems as if no matter where you go, whether it is discussed intellectually as a religion or spoken as profanity or in casual seasonal conversation, people cannot seem to avoid discussion about Jesus Christ. It is perhaps more appropriate in the secular places than in the so-called sacred places to ask the question, "Who do people say that he is?" It is, I think, a good question because Jesus wanted to know what other people had to say about him.

Wouldn't you like to know what people say about you? We would all like to know what other people think, who they say we are. Do people speak of us as if we are saints or as if we are sinners? At Christmas time do they say we are generous Santas or miserly old scrooges? How do people see us and think of us and speak to one another in description of us? The truth of it is, often we don't ask for we are fearful of what the answers might be.

The disciples had a quick answer. "Jesus, some say that you are John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and still others one of the prophets." It was an interesting list because they were all dead. It was somewhat like an ancient equivalent to the sightings of Elvis Presley or John Kennedy. They were saying that people had him confused with well known people who were dead.

The first answer was that he was John the Baptist. John the Baptist, by the way, was a cousin of Jesus. He was a fiery, bombastic preacher who named people as sinners and condemned them publicly for their sins. Baptist was not his denomination, he was called John the Baptizer because he would call people to repentance and when they repented he would baptize them by immersion. Baptism was a symbol of the cleansing they received from God as a result of the repentance that they had given.

A most disconcerting practice of John was to call people out of the crowd by name and say, "You are guilty of this sin or that sin." Now in some ways it attracted a crowd and in some ways it might have discouraged people from coming to listen to him! One of the people that John named as a sinner was the king, Herod Antipas. Now it's sort of a confusing association that he had and maybe only if you are really into soap operas can you get all these connections, but let me try to explain to you. Herod Antipas, who was a grandson of the Herod in the Christmas story, had a niece named Herodias who was married to his brother Philip who also was a king in a nearby area. Herod Antipas decided that he wanted his niece for himself. So he divorced his wife and married his niece who was also his sister-in-law. John the Baptizer publicly condemned what he did and called his behavior immoral, incestuous and il-

legal. King Herod Antipas responded by having John arrested and beheaded.

There were those who said that this amazing fiery preacher had come back to life again under the name of Jesus. There were others who said "No, he is Elijah." Elijah was the greatest miracle worker of the Old Testament, 900 years before the birth of Christ. He did spectacular miracles, even raised the dead back to life again. He was extraordinary and the very last words of the Old Testament predicted that Elijah in one form or another would come back again and would prepare the way for the Messiah. So when people saw the miracles that Jesus did, they were astounded and said, "Elijah is back."

Others said that Jesus was one of the prophets. Matthew in his biography of Jesus identifies that other prophet that they allege him to be as Jeremiah. Long before, in the Old Testament, Jeremiah was nicknamed "the weeping prophet" for he was a man of deep compassion and love who was heart-broken because the people rejected his message. He wept with compassion because people would suffer the consequence of their sins. Some people said that Jesus was Jeremiah — nobody listens to him either and he has such love, such compassion, such concern.

It is fascinating to me that the same Jesus could be seen so differently. Some people saw Jesus and said, "He is one hell-fire-and-brimstone preacher. He really let's them have it — just like John the Baptist." Others said, "No, no, he is like Elijah. Did you see the miracles? The next thing you know, he is going to be raising the dead. He's Elijah." And others said, "The main thing about him is his love and his compassion, his tenderness of heart and his sensitivity."

They all saw different aspects. They all saw that Jesus was very special, but human, only human. Frankly, they saw him the way Muslims see him today. This conversation with Jesus is one of the great dividing points between Christianity and Islam. Islam teaches that Jesus was a great man, a miracle worker, a prophet, someone who helped to prepare the way for the greater later prophet, Mohammed.

Jesus asked the second question which was far more personal. "What about you? Who do you say I am?" It still is the question that divides Christians from Muslims, from Jews, from people of any other religion. It is the dividing point, one side or the other. His second question was to determine if he really made any difference in the lives of his disciples.

There were all kinds of crowds around Jesus, people who would hear what he had to say, who would discuss with one another the points that he made, but they weren't any different as a result. Jesus

wanted them to understand that just hearing his words and hanging out in his crowd did not make a person a disciple of his. There had to be a difference. A Christian is someone whose life has been transformed by a relationship with Jesus Christ. She has different priorities. He has different morals. The person is changed so that sin is hated, so that Jesus is loved.

Jesus wanted to know, “What about you? Who do you say that I am?” Frankly, I find that uncomfortable, for it is much easier to talk in the third person about what other people have to say about Jesus. It is easy to talk about whether other people worship God or not, or whether they pray. It’s more comfortable asking questions like, do people really believe that God answers prayer? Do you think Christians forgive? If someone really hurts them and offends them, do you think they keep grudges at the same rate as others? What about giving? Do you really believe that Christians have such a stewardship of their possessions that they are significantly different from the rest of the population in terms of what they contribute to the cause of this person that they claim to follow?

But it can get uncomfortably personal when the

question is changed and you’re asked directly, “What do you think of Jesus? Do you love God? Do you forgive others? Do you pray? Do you give? Is your life changed?” So Jesus just asked them straight out if he had made a difference in their lives. What did they have to say to him? Jesus asked the question and Peter comes back with an answer. I wonder if he was really that quick. I wonder if it wouldn’t be better if there were three inches of blank space left on the page to communicate what perhaps was the pause as he thought through Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am?”

When he had thought it through, Peter gave a profound answer. “You are the Christ. Yes, Jesus, you are more than John the Baptist, the fiery preacher; you are more than Elijah, the spectacular miracle worker; you are more than Jeremiah, with all of his compassion and all of his tears. You are different, Jesus, you stand alone. You are one of a kind. You are the Christ, the Messiah, the anointed one from God.”

Christ, by the way, is a Greek word. The same word in Hebrew is Messiah and the same word in English is anointed one or chosen one of God. But Peter’s answer wasn’t a technical or precisely theological answer. Oh, it was correct, but there was more to it than that. His answer was a commitment to Jesus

being the Christ, the Messiah, the anointed one. His answer acknowledged that who Jesus is makes a difference in the way a person lives his life. For if Jesus is who he says he is, then he must be followed and he must be obeyed. That’s the difference.

If a person is to be a Christian, that is the most radical and revolutionary change that any person can have. It includes forgiveness of sin, the presence of God for now and the assurance of eternal life some day. But it also means living differently now. Jesus sets the standard for how we live. We are different people if we, in fact, are Christians. A person who is a Christian gives to Jesus his body, her money, one’s entire life.

Peter said it all when he answered, “Jesus, you are the Christ.” Then Jesus said, “Don’t tell anyone!” That’s kind of a surprise. Don’t we say at Christmas time, “Go tell it on the mountain?” Don’t we tell people if you are a Christian you should share your faith with other people as far and fast as possible? But Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

Why? Because they didn’t yet understand all that was involved. For being a Christian is a whole lot more than an insurance policy against hell. It’s a whole lot more than an intellectual assent. It can be

tough. It can be tougher than not being a Christian. It can include such things as difficulty and pain and suffering.

Look at what Jesus said next in Mark 8:34 and following.

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and he said: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel, will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.”

Being a Christian includes self-denial. It includes suffering, sacrifice and an unashamed commitment to who Jesus the Christ really is. I think that runs counter to what most of us, myself included, want to think. I think that we are more prone to pleasure, to self-advancement, being a little bit embarrassed about Jesus when his name comes up — not this unashamed business.

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There is an old story about Charlamagne, Charles the Great, the wealthy, powerful emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. They say that when he was buried they made the most extraordinary tomb for him. It was configured as a throne room and in it was deposited vast wealth: jewels and crowns and silver and gold. It was beyond ordinary imagination. Those who buried him took his corpse and instead of putting it in a casket, they seated him on a throne with his elbow on the arm of the throne and his hand and finger up holding up his head. They placed a Bible on his lap and then sealed the tomb.

Centuries later, when archaeologists opened the tomb, they saw a somewhat different scene. As his body had turned to a skeleton, the hand fell and the finger pointed to Mark 8:36, "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world and yet forfeit his own soul?"

Peter said it before he fully understood it, but Jesus taught him what it meant to say, "Jesus you are the Christ." Peter learned the lesson and the rest of his biography says that he not only learned it, but he lived it, and that he died it as well. "You are the Christ."

Let me ask you that pointed, uncomfortable personal question that Jesus asked his disciples, "What about you? Who do you say that Jesus is?"

Will you answer Jesus today? "Jesus, you are the Christ. You are my Christ. I will follow you anywhere, I will do anything that you say. I am willing to suffer. I am willing to give up everything because you are my Christ."

Take a few moments of silent personal prayer, a time for those who are absolutely serious about Jesus to tell him personally and privately, "You are my Christ, I acknowledge you to be the absolute Lord of my life. I submit everything to you. I give myself to you, Jesus, this Christmas."

Faith Matters is the Broadcast Ministry of
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