



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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The Third Sunday in Lent, March 8th, 2015

The Commemoration of The Feast of St. David of Wales

✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

The most common reaction of lesser mortals when they meet somebody really famous is: "He (or she) wasn't a bit like I'd imagined he (or she) would be." This is partly our own fault, of course. We are influenced by the media or other folks "in the know" and are inevitably disappointed when reality fails to live up to the hype.

Even so, there are times in our lives when we simply can't afford to let others make up our minds for us – times when it is absolutely vital to make up our minds for ourselves.

There is nothing new about this. Folks have been misled by the opinions of friends, acquaintances and self-styled experts for millennia. Certainly 1st Century Judea was no exception. In the 8th Chapter of St. Mark's Gospel – one of the readings appointed for Morning Prayer – Jesus asks his disciples to make up their own minds who he is rather than defer to the opinion of others.

These 12 men had been travelling with him, listening to him and witnessing the miracles he had performed for well over a year – time enough one might think for them to have formed some reasonable opinion about who he really was. Yet, according to St. Mark, this wasn't the case at all.

"Whom do men say that I am," Jesus asks them. They mutter, mumble and scratch their heads. "John the Baptist," says one of them. "Elijah," ventures another. "This prophet," says yet another. "That prophet," says the chap next to him. The one suggestion that none of them make is: "The Messiah."

This is really quite puzzling. They had seen Jesus do things that no prophet had ever done – even ones as eminent as Elijah and John the Baptist. He'd healed all manner of people of congenital diseases; giving sight to those born blind; straightening limbs malformed before birth. He'd raised people from the dead, including the daughter of the chief of a local synagogue. He'd feasted thousands of people on a couple of loaves and a few scraps of dried fish – not once, but twice. And, on top of this, he had preached with a degree of authority not even the greatest prophets dared presume.

Now the disciples were eyewitnesses to every single miracle Jesus had performed. They'd been his helpers, active participants in His ministry. If anybody should have been convinced of His Messiahship it was they.

But as things turned out, rather than trust their own judgment and hail him as Messiah, they deferred to the opinion of other people – folks who knew far less about him than themselves. Rather than make up their minds on the evidence of their experience, they abdicated the responsibility.

Why didn't the disciples hail Jesus as the Messiah? The answer they lacked the moral courage. It takes a great deal of moral courage to hold convictions contrary to the mainstream of society. Espousing unconventional opinions can expose one to ridicule. Sometimes holding unpopular opinions can expose one to real personal danger – like dissidents in totalitarian societies.

Jesus made them confront their moral cowardice with the question to them: "Whom do men say that I am?" He wasn't asking them what other people thought. He was asking them for their own opinions. But, instead of answering his question frankly, they deliberately side-stepped the issue, parroting back ill-informed popular opinion: Elijah, John the Baptist or some other prophets.

It took Jesus' emphatic question, "But whom say ye that I am?" to prompt Peter's stammering, embarrassed, but profound confession: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God ..."

It's easy to feel superior to a bunch of stumblers and bumbly men like the disciples. Yet these men gave us the Gospel record that we have today. And they told the unvarnished truth, even when it was to their own discredit. They didn't try to portray themselves as super heroes. Far from it.

Their personal witness shows them to have been people just like ourselves, with all our faults and flaws. And the point of their painfully honest testimony is to give us the answer to the question that Jesus posed to them 2000 years ago and that he poses to every single person who, over the centuries, has heard the Christian Gospel: "But whom say ye that I am."

It is a question directed, personally, to each and every one of us. Jesus isn't asking us who Joel Osteen says he is, or the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Pope, or the Dalai Lama. He asks us: "But whom say ye that I am?"

And his question is so important that, if we are wise, we'll take the time to think out the answer for ourselves. It is a question so profound in its implications that we simply can't afford to let other people make our minds up for us. Yet this is what millions of our fellow Americans are doing today.

Confronted with Christ's eternal question – "But whom think ye that I am?" – they try to shuffle off the responsibility to others. Instead of making their own decision, relying on their own judgment, based on solid eyewitness testimony, they rely on contemporary opinion makers to supply the answer for them.

Rather than go through the intellectual effort of examining the primary sources – the eye witness testimony of Christ's disciples – they turn to people whose expertise lies in entirely different realms: sociologists, anthropologists, scientists, political

theorists, skeptical philosophers, friends, neighbors, even casual acquaintances.

Today, of course, there is an added dimension to the problem. Becoming a Christian takes almost as much moral courage as it did in Jesus' day. We live in an increasingly pagan society. Christians are openly ridiculed. People who take the Bible seriously are derided as "fundamentalists." Sometimes even their mental stability is called into question.

Occasionally, Christians are persecuted – not yet to the point of death, but enough to cost some Christians their livelihoods. And this disquieting situation seems destined only to get worse. While it's easy enough to confess Christ when everybody else is a Christian. But doing so when it means being hated, mocked and reviled is quite another matter.

Even so, neither our desires to preserve our dignity nor our concerns for our personal safety get us off the hook when Jesus confronts us with his question: "Whom think ye that I am?"

There's no saying: "I couldn't make up my mind" or "I didn't have time to think about it" or "a former Bishop of Newark told me your philosophy was fundamentally sound, but in need of serious revision to bring it in line with the times." Jesus isn't conducting an opinion poll about his ideas. He's asking the question: "Whom do you think I am?" And there's no "e-none of the above" or "don't know" column on the response sheet.

In fact, The Bible tells us there is only one correct answer – and that's the one St. Peter gave (John 6:69): "Thou art that Christ; the Son of the Living God."

Now this might not be the answer that some people want to give – for fear that it might cramp their style or put a crimp in their personal pleasures. That's fair enough. It's what free will is all about. But considering the consequences of being proved wrong, they'd do well to make up their minds for themselves rather than abdicate the task to people like sages like the late Carl Sagan or the former bishops of Newark and Durham.

In other words, they'd be well advised to read the Scriptures before they reject them. After all, if the Bible is right, they'll be forced to pay a rather high price for failing to do their homework. AMEN.