

Proper 16 Year A 2011

“It is not that God’s Church has a Mission, butthat God’s Mission has a Church... It’s Peter’s day – the day Peter is renamed by Jesus. No longer Simon, but Peter which in the New Testament Greek makes for a kind of pun – the word for “rock” is *petra*, and the word for Peter is *Petros*. *Petros* is... the rock, the foundation upon which Jesus says he builds his church.... And I say “builds” because of course we know that God’s church is still under construction in so many ways. The church is always growing, changing,... searching for new, more nimble, more creative, more flexible ways of being God’s people. But again we must have it in perspective. It’s not God’s church that has a mission it’s God’s mission that has a church. A church without God’s mission is like a ship without a sail or rudder, lacking in the Spirit, incomplete and likely not going anywhere, adrift upon the sea with no way to catch the wind in its sail and no way to steer the course without a rudder.

In today’s Gospel Jesus asks the question, “But who do you say that I am.” Peter’s response, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” You are the Anointed One of God, sent by God and not a God who is dead but a God who is living. Then Jesus reminds Peter that what he knows and how he knows it is not because he’s necessarily smart or deserving but because God has chosen to reveal it to him.

What would you say to Jesus’ question? Who do you say that I am? Let’s start with a joke.

Three clergy—a Lutheran, a Catholic, and an Episcopalian—ended up at the Pearly Gates one day. It was St. Peter’s day off, so Jesus was administering the entrance exam that day.

“The question is simple,” he said.

“Who do you say that I am?”

The Lutheran stepped forward and began, “The Bible says ... ” but Jesus interrupted and said, “I know what the Bible says; who do *you* say that I am?”

The Lutheran said, “I don’t know,” and ...immediately fell through a trap door to well.....that other place.

The Catholic stepped forward and began, “The Pope says ... ” but Jesus interrupted him and said, “I don’t care what the Pope says; who do you say that I am?”

"I'm not sure," said the Catholic, and like the Lutheran promptly fell through that same trap door to well... that other place.

Jesus turned to the Episcopalian and asked, "Who do you say that I am?"

The Episcopalian replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!"

Then, just as Jesus smiled and gestured for the Pearly Gates to be opened, the Episcopalian continued, "but on the other hand ... "

In our Gospel today, Peter is called on to answer Jesus' pivotal question of "Who do you say that I am?" And the same question is posed for us... each and every day that we choose to live as Christians.

Emil Brunner in 1955 wrote that: "We must not believe on the authority of Peter or John or Paul that God comes to meet us in Jesus Christ. For in that case our faith would be faith in Peter, John or Paul. We are to know the truth in freedom. For that reason Jesus did not tell the disciples the truth [of who he was] but enquired of them whether they had at last come freely to recognize it for themselves." This type of faith, he points out, is a matter of free choice, and comes as a result of insight.

Not too long ago I was driving down W. Harvard and spotted the sign for St. Joseph Catholic Church. I thought that's odd.....shouldn't it be St. Joseph's Catholic Church? Then not too long after that I was looking at the church ads in the yellow pages and noticed that the names were all singular including us. We were not, as we often call ourselves St. George's Episcopal Church. We were St. George Episcopal Church. And then the grammar and the theology hit me. It's God's church and we just happen to call ourselves after St. George. We are not St. George's we are Gods. It is not St. George's church that has a mission but God's mission that has a church named after St. George. Big difference don't you think. Jesus is building the Church upon us that is God's mission. Without God's mission we are that ship adrift with no power or direction.

So how do we respond when we're asked to name and to describe the Person who is our reason for hope, when Jesus asks, "Who do you say that I am? Jesus is after all as the Gospel tells us, building a Church. How do we live out God's mission?

Listen to this story told in India and reiterated by Megan McKenna called "Into Exile."

Once upon a time there was a holy man who would sit in the groves and along the roads teaching the people and praying with them and they would come to him in huge crowds for advice, for his words that encouraged them and gave them hope.

The king looked disapprovingly upon this itinerant preacher and met with the leaders of his temples. It was decided that he would build a huge gorgeous temple so the people could meet there instead and then they could listen to the priests and leaders who would preach to them. The work was begun, and for years, even more than a decade it was built. It was duly dedicated and opened for business; but the people didn't come, because that holy man and his followers weren't invited to speak and didn't come to the temple. They stayed in the groves and fields.

Finally one day the king went to visit him, and asked him why he would not come to the temple. They were all seated on the ground looking up at the king and his entourage of priests and leaders of the city. One spoke: your temple of gold, jewels, and marble is as hard and cold, as unrelenting and ungiving as you yourself are in life. The king was furious. What? What do you mean?

Another spoke: over the years while you built your temple there were floods, famine and disease that wreaked havoc among the people. They came to your temple, seeking help, aid, medicine, just shelter from the storms, mud, and lack of water—and you barred your gates and locked your doors, continuing to spend huge sums of money on your temple. No matter how much you bless that building— God will never visit there.

The king was livid with anger. You, you! he sputtered out—get out of my country. And never return or you will be arrested immediately and executed publicly to teach others a lesson.

The man and his followers, men and women, just ordinary folk, arose together. They bowed to the leaders and he spoke for the last time: I go gladly into exile. Long ago you exiled God from your country—I go into exile with the people, for that is where God hides out. But I will not leave your borders. If you want me, come look for me among the people—where God chooses to dwell, and make his temple.

These facilities, this sanctuary we have to understand that they don't belong to St. George's church, it is not our church,your church or my church,... it is God's mission that has a church named St. George. The time is always now to focus and discern what God's mission is,.....as St. Paul put's it to the Romans. To "be transformed by the renewing of [our] minds, so that [we] may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect." With God's help, it is where we choose to put our energies as a community of faith that is the key to our future and the keys of the

kingdom of heaven. God leaves us free to choose because as we know God desires friends and not slaves.

I'm going to end with an old Cherokee story.

One evening an old Cherokee told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside people. He said, "My son, the battle is between two wolves inside us all. One is Evil—it is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego. The other is God—it is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith."

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather:

"Which wolf wins?"

The old Cherokee simply replied,

"The one you feed." Amen.

Excerpted from Synthesis and the Rev. Kirk Alan Kubicek