

*Sermon for the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, 21.viii.2005, 9:00 a.m.  
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle/Brogue, Chanceford Twp., York Co., Pennsylvania  
Isaiah 51:1-6; Psalm 138; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20  
Service of Word & Prayer WOV*

**J. J. !\***

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was and  
Who is to come! ✠ Amen.

*"But who do you say that I am?"*

*--Matthew 16:15b*

Just a brief caveat about today's sermon: It ends with the same question with which it begins. What would *you* have answered to that question had you been there when it was first asked? What did and do *others* say? What does *the Church* say? What do *you* say today?

The question that is posed to us through all three Synoptic Evangelists, through Matthew, Mark and Luke, is one that will not go away because it comes from a figure Who lived in history, *our* history, One Whose very life and death poses that question again and again, inside and outside Christianity, the Church and the churches. It is a question that does not even need words, as we can see in the image of Christ painted by the Greek iconographer turned

Renaissance artist, El Greco. Just look into those eyes and you will hear the question El Greco heard, just as the first Disciples heard it.

One theologian of our time has listed the *types* of answers to the question Jesus poses to the Disciples at Caesarea Philippi in today's Gospel. Your answer, *and* mine, would tend to fit into one or more of the following categories (Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian*, pp. 126ff).

First, there is the 'Christ of piety.' This is the Christ of one's own personal faith experience. It may be the 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild,' the Jesus, friend of children, the weak and meek of primary Sunday School and illustrated Bible story books. For Martin Luther as a child and young man five centuries ago, the Christ of *his* piety was the Christ of the Last Judgment described in the New Testament Book of Revelation and often depicted in the Christian art of the Middle Ages, a stern Christ seated on God's throne of judgment with two swords protruding out of His mouth. For Christians in much of the Spanish-speaking world, and elsewhere, the Christ of personal experience is definitely the suffering and crucified Christ, the Christ Who relates immediately to our own experience of suffering and

death. For still others, the Christ of their piety is mainly a moral example or teacher, while for others, Christ is the Christ mystical communion in prayer and the sacraments. But, if one's basic experience of God in a particular moment is that of God's *absence*, of the meaninglessness of life and the inaccessibility of hope, then the Christ of piety—the piety of *others*—may seem to mock one's own search for an answer to the question Jesus poses to us.

Then there is 'the Christ of *dogma*,' of doctrine, of the Church's historic and normative teaching. This teaching is enshrined in words, e.g., the Creeds, in liturgy, in sacred music and in art and architecture. Good Christian art and architecture can preach and teach as well as any preacher and theologian. Luther warned those who, during the Reformation wanted to tear the churches down and rebuild them from scratch along strictly biblical lines, that good art and architecture, including especially music, are in some cases the only means whereby some people can hear the Gospel and receive the Good News of God's love and forgiveness in Jesus Christ for their salvation. But the doctrine that undergirds the Gospel proclaimed in stained glass, music, solemn and dignified liturgy, stone, brick and

mortar, painting and fine craftsmanship is for some the primary way of relating to Christ or not. The dogmatic controversies over the origin true nature of Christ and saving work of Christ of the first five Christian centuries and the Creeds they produced, or the doctrinal writings that came out of the Reformation era or the life of contemporary Christianity may be the way theologians, some historians and others who understand the *context* of these statements of faith relate most directly to Jesus, while for others, the Christ of dogma may be inaccessible.

For still others, the revolutionary Rabbi from Nazareth, the denouncer of hypocrisy, the enemy of injustice and human bondage is what our theologian calls 'the Christ of the enthusiasts,' i.e., of the fanatics of one sort or another. They may be political fanatics, religious fanatics, or both. In any and all cases, they are fanatics who, like all fanatics, are people with a cause in search of an argument. *Jesus Christ* is their argument, whether the cause is to make the world safe for democracy, for communism or for fascism, whether the cause is to put a universal stop to general immorality or to alcoholism and drug abuse, or to infidelity divorce, or to sexual promiscuity and

deviance, or to abortion. Whatever bee may be in the fanatic's bonnet, Jesus Christ is brought in to back them up in their single-minded battle against what- or whomever. *And we all tend to press Jesus into service to our own pet cause in this way,* rather than carefully the Christ of Scripture, rather than taking responsibility for our own opinions and actions and causes.

Then there is—in some ways the most interesting—‘the Christ of literature.’ This includes also the cinema and the theater. Anyone can and, it seems, almost every writer *does* try to address the question Jesus asks us, offering as many answers as there are writers. Those who come to mind are as diverse as Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Georges Bernanos, and Nikos Kazantzakis, all three authors men of deep Christian faith and sensibility who wrote expressly in order to portray the living Christ of Scripture and the Church's faith in the lives of the characters their creative minds invented. The great and tragic American writer, Carson McCullers, searched for a Christ whose compassion was concrete and all inclusive, even of the confused and lonely girl she remained all her life, even to the point of

death for those He loved in the character of Mr. Singer in her first and finest novel, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*.

Then there are satirical, skeptical and some of them avowedly anti-religious and even atheistic writers. I think of figures such as the Swedish playwright, Ingmar Bergman, who grew up in a Lutheran parsonage and who is *still* trying to separate the Christ of faith from his memory of his father, *the pastor*, Ingmar Bergman, Sr.. And there was the Spanish surrealist film director, Luis Buñuel, famous for the quote, "Thank God I'm an atheist!" His self-alleged atheism did not permit him ever to be indifferent to the powerful images of Christ and the Catholic Church of his upbringing, his best and most long-suffering friend a Catholic priest. One could, and some do answer Jesus' question not with witness to personal faith experience, or with liturgy or with creed but by pointing to the figure of Christ, either explicitly identified or working metaphorically in the background in the lives of characters from literature with whom they identify deeply.

None of the above are mutually exclusive, but one thing is unavoidable, non-negotiable, and that is whether the question is

posed to us and whether we will have the rock-solid courage, like Peter, to venture an answer. It cannot be an answer based solely on the opinion or experience of others, for the question is posed to *you* and to *me*. Ours can be an answer given in common, if we share the Church's historic faith confessed in the Creeds, but it need not satisfy others. The question is posed to us not by them but by *Him*, and to Him alone do we speak in reply. ✠Amen.

Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit both now and forever. ✠Amen.

**S. D. G.!\*\***

\**Jesu juva!* = 'O Jesus, help!' abbrev. '*J.J.*'

\*\**Soli Deo Gloria!* = 'To God alone be the glory!' abbrev. '*S.D.G.*'