

"Who Do You Say That I Am?"

Jesus asked his disciples, **"Who do you say that I am?"** It's a penetrating question. Persons down through the ages have answered by saying that Jesus was a great moral teacher, a prophet, a revolutionary, a religious nut.

People of faith have answered along with Peter, **"You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God."** This is the confession of the church and you and I as individual Xians submit to this confession when we join the church. It is the bold statement we make about Jesus.

Peter's answer to the question is the hallmark of the Xian church. **"You are the Christ, the son of the living God."** It is a bold claim. It is the witness of scripture and of the tradition of the church. This confession is the beginning point for all matters of faith and life. Everything else shakes out from this point, that **"Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God"**.

Peter was the first to make this bold confession. Peter is the best known and most loved of the disciples. We know Peter as a disciple of courage and devotion. But we also know that Peter denied his Lord three times. Peter was one of the three disciples who climbed the Mt. of Transfiguration to see Jesus revealed as the Son of God. Peter saw the brilliant light of the Transfiguration and as he stood in that light Peter himself became transparent. The scriptures show us a disciple of Jesus who was bold to confess that Jesus is Lord and only moments later heard the rebuke of Jesus, **"Get behind me Satan, for you are a stumbling block to me; for you are not on the side of God but of men."** (Matt. 16:23) Peter was bold as he stepped out of the boat in faith into the teeth of the storm, but a moment later he became afraid of the storm, lost his faith and began to sink. This Peter, known as the "rock" sank in the waters of doubt and fear. Peter is so much like us.

Like Peter, sometimes our faith is strong and at other times we deny our Lord in countless ways. Like Peter in the courtyard of the High Priest the night of Jesus' arrest. A servant girl approached him and said, **"You are also from Galilee, for your accent betrays you."** A simple, matter of fact observation by a little girl, yet Peter, in his fear, over-reacted and in strong words denied that he knew Jesus. It can be the same for us.

Yet Peter was an apostle, chosen by God to point to Jesus as the Savior of the world. It was Peter who answered the question of Jesus, "Who do you say that I am" with the stunning confession, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." It was Peter, the doubter, who confessed Jesus as Lord before all the other disciples. It was Peter who rushed to the empty tomb on Easter morning to see if the body of Jesus was still there. It was Peter who Jesus sought after the resurrection and to whom Jesus directed the penetrating question... "Do you love me, Peter? Then feed my sheep". Peter is the best known of the disciples and down through church history the best loved the disciples. Because in Peter we see ourselves.

We see ourselves caught between faith and doubt, caught between hope and despair, caught between making a bold confession and denial. We are so much like Peter. At times our faith seems strong and we can sing with the church the hymns that lift our spirits and we feel close to God. Then there are times when doubts overtake us and the cares of the world crowd out the faith and we cling to our worldly securities and try to pile up more and more of them in order to feel safe. We are caught like Peter between bold confession that Jesus is our Lord and Savior and a denial of that confession in the way we live.

Peter's confession was, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." And Jesus said, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven." We don't learn this confession of faith. Flesh and blood do not reveal it to us...No. It is the revelation of the Holy Spirit of God. Every Sunday I wake up and think to myself, "I wonder if anyone will come to church today?" Yet every Sunday the people of God gather. Your faith is a gift of God. The words of Jesus to Peter are the same to you... "Blessed are you for this faith has been given to you by your Father in Heaven." The faith we call our own is really the gift of God, as Luther said in his explanation to the 3rd Article of the creed... "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or understanding believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts and sanctified and preserved me in the true faith. Let me proclaim this to you as Law and then as Gospel. This is how it works, first as law ... "You cannot by your own reason or understanding believe in Jesus Christ your Lord or come to him." That's the law. But now hear the gospel... "but the Holy Spirit has called you through the gospel, enlightened you with his gifts and sanctified and preserved you in the true faith." That's good news! It is the work of God's Spirit that calls you into faith.

And then as if that were not enough, Luther goes on and repeats it by expanding it to include the whole church..."In the same way the Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole church on earth and keeps it united in the one true faith. In which Xian church he daily forgives my sins and the sins of all believers and on the last day will raise me and all the dead and with give to all who believe in Jesus eternal life. This is most certainly true."

Your faith is the gift of God and Jesus is in charge of your life and your salvation. He is Lord! He says, **"I will build my church, and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it."** When we hear this promise from Jesus it should take away any fears we have about the future, our future or the future of the church. The power that protects and holds the Church of Christ is not our power, but the power of God. It is a power so great that even hell itself will not prevail against it. This gives us great hope and comfort. When you are worried about the future remember the promise of Jesus... **"The gates of hell will not prevail against Christ's church"**. Hear what Martin Luther wrote on this verse...

"Christ does not lie when he declares, "I am with you always, to the close of the age" [Matt. 28:20], and when he assures us that the gates of hell shall not prevail against the church [Matt. 16:18]. At the same time we are instructed to remain awake and to do our part in preserving the light.... For after all, we are not the ones who can preserve the church, nor were our forefathers able to do so. Nor will our successors have this power. No, it was, is, and will be he who says, "I am with you always, to the close of the age." ...

Luther continues... **"A thousand years ago you and I were nothing, and yet the church was preserved at that time without us. God had to accomplish this. Even during our lifetime we are not the church's guardians. It is not preserved by us, for we are unable to drive off the devil.... If it were up to us, the church would perish before our very eyes, and we together with it. It is Christ Jesus who preserves both the church and us.... Likewise we will contribute nothing toward the preservation of the church after our death. Only Christ Jesus will accomplish it...."** (M. Luther, "Against the Antinomians", LW Vol. 47, p. 117).

The church belongs to our Lord. When you are nervous about what the future holds you need to remember who holds the future. Zephaniah, the O.T. prophet put it well. On a day like today his words speak to us in a

powerful way...Zephaniah 3:16-17 “Do not fear, O Zion; let not your hands grow weak. The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love.” (Repeat it.) Go home, get out your bible, find this verse and underline it. These are words of encouragement. This church belongs to Jesus, you belong to Jesus, he is your powerful savior. It is my prayer that God will hold on to you and keep you true to “The Faith” that empowers you to make the good confession that Jesus is “the Christ... the Son of the Living God.” Amen.

Found on the web...

The next time you feel like GOD can't use YOU, just remember...

Noah was a drunk
Abraham was too old
Isaac was a daydreamer
Jacob was a liar
Leah was homely
Joseph was abused
Moses had a stuttering problem
Gideon was afraid
Sampson had long hair and was a womanizer
Rahab was a prostitute
Jeremiah and Timothy were too young
David had an affair and was a murderer
Elijah was suicidal
Isaiah preached naked
Jonah ran from God
Naomi was a widow
Job went bankrupt
John the Baptist ate bugs
Peter denied Christ
The Disciples fell asleep while praying
Martha worried about everything
The Samaritan woman was divorced,
more than once
Zaccheus was too small
Paul was too religious
Timothy had an ulcer...
AND Lazarus was dead!