

Who do you say that I am?

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Exodus 1:8-2:10; Psalm 124; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

One of my recent formative experiences was reading a few years ago a book by Fr. Laurence Freeman called “Jesus—the teacher within”. This eye-opening, and beautifully written, book takes as its central organising principle Jesus’ key question in today’s gospel: “But who do you say that I am?”. While I certainly want to acknowledge a deep debt of gratitude to Fr. Laurence, I’m not going to attempt to summarise or paraphrase his book today – it’s far too broad ranging – I’d much rather recommend it! Instead, I’m going to do my own thing by treating the question as a kind of arrow, and tracing its passage through some of the ‘layers’ of my armour that it’s penetrated.

Let’s start with the arrow as it flies largely unnoticed through the air. In perhaps typical Christian style, this question doesn’t go out of its way to draw attention to itself. We’re in the back country, north of the Sea of Galilee, between two much flashier events — the feeding of the four thousand, and the Transfiguration. Jesus is alone with his disciples. And even within today’s story, the main focus seems to be on Peter and his answer. In fact, my NRSV Bible, with its modern penchant for italicised subheadings, calls this incident “Peter’s Declaration about Jesus”.

But the really useful thing to do, as usual, is to focus on what Jesus says and listen hard. The arrow makes contact when we put ourselves in Peter’s position and treat the questions as directed towards us individually.

If Jesus were to appear before you and ask, “But who do you say that I am?”, how would you go about answering him?

Well, the obvious approach might be just to fall back on Peter’s answer which we have the benefit of. Remember, Peter answers by saying, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.”

At first this sounds pretty good because, after all, Peter is specifically commended as being right and maybe this gets us out of having to think any further for ourselves. One immediate problem though is that if we just rely on Peter’s answer then we are really only answering the other question (let’s call it ‘question 1’) that Jesus asked — which was “Who do [other] people say that I am”. An important reason why I think Jesus asked question 1 was to make sure that we understood the difference between being able to parrot other people’s answers, and giving our own personal view — which is what he seems to be really interested in.

A second reason for being cautious in simply adopting Peter’s answer is that it turns out that Peter didn’t actually know what his own answer meant! It’s a pity our gospel reading didn’t continue because in the very next passage in Matthew, Jesus starts to tell the disciples he is going to Jerusalem to be tortured and killed and rise again. Hearing this Peter emphatically tries to stop this kind of talk by saying “God forbid it, Lord!” and Jesus, after having just said Peter is to be the Rock on which the church will be founded, now has to say “get behind me, Satan”!! Peter clearly had some pretty wrong views about what being a Messiah meant.

As an aside, this maybe also suggests that the church is maybe by its nature an organisation that will sometimes **speak** the truth but then show by its **behaviour** that it doesn’t really understand what it means!

But maybe this very disconnect points to a more fundamental problem with just using Peter's answer. And that it is that it is overwhelmingly a *theological* answer. Peter doesn't describe Jesus the man, he describes a role Jesus plays in a Jewish theological system. In order to understand Peter's answer, you have to know what is meant by a 'Messiah', and what it means to be the 'Son of God'. Both issues (and lots of other questions about Jesus' significance and role) have been hotly disputed since the earliest days of Christianity. A large number of early heresies were about these ideas about what exactly it meant to be 'the Christ', and Jesus' relationship with the God the Father. The Nicene creed we recite every Sunday (which is sort of the church's official answer to Jesus' question) had to be put together by a council formed by the Emperor Constantine to get the factions to sort out a common view.

Even after 2,000 years we still have lots of denominations and sects in Christianity partly because we still can't agree on some key ideas. In fact, there's a whole branch of theology (called 'Christology') that is devoted to exploring who and what Jesus as Christ is, and signifies. It's a huge topic and I'm no expert in it — maybe ask Brian or Rebecca or Doug! But for today my point is that even though it seems Peter's answer was right, it doesn't actually help us (or at least me) that much in practice because the answer is in a kind of special religious language that needs to be decoded, and people disagree about the decodings.

So, if we're to answer the big question — question 2 — “But who do you say that I am?” — it seems we can't avoid doing some work of our own. Other people's answers (in particular the church's accepted wisdom) are a good start, but our understanding needs to be personal. And as we start to engage personally, Jesus' arrow question penetrates another layer and gets us noticing just how relational this question is.

It's very structure points to two players: there's a 'You' and an 'I'. The question is not the third person question of Christology — “who is Jesus?”; it's “who do *you* say that I am?”. An interaction is called for, not a cerebral exercise in scholarship.

And whether Jesus' listener likes it or not, the question almost **requires** some deepening, or at least clarification, of relationship. However the disciples answer the question — including if they decide to dissemble or avoid answering it — they **cannot but** expose something of their real views in a way that could, if they are honest, be awkward. They have to communicate something about themselves, and their level of true understanding.

And “who do you say that I am?”, really is a very intimate thing to ask — in fact the more I think about it, I'm finding it hard to think of a more intimate question. If I was having a cup of coffee with a good friend whom I thought I knew fairly well, and this friend suddenly and intently looked me in the eye and asked me “who do you say that I am?”, I think I would probably be rather non-plussed, to say the least. Certainly this is not the sort of thing casual acquaintances do, and it would probably be one of those turning points in a friendship when it either deepens or is allowed to drop away.

And this invitation to deepen the relationship seems to be done in a gentle way, that at first leaves Jesus vulnerable. He has made the move, the gift, of opening himself up. The disciples are free to answer as they will, or just to decide this is all getting a bit too weird. And they may get the answer quite wrong, or even reveal their doubts. Where does the relationship go then?

There's an underlying issue about integrity here too. Once we start realising the relational dimension of Jesus' question, we realise why we have this tendency to slip back to the much easier question about giving other people's answers. It's because if we either don't know or don't like our own personal answers, it is nice to be able to sort of hide behind an official position, or at least someone else's ideas.

So, Jesus' question is starting to feel quite unsettling, doesn't it? That's why we can tell this is a redemptive question. And this is also why, I think, this question was asked when and where it was. Jesus' party is between regions, and the questions are put to an inner circle of people who have been his disciples and friends for a while. This really is not a question for people just starting out on the path, or for the crowd. The crowd these days, if they even bother, is just as likely to say "I think you were a first century Jew with a messiah complex", or "you were an ethical teacher with some interesting things to say who unfortunately got crucified".

But if we choose to take up the invitation that this question represents, and enter further into the relationship it offers, there are some further levels this arrow question is likely to penetrate.

Another layer is the whole question of identity, which really is what this question is about, isn't it? While Jesus' question sounds mainly like a question about his own identity, as we ponder this more and more, the finger sort of starts slowly to swivel around : who, or what, do I think I am who actually **dares** to comment on who Jesus is?

Can I really describe who I am, in the kind of essential way that Jesus is asking me who he is? And if I can't, what the heck am I doing thinking I can comment on who Jesus is, or for that matter anyone else?

"Who am I?", of course, is one of the great universal human metaphysical questions of all philosophies and religions. The French philosopher René Descartes famously concluded that he knew he existed because "I think, therefore I am". The result for western society has ended up being rampant, and somewhat narcissistic, individualism. Jesus offered a safer way for us to ponder this. It's a pity Descartes didn't frame the question of his own existence within the grounded context of a relationship with the other, and the divine.

And there's another troubling aspect to all this identity stuff. I may not, on closer inspection, be entirely sure about who or what I am. But by contrast Jesus, in asking these questions in the way he did, is, surely, revealing a huge degree of self-knowledge and self-confidence. Yes, he might be opening himself up by asking a question that could get any type of answer. But my impression is that this kind of thing only comes from someone who truly knows who and what he is before he asked it. And maybe who and what I am, too. In Luke's version of this story, Jesus is praying by himself among them when he suddenly comes out of prayer and asks them these amazingly grounded questions.

Do we really know what it really means to be human? Fully human, that is, and where this is leading us? St Paul tells us that the Spirit of Christ is in our hearts, in the centre of our very beings. We live in and by the in-dwelling God. And Jesus tells us he is in the people we meet.

And this maybe takes the arrow through to the last level of the question I want to talk about today, and that is its potential **transformational** role.

I may have started thinking that it was me who was following this arrow. But the more I ponder Jesus' invitation to comment on his identity, the more I think maybe it, the arrow, is taking me on journey, down a path away from the ego me, the little me largely formed out of so many petty distractions and attachments towards something larger, and quieter and more centred.

Jesus was a man like us. He was a human being we become increasingly familiar with as we come to know his stories. In my book, proclamation of the gospel is not so much the exposition of a theological system with neatly fitting components, it's mainly the telling and retelling of Jesus' story and reflecting on it intimately — sort of like were doing today.

Christianity is, uniquely, a religion that says salvation can be obtained by getting to know a person.

Our conscious ego-selves with their limited and often deluded views on reality may not always hear the divine word being spoken. Which is maybe why Jesus, when talking about the Christ aspect of his nature, used all those metaphors. Interestingly, in John's gospel Jesus doesn't ask the disciples his big question — "who do you say that I am". Rather, he gives a lot of rather enigmatic answers to it. Answers like : "I am the way the truth and the life"; "I am the true vine"; "I am the light of the world". Answers that point beyond himself. Perhaps my favourite of these "I am's" in John is "I am the bread of life" — because it underlines how we have to eat of who and what he spiritually is if we are to truly know him.

And it's no coincidence, I think, that the next incident that happens to Jesus is the Transfiguration. That mystery is something we can only ever really encounter within our hearts, and sometimes in our encounters with other people. It is above all something we need to learn by listening and attentiveness.

In order to know Jesus, I have to know myself. In coming to know myself, I am freer to find out who he is. In learning about him, I also learn about how I work and what I am. How relational is our Christian approach to salvation, and how spookily Trinitarian all this is starting to sound...

Especially as I start to become aware that this is a relationship that is unfolding simultaneously at different levels of my being. I only become conscious of these with varying levels of clarity at different times. After a while it becomes increasingly less important what I say about him. How I judge him is less important than the fact that he loves me. My task is partly to let go of the rationalistic and egotistical mindset of someone trying to solve a puzzle and grow into the intrigued and delighted state of being of someone surprised by love. What is real love, if not a deep, deep desire to know the loved one intimately, and in their entirety, without possessing them, or controlling them, or wanting something from them? But what happens when the person we are falling in love by wanting to know them, also happens to be the very essence of existence?

So to summarise: Jesus' marvellous arrow question is one that cuts right through our theology (and our pretensions); invites us into a deeper relationship; challenges our identity by pointing to his; and can lead us onto a journey of transformation if we do it with our hearts, and not just with our heads.

I'd like to finish with the closing paragraph of Fr. Laurence's book: The answer to a question is the way it is asked. We can hardly not be moved, beyond words, by its gentleness, its innocence, the peaceful humility of self-knowledge it carries; by its being addressed directly to *me*. If the answer could be put into words I would suggest here that we might respond to his question by saying "*You* must help me to know who you are. But *I* say that you, Jesus, are the humility, the humanity, of God.