

Who is Jesus Christ for Us Today?

Matthew 16:13-26

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, (Aug. 27) 2023

Kyle Childress

What is bothering me incessantly is the question what Christianity really is, or indeed who is Jesus Christ for us today.

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, April 30, 1944, *Letters from Prison*

Saying yes, to the person of Christ, which remains isolated from the way of Christ in this world, is Satanic. It is evil. It is seductive. It cannot be the Christian faith.

- Eberhard Bethge, 1995 sermon

On April 30, 1944, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a letter to his best friend Eberhard Bethge. Bonhoeffer, age 39, with less than a year to live, was in a Gestapo prison in Berlin. He wrote to his friend, “What is bothering me incessantly is the question what Christianity really is, or indeed who is Jesus Christ for us today.”

Who is Jesus Christ for us today? That was Bonhoeffer’s question in 1944 and it was essentially the question he wrestled with his entire adult life. For Bonhoeffer, the centrality of Jesus Christ was at the heart of everything he did and believed. Without the living Jesus Christ, there is no church, there is no Christianity, and there is no hope. Christianity becomes abstract, a set of principles, a myth. Only with Jesus Christ central, can Christianity be embodied, a life, incarnate.

An extraordinary turning point in young Bonhoeffer’s life and his faith was

the year he spent at Union Seminary in New York in 1930-1931. Twenty-five years old, already with two doctorates, he became involved in Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, a leading black church in America at the time. Bonhoeffer attended church there regularly, eventually helping teach youth Sunday School and becoming involved in various ministries with the everyday people of Harlem. It was during this year that Bonhoeffer's faith shifted from a White European Christ to the Black Jesus he experienced in church and on the streets of Harlem.

It was from the perspective of the Black Jesus and among black people, Bonhoeffer began to see racism and injustice like he had never seen before. When he returned to Germany, it was the Black Jesus who gave him the ability to see the evils of Hitler and Nazism when it seemed that everyone else in Germany, and especially the German church, saw Hitler as the God-anointed leader and savior of their nation. And it was the Living Christ, the Black Jesus which gave him the insight and strength to speak out for Jews, when almost no one else did.

Bonhoeffer's reflections are timely and pertinent as the lectionary takes us to this crucial hinge-point in the Gospel. This is the turning point in Matthew where everything after this leads toward the cross.

Jesus was up around Caesarea Phillipi. Caesarea Phillipi was located about 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee, near the headwaters of the Jordan River which emerges from a series of springs at the foot of Mt. Hermon.

When one of Herod the Great's sons, Herod Phillip became king of this northern region, he built a Roman city named for himself and Caesar, which featured temples built to various pagan gods. It was built on the side of the mountain with alcoves and temples carved into the stone for the various gods. As

you walked along the streams of waters coming from the springs, you passed the temples of multiple gods to worship. It was most likely in this area that Jesus is walking with his disciples.

Jesus looks around at all the pagan statues and temples and says, “Who do people say that I am?” The disciples answer with the names of various biblical prophets. Then Jesus stops, turns, and looks directly at his disciples, “What about you? Who do you say that I am?”

Peter spoke up, “You’re the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed and Chosen One of God.”

Jesus responds, “Wow! Simon son of Jonah! You’ve got it! Blessings upon you. This is not something you’ve figured out by yourself or read in books. This is something revealed to you by God.”

Jesus goes on, “And I’ll tell you more. Let me tell you who you are. Your confession of faith tells me that you are Peter, the Rock. It is upon such a rock of faith I will build my church, and nothing, not even the gates of Hell can stop it. You now have the keys to God’s Way. No more locked doors between you and God, no more obstacles.”

Jesus then shifts his tone. Looking at them directly, he says with great emphasis, “I don’t want you to go around talking about me being God’s Chosen. There is more you need to know.”

As they kept on walking, Jesus said, “You need to know that when we leave here, we’re going to head to Jerusalem. And it is not going to be pretty. Instead of me riding into the capital on a warhorse and taking over, I’m going to face a lot of

opposition and suffering. I'm going into Jerusalem as the Servant of God and not the Warrior of God many expect. It's going to be tough. The Religious and Political Authorities will oppose me, and I think it is very likely they will kill me. But wait, wait, hear me out! That's not all. I believe, I trust that God will raise me from death after three days."

The disciples are all upset. They explode with questions and comments, all talking to one another and over one another. With both shock and anger, Peter interrupts Jesus and says, "No, Lord! You're not going to suffer and die! You can't talk like this! We've got a movement going! You're the Chosen One and thousands will rally around you. People will rise up in revolution. We're going to the capital and we're going to kick those Religious and Political Authorities out. We're going to rid Jerusalem of those Romans and we're going to make Jerusalem great again! It's time to raise the flag, get our weapons, and re-take control! Jesus is Lord! Let's do it!"

Jesus quickly turned, "What's you're saying is Satanic! Shut up and get out of here! You are a stumbling block to what I'm talking about. You have no idea of how God works."

Jesus then motions for all the disciples to draw closer, "Calm down. Chill. Take a deep breath and listen to me. Hear me on this, if you or anyone else want to become my followers, you must deny yourselves, and take up the cross and follow me. If you want to protect yourself, and you want security, power, and control, then you'll end up destroying yourself. If you truly want to save yourself, you will need to give yourself away. The Way of God is different from human notions of power and control. God's Way is suffering servanthood."

As you can see, there is a reason this story is the critical turning point in Matthew. It's a very big deal. It was a big deal then, it's been a big deal across the history of Christianity, and it is most certainly a big deal right now.

Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer's best friend, and the recipient of Bonhoeffer's 1944 letter asking, "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?" fifty years later preached a sermon on this same text. Bethge, said, "You cannot have the name of Christ, you cannot be called a Christian, without His way." Bethge explained, that Peter wants to separate the person of Jesus, from the Way of Jesus. He went on, "So Scripture says here, saying yes, to the person of Christ, which remains isolated from the Way of Christ in this world, is Satanic. It is evil. It is seductive. It cannot be Christian faith" (Bethge, April 23, 1995, in *Sermons from Duke Chapel*, ed. Will Willimon, p. 319-320).

Bethge put his finger right on the hard truth: To know Jesus Christ we must participate in the suffering servanthood of Christ. To confess Christ, no matter how loudly and vociferously, without entering the suffering servanthood of Christ is evil! It is satanic.

Peter wanted a triumphant and powerful Jesus and Jesus said that to want that was evil, satanic. In Bonhoeffer and Bethge's time, Christians in Germany believed that they could believe deeply and ardently in Jesus in their hearts but never speak out and suffer alongside the Jews and others who suffered. During the Crusades of the 11th and 12th century, European soldiers thought they were being faithful Christians to shout, "Jesus is Lord!" while cutting off the heads of their Muslim opponents. In our own United States, slaveowners could sincerely believe in Jesus in their hearts and see no incongruity with slavery. The racist Ku Klux

Klan can wear crosses on their white sheets and burn crosses and see no discrepancy with Jesus. And White Christian Nationalism believes in and proclaims a powerful and violent Jesus and can be mean, even violent, toward people suffering, especially toward people of color and LGBTQ folk, and see no problem proclaiming Jesus is Lord.

That's the rub. It has always been the rub. We want Jesus as Lord, the Chosen One of God and king of glory, but we don't want Jesus' Lordship to be in the shape of the cross.

That day at Caesarea Phillipi, Jesus was giving those disciples then, and disciples across the centuries, including us, a window into who God is. To confess Jesus is Lord is to begin to see that the God we know in Christ is a God who dies rather than kill, who gives rather than takes, suffers instead of taking control, and who walks with the outcasts and the marginalized. This is who God is.

What Peter does and what we have done across the centuries, is turn Jesus as a window into a mirror who simply reflects ourselves and our social values back to us. We think we're looking at God when in truth all we're seeing is ourselves.

American White Christianity believes Jesus is Lord, accepting him as savior in our individual hearts, and sings and cries and preaches loudly about Jesus's death on the cross for us 2,000 years ago, while at the same time, not participate in the suffering and servanthood of Christ today. White evangelicalism abstracts, Jesus from discipleship, spiritualizes the cross as something that happened in the ancient past. Therefore, our ethics, our values, our politics, our way of seeing and interpreting the world are our own social world writ large.

So, there is a big difference, for example, in the March on Washington which tomorrow we commemorate its 60th anniversary, from the January 6, 2021, Insurrection. The 1963 march wanted to make a statement, make a witness while Jan. 6 was attempting to overthrow the election. The first came non-violently while the second was violent. Some participants on Jan. 6 were armed, they built a gallows outside of the capitol building, and five people died during the insurrection. One infamous photo was of a man hitting a police officer over the head with a Jesus Saves sign.

There's a quote, often misattributed to Sinclair Lewis, that "If fascism ever comes to America, it will come draped in the flag and carrying the cross."

So, who is Jesus Christ for us today?

It's important that as we ponder our answer, that we pay attention to who our conversation partners are, and what's our context. It is why you have long heard stories from me about people like Tertullian in 3rd century North Africa to Thomas Aquinas in 13th century Paris to Fannie Lou Hamer in 1960's Mississippi. It why we listen to the people of Le Chambon and Bonhoeffer, and so many others. Who was Jesus Christ to them? For Bonhoeffer, his conversation partners in Abyssinian Baptist Church helped him see Jesus Christ, not only as Lord but also as the Black Jesus who takes up the cross and suffers and serves the left out and beaten down.

When you're sitting around a table at the Clay House barbeque or over a cup of coffee ask a friend from Zion Hill or Iron Wheel, "Who is Jesus to you?" Ask a LGBTQ young person, who has only known shame and bigotry from the church up to now. See what they say. I wonder what kind of conversation we would have down on the border with someone who has traveled, mostly walking, for weeks,

dodging cartels along the way, trying to protect their children, and trying to find safety, trying to find refuge in the U.S., ask them, “Who is Jesus Christ to you?”

In 1985 when I was living in Atlanta in the Community of Hospitality and working for the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America, on Saturdays four of us friends squeezed into the cab of a ramshackle 1971 Chevy pickup and drove up and down the alleys of the high-dollar part of town, loading up cast-off appliances from wealthy homes, taking them back and repairing them and then donating them to various homeless shelters and children’s ministries around the city.

I was the middle-class educated white kid, born and raised in a Southern Baptist Church in a small town in west Texas, who knew Jesus was calling me to be a pastor. And since I was the only one with a driver’s license, I drove the pickup.

Sim, short for Simeon, was a former Maytag repairman who had lost his job and his family to drinking, and who had been homeless, said Jesus helped keep him sober and gave him hope. Joe, was a former Roman Catholic monastic, said that Jesus led him to be among the poor.

Alemayu, a former pilot in the Ethiopian Air Force, was a political refugee waiting and praying for his family still in Ethiopia. When the other three of us asked him who was Jesus to him, he told a story. He had been assigned a mission to bomb a poor village in Eritrea. He said that as he flew, he prayed for God to help him, tell him what to do. As he made his approach for his bombing run, Alemayu said, “I heard the voice of Jesus. I knew it was him. He said, ‘Alemayu, my brother, do not bomb these people. They are my brothers and sisters just like you. Leave this place. I will be with you.’”

Alemayu said that he turned his fighter jet north toward Egypt, frantically radioing the Egyptian Air Force to not shoot him down telling them he was seeking political asylum. Alemayu continued, “I know it was Jesus. I know it was Jesus who kept me from being shot down and it was Jesus who brought me all this way and Jesus will one day reunite me with my family.” (And they were indeed reunited a couple of years later in Toronto).

Who is Jesus Christ to you?

Take your time before answering. To say Jesus Christ is Lord means to have Jesus put his hand on your shoulder and say, “Okay. You’ve got it. Now, come on, pick up the cross and follow me.”

Who knows where he’ll take you.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.