

Who do you say that I am?

Hespeler, 12 September 2021 © Scott McAndless
Proverbs 1:20-33, Psalm 19, James 3:1-12, Mark 8:27-38

You know, there was a time when I looked at the opening passage in the Book of Proverbs, the passage that we read this morning, and I thought that it was an exaggeration. **“Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice. At the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks: ‘How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?’”**

I mean, I didn’t think that that was possible. I didn’t think that people would intentionally embrace a lack of knowledge. I knew, of course, that people could be wrong or mistaken sometimes. They might have misunderstood their lessons or been unable to get access to the right sources of information. But I assumed that people, if given the opportunity, would want to know the truth about the world.

Rejecting Wisdom

I realize today how wrong I was. For we are living in a time today when the majority of the population actually has much of the accumulated knowledge of the world almost literally at its fingertips. They can look it all up from credible sources on their phones. And yet, it seems like a growing number of people are simply not interested in knowing what is true, at least, not if it’s going to contradict what they’ve already decided they want to believe.

We are living in an age when people actively choose to get their knowledge about important things like the spread of viruses and the safety of vaccines from random videos on YouTube rather than from people trained in public health and epidemiology. We are living in an age when people are deciding not to do things simply because some authority figure told them they should do it. Once again, it seems that the Bible has found a way to apply very directly to the serious issues that we are facing in our times.

Jesus’ Question

It also reminds me of the time when Jesus turned to his disciples one day and asked them, **“Who do people say that I am?”** I don’t think that this question was just a matter of idle curiosity. Jesus understood that he was and would continue to be a polarizing figure. He knew that some people would just fail to understand who he was and what he came to do. But he also knew that there were some who would be only too happy to make Jesus what he wasn’t but rather what they desired him to be and what served their own purposes.



What People were Saying

And so that is what he was discussing with his disciples, how there were people who were looking for Jesus to be like John the Baptist and lead the people in a new conquest of the land of Israel. Or they were looking for Jesus to be like Elijah and confront the people who were in charge head on. Or they wanted Jesus to be like one of the prophets. That's really convenient, of course, because whatever message you wanted to be spoken, you could probably find a prophet who had said something along those lines.

Jesus asked this question, in other words, because he knew very well that people were turning him into whatever they wanted him to be. And I would suggest to you that that is a process that is very much continuing to take place in our world today.

2021's Most Famous Prayer

Take, for example, what I would consider to be the most famous prayer that has been publicly prayed in our world during this calendar year. I don't know if you've heard about this prayer, but you need to. It was prayed by a group of people on the sixth day of January of this year and you can still go and watch the video of that prayer today. It all started when one of the people present cried out, "Jesus Christ, we invoke your name!" to which the others called out, "Amen!"

And then another man, Jacob Chansley, raised a bullhorn to his lips and shouted, "Let's all say a prayer in this sacred space," and immediately begin to lead such a prayer. He invoked the "divine, omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent creator God." He thanked this God for the police officers who, in his words, had allowed them into the building (even though the very same video shows a police officer telling all of the people that they needed to leave). Chansley above all thanked God for being able to "exercise our rights, to allow us to send a message to all the tyrants, the communists and the globalists that this is our nation, not theirs."

Did you catch that prayer? It was, of course, prayed by a man whose face was painted red, white and blue, whose naked chest was covered with tattoos and whose head was adorned with buffalo horns. It was prayed on the floor of the United States Senate chamber by people who were there illegally, most of whom have since been arrested and are facing trial. And yet, they declared that they were there in the name of Jesus Christ. I think I know how those people would have answered the question that Jesus asks in the Gospel.

This September 6th Insurrectionist Jesus

"Who do you people that I am?" "Well," they would have replied, "we know who you are, Jesus. You are the one who has given to us the divine right to decide how this country is going to be run and to make sure that people who are not like us don't get any say." They would have said, "You are the Jesus who made this country one that must be dominated by white Christian men – a country that always will be dominated by white Christian men. And they would have said this without any sense of irony whatsoever, without realizing that Jesus himself was not white and certainly not a Christian nationalist.

And I realize, of course, that those people who stormed the US capital in the name of Jesus, who carried their crosses and Christian flags, are rather an extreme case. Not everyone warps their

image of Jesus to make him fit their agenda as much as that. But I do think that there is a sense in which we all do it. We all like to make our idea of who Jesus is speak louder than Jesus himself.

The Nationalistic Jesus

For many people, they don't have to think about it, they would just answer that question of, **"Who do people say that I am,"** with a picture of a nationalistic Jesus. They just assume that their Jesus would automatically give reverence to the flag and support to the troops no matter what. They assume that Jesus is on their side in any war or international dispute. Above all they would say that their nation is uniquely blessed by God and so cannot do any wrong.

But Jesus would press us with the deeper question, **"But who do you say that I am?"** He would perhaps remind us of the time that he said, **"My kingdom is not of this world,"** (John 18:36) and all of the times when he described a kingdom of God that was over and against this present world's systems. And I'm certain he wouldn't let us forget his warning that, **"Those who live by the sword, die by the sword."** (Matthew 26:52) Yes, it is true that we, as individuals, can love our country and give all respect to those who serve in its armed forces, but when we start to drag Jesus and our image of Jesus into that, I think Jesus would make us look deep into ourselves and ask, "Is that really who you say that I am?"

Supply Side Economics Jesus

Of course, there are others who are only too happy to turn Jesus into a picture of their economic understanding of how the world works. They want a Jesus who says to them that if they are wealthy and prosperous and have good things happening to them, then it must simply be because they deserve it. They must have worked hard and been virtuous. Of course, it follows from that that if there are others who are poor or struggling, it must be because they also deserve it, because they have not pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps like the virtuous people have. Above all, they would say that Jesus is completely on board with their program of amassing as much wealth to themselves as they can.

But, I believe that, to these also, Jesus is asking, **"But who do you say that I am?"** He is reminding them that he is the Jesus who said, **"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God."** (Luke 6:20) He is also the Jesus who went on to say, **"But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation."** (Luke 6:24) I have no doubt whatsoever that Jesus saw the value in hard work and the people who do it, but he also saw the flaws that were inherent in the system that meant there were many who could profit handsomely from the labour of others while some could never advance given the disadvantages they were saddled with

And, of course, don't forget that this is also the same Jesus who told the rich man that the only way for him to be part of what God was doing was to sell everything he had and give it all to the poor. (Mark 10:17-31)

Maintain the Status Quo Jesus

"Who do people say that I am?" For many people, the obvious answer to that question is that Jesus is the one who gives legitimacy to the present system of this world and the way things are done. Jesus is the one who makes sure that the system doesn't change. Even with all of the turmoil

we have seen in our society over the last sixteen months, I think many of us are still living with that expectation that at some point things will go back to how they used to be, which is to say, how they *should* be.

But Jesus turns to us and asks, **“But who do you say that I am?”** And he would remind us that he is the one who said, **“The first shall be last and the last first.”** (Matthew 20:16) And there is no way to understand that but that he was saying that he was here to overturn the established order of things. And he seemed to think that that kind of disruption was necessary for the kingdom of God to come into being.

Responding to Wisdom

The Book of Proverbs has this incredible image of this woman who is the personification of wisdom. She is offering to people what we all say that we desire – the wisdom that we need to work through life’s questions and problems. But, amazingly, she doesn’t have any takers.

But I think that I understand what the problem is now. It’s not that people don’t want wisdom, it’s that they don’t recognize her when she calls out because they are seeking for wisdom in all the wrong places – in the easy answers to life’s questions, in the answers that only conform to what they’ve already decided to believe. They especially seem to choose such an answer when it is so readily available on Facebook and Twitter. But if they knew what they were looking for, if they were able to recognize it, wisdom would actually be so easy to find. That is what the Book of Proverbs suggests.

Finding Jesus

It is kind of the same way with Jesus. People often complain that Jesus is absent from our world today. “Oh, if only we could hear his voice, maybe we would find our way through this present crisis!” But what if he’s actually out there standing on every street corner, maybe in the face of a beggar or someone struggling with mental illness or addiction. Maybe he’s right there in that person who’s fallen through the cracks of the system.

The problem is not that Jesus isn’t there in our world, it is that we are so busy looking for the wrong Jesus. We’re busy looking for the nationalistic Jesus or the capitalistic Jesus or the Jesus who will maintain the status quo no matter what.

“Who do you say that I am?” It is the question that Jesus continues to ask every single one of us. And maybe if we can just let go of our ideas of who Jesus is supposed to be and embrace some of the difficult pictures of who Jesus actually was and is, we can start getting somewhere.