

A Sermon Preached at St, Christopher's Episcopal Church,  
Oak Park, IL on the 10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost,  
August 21, 2011 (Proper 16, Year A) by the Rev. Paris Coffey

*Jesus said to his disciples, "But who do you say that I am?"*

Matthew 16:15

Last weekend – realizing that we had no keyboardist for today's ten o'clock service – a group of us decided that a Taizé Eucharist might be nice. After all, not only are its simple chants *best* sung a cappella, but the community of Taizé in southern France is where St. Christopher's youth went on their first pilgrimage. That was eleven years ago, when twelve teenagers and four adults went to experience this amazing community of monks, whose name is taken from the nearby town of Taizé. We went to experience the brothers' work of peace and reconciliation, which began when Brother Roger moved to France in WWII to shelter those fleeing persecution.

Deeply influenced by his grandmother – who had sheltered refugees during the *first* World War – Brother Roger saw these refugees and those who sheltered them as Christ's community. As he later wrote in his book, *God is Love Alone*, "Since my youth, I think that I have never lost the intuition that community life could be a sign that God is love, and love alone. Gradually the conviction took shape in me that it was essential to create a community . . . (that) would always try to understand one another and be reconciled, a community where kindness of heart and simplicity would be at the center of everything."

This was who Brother Roger said that Jesus was – HIS answer to Jesus' *second* question in today's Gospel. "Who do *you* say that I am?" Jesus asks his disciples, but only after asking them *first* who others say that he is. Saying what others think, after all, is easier . . . especially in a cosmopolitan city like Caesarea Philippi. This Greco-Roman city north of Galilee was a crossroads of trade and commerce, which likewise made it a variable marketplace of gods and religions, not unlike the United States today. There were as many speculations in Caesarea Philippi and beyond about Jesus as

there were people, providing endless answers to Jesus first question.

His second question, on the other hand, is harder, as suggested by his opening conjunction, “*But*, who do *you* say that I am?” Never mind now what others think, says Jesus, emphasizing that the answer that *really* matters is what WE say in our own hearts. Never mind other people whose beliefs may *seem* true, but whose answers can be deceptive, as dogmatic Pharisees often reveal. Jesus knows only *too* well that doctrine, dogma, and discipline – or even words and ideas – can’t reveal the full truth of who he is. He knows they cannot answer his most important question, which instead must be found, felt, and answered within each and every human heart.

Certainly, others can share their personal encounters of the Living God with us, and tell the history of our common faith, which helps inform our own. Such answers, though, will never be truly ours until we face God and ourselves *alone*, with the force of the Spirit pulsating between us. Only in that moment of confrontation – or *those* moments, since there can be many – can our hearts know its own answer to the question, “Who do you say that I am?” Only then can we form in the deep and quiet places of our being where authenticity dwells – an answer that’s not contrived or that simply spits back what others claim – but is KNOWN in a way that comes solely when we experience something for ourselves. Only then can we know Christ in that way that we know and are known most fully by those *closest* to us– those with whom we live and move and have our being

And it is this kind of knowing that Jesus invites. Consequently, I want to offer you at least a little time and space this morning to reflect for yourself on Jesus’ question, “But who do you say that I am?” I want to offer a bit of silence – where in the safety of community – we can listen for *our* answers, knowing as they begin to unfold that we need not fear them. In fact, the only thing we need to fear is the kind of cynicism or world-weariness that comes when we robotically accept *or* deny the answers others give us, and resist *our* own encounter with the Living God.

After all, such resistance can make it impossible to discover what – at some level – we already know of this God who, as Brother Roger says, “is love alone.” It can make it impossible to encounter the Spirit who longs to reveal to us the truth – not only of who God is – but of who we are, as well. It might not be today, of course. It might not be tomorrow. God tends to meet us where we are and to respect our boundaries. Still, today is as good a time as any to begin – a good time to open our minds and hearts at least a crack to know and *be* known by Christ – who reveals God’s love in the deep recesses of our hearts and lives.

“Who do you say that I am?” Jesus asks each one of us, and we answer from the silence of our hearts, “You are . . .”

*An extended period of silence  
– which begins and ends with the sound of a bell –  
follows the meditation.*