

A Question of Identification

June 24, 2007

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

Have you ever had a phone call when the voice on the other end says, *Guess who this is!* And you haven't the foggiest notion who it is. Have you ever met someone whose name you ought to know and who assumes you know it, but it just doesn't ring a bell? Have you ever had the experience of trying to cash a check at the bank you have used for 20 years and a new teller holds up the proceedings until you can prove who you are?

My point is that, in human relations, it's important to know with whom you are dealing and to know it as precisely and as accurately as possible. Identification will determine much of what we say and do, and if we make a mistake in identification, we can find ourselves embarrassed at the very least and or, worse, in real trouble. This is true of our religion, too, especially in regard to Jesus of Nazareth. My thoughts this morning are taken from the Gospel according to Luke (9:18-24).

Jesus must have asked himself more than once, *who am I, really?* Just as most of us, in some moment of

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introspection, have asked ourselves the same thing. The answer came to him at his Baptism with the realization that he was the *Beloved*. The first part of his ministry was an attempt to lead others, especially the disciples, to a recognition of the same fact. The climax comes on that day in Caesarea Philippi when he asks them, *who do people say that I am?* (v.18) they answer *they say you are John the Baptist, or Elijah or one of the Prophets come back to life.* (v. 19)

Then he goes further and asks the crucial question, *but who do you say that I am?* (v.20) You can almost feel them hesitate until Peter finally blurts out, *you are the Christ of God.* (v.20) One of them, at least, was led to see the truth and confess it, at least momentarily. The rest of Jesus' ministry is entirely different from the first part because it builds on Peter's confession and goes on to tell and show them what it is going to *mean* to be the Christ of God; the suffering, the rejection, the death, and the Resurrection from the dead. He becomes known for who he is.

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The same matter of identification is at the heart of theology, the process of thinking intelligently about God. We've all thought about God and the result of this thought is found in the assumptions upon which we habitually act and make our decisions. A wicked person acts on one set of assumptions about what he or she thinks the truth, God, is. A saint has a different set of assumptions. The rest of us are neither very wicked nor very saintly and have still another concept of God. The point is that we do have *some* notion about what we mean by God.

We are guided by facts as we have observed them. One is the fact of existence, that we ourselves exist, that the earth and heavens are all around us, that intelligent life exists here. We conclude that it is God's creation. Another is the fact of evil. It exists. Everything in this world is not as it should be. A great many people conclude that there is no God at all, or that mankind is not capable of forming an *intelligent* notion of who and what God is.

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And this would be the end of it, except that there is one more fact which has to be placed next to the fact of existence and the fact of evil: Jesus of Nazareth. There he is, embedded in history, his life recorded and described in the New Testament, remembered in the Church which insists he is not dead, even though it is over twenty centuries since he was crucified, and is still a very, *very* powerful influence upon how many, many people live. Who do *you* think he can be?

You may answer, as you like, as many have done, but the only way to dodge the question is by denying that he ever lived at all. No honest person can do this, so the question of identity becomes the key to a faith upon which to build a way of life. One answer is that Jesus was a mad man, or at best, mistaken. This was one of the verdicts some of his contemporaries rendered upon him, and was probably the reason nobody objected too much to the crucifixion. The result of this thinking is that he has no practical effect at all on the way we live and he might just as well never have lived at all.

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The answer given by a great majority of mankind is that he was one of the prophets. This is the opinion of Muslims, some Jews, and even some Christians. He was a great religious teacher to be obeyed. Or, he was a *man for others*, a man whose life is to be imitated. He is essentially a man whose humanity is raised to the highest power, to use a mathematical term. But the result of this view of Jesus, if we really embrace it, is discouragement. He is so far above the rest of us that we that we can never reach up to his level, and we're likely to stop trying. Once again, he has no practical effect on how we conduct our own lives

The answer given by those who have known Jesus best, beginning with Peter and continuing right down to and including today is, *Thou art the Christ, the Son of God, the divine reality invading the world and life of humankind*. If this how we identify Jesus, then we can't possibly ignore him, neither can we be dismayed by his impossible demands upon us. On the contrary, we offer him our worship and claim his mercy and forgiveness as

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we endure the trials and temptations of this life and look toward the life to come. He sets our human experience in the context of God's love where the trials and temptations begin to make some kind of sense because we accept them with faith in God's wisdom.

So, you see, it does make a difference just how we identify Jesus. He asks each of us as individuals, ***who do you say that I am?*** and waits for our reply of recognition and acceptance. We really need to think about that and come up with an answer that we are willing to live with. ***Who do you say that he is?***

AMEN.