

"RELIGION IN THE FIRST PERSON SINGULAR"

August 26, 1990

TEXT: Matthew 16:15 "He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?'"

Last spring I had an opportunity I wish I could have shared with each of you. It was my very real privilege to read the papers submitted by the members of our 1990 Covenant Class. One of the class requirements was that they write a paper about what they believe. During the year, they had been told about the things Christians generally believe, but they were also told they did not have to agree with them. They were supposed to express to the best of their abilities their own personal beliefs. For, as Marcel Proust wrote, "We do not receive wisdom. We have to discover it for ourselves after a journey which no one can take for us"

As you might well imagine, it was certainly interesting to read what these young people had to say. Some of the the papers were better written than others; some more mature in thought. But all showed that they had been thinking very seriously about their beliefs. And that, of course, was the purpose of the paper, to get them in touch with their own religious beliefs.

In today's scripture, we find Jesus doing much the same with his disciples. First he asked, "Who do men say that the Son of Man is?" And the disciples answered, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." Then Jesus got to the point as he asked, "But who do you say that I am? What is it that you believe?"

In so doing, Jesus was not just being curious. He knew the time was fast approaching when those disciples would need to answer that question, for their own sakes as well as others. And, sooner or later, we have to answer it, too. Year after year we go through life not really thinking much about our beliefs. But, eventually, to most of us there comes a time when complacency is challenged and we find ourselves struggling to find some kind of meaning in life. When that happens, it is not enough just to know what others say. When we stand at the crossroads between meaning and despair, we need to know what we believe.

In the eighteenth chapter of John's Gospel there is a dramatic moment when Jesus and Pilate stand facing one another in the Roman hall of judgement. Pilate, trying to get to the bottom of things, asks Jesus, "Are you the King of the Jews?" And

Jesus, very much in command of himself, replies with a question of his own: "Do you say this of your own accord or did others say it . . . about me?" Sooner or later, he asks the same question of us.

The trouble with much of what passes for religion these days is that it is so often second-hand. We perpetuate forms and customs that we have inherited, but which we have never really made our own. We repeat words that were spoken or written by people whose hearts were full Christ, but, too often, that spirit is no longer in them. We sing hymns which express the faith of men and women who knew Christ in a very personal way, but their fervor is no longer there. As E. Stanley Jones has written, "This generation . . . is living on leftovers from a previous generation, and most of it is thin, precarious and inadequate."

Those words remind me of a family I know whose teen-aged son absolutely hated leftovers. One evening his mother went to great pains to disguise the fact that one of dinner's chief ingredients was the previous night's pot roast. I can personally testify to the fact that this lady is a marvelous cook, and I am told that she was very creative in trying to make dinner look and taste like something new. But one look at his plate, and the lad announced disdainfully, "Mother, you know I do not eat used meat."

Well, as a Congregationalist, I have something of that same disdain for "used theology." We Congregationalists have long stressed the sanctity of private conscience. We reject the authority of bishops, and synods, and creeds, not because we think they are always wrong --or that we are always right. We reject them because of our conviction that religion, in order to be meaningful, must be in the first person singular.

We respect the opinions of others; we often learn from them. But we insist that we, and only we, are responsible for what we think and how we act. It may help us to know who others say the Son of Man is. Their answers may help us as we formulate our own. But the important question is, "Who do you say that I am?"

Too many of us, however, can not answer that question. We may know what we reject, but we are often fuzzy about what we accept. We are like the high school student who was asked one day what church his family attended. "We're Congregationalists," he replied. "Oh," said his friend, "I thought you were Presbyterians." "We used to be," said the boy, "but we like Congregationalism better. A Presbyterian has to believe in the Apostles Creed and the Westminster confession, but a Congregationalist doesn't have to believe in anything."

Of course, nothing could be farther from the truth. Everyone has to believe in something. We Congregationalists just insist on figuring out what it is for themselves. The twentieth century theologian, Roger Hazleton, writes, "If God is ever to become our present help and Jesus Christ our own true Lord, then

it is plain that a faith at first, not second hand will have to be discovered." A second-hand, inherited faith may be where most of us begin, but, in times of personal testing or profound change, no second-hand faith will do. That is why the great confessions of history have always begun with the words, "I believe."

But, if we need a first-hand faith, where are we to find it. Do we just believe whatever we please? Are we to be like the Queen of Hearts in Lewis Carroll's Through the Looking Glass? You may recall that she tells Alice at one point that she is one hundred and one years, five months, and one day old. "I can't believe that," replied Alice. "Can't you?" said the Queen. "Try again; draw a long breath and shut your eyes." Is that what we are to do? Hold our breath --and perhaps our nose as well-- and believe whatever someone tells us?

Certainly not. Wallace Alston writes, "Christianity is essentially a friendship. You can read books about it and sing hymns about it and repeat prayers and creeds, but it is all second-hand until you become self-conscious about the Presence of a Personal Friend who is walking beside you." Only then do we have a first-hand religion.

And where do we find this Friend? I can not answer that question for you because He often delights in surprising us. We expect Him to come in heavenly glory and He comes among us as a humble carpenter. We look for Him in the whirlwind and the storm, and He comes in the still small voice.

But one place where many find Him is the Bible. That is why we call it the "Word of God." Not because every word is literally true, but because those who approach its pages with open minds and teachable hearts are confronted by God and challenged to do His will. Another place is the Church. Jesus said, "Wherever two or three gather together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." And, though we can not always explain why, many Christians have discovered that in the Church, in its worship and fellowship, they do discover the Spirit of God.

Still another place, for me at least, is in silent meditation. Prayer is a wonderful Christian experience, but I am not talking about prayer. Too often, prayer consists of our telling God what we want. We can be pretty good at that sometimes, but we rarely listen. We rarely hear that "still small voice" because our own voice and the voices around us drown it out. I find I have to get away from life's distractions sometime each day to listen for the voice of my Friend. That way I am better able to recognize it again when I hear it in the Bible, or in the Church, or in the needs of the world around me.

Perhaps your experience is like mine; perhaps it is not. But wherever you find God, you have to find him first-hand. As Martin Luther wrote, "Each of us must do his own believing just as each must do his own dying." It is as personal as that.

PRAYER

God of love and mercy, we thank you for this time together when our hearts and minds can focus upon Your love. A time when we can come to you in prayer to acknowledge Your Lordship in our lives, to seek Your help for our living. We confess that in spite of good intentions, we have sometimes failed to live in peace and harmony, in justice and in love. Too often, we have done what seems good to us when You call us to serve You by doing good to others. Too often we have become angry or discouraged when You call us to be forgiving and joyful. Forgive our frailty and our shortcomings and grant us both the power and the peace which come from grounding life firmly in Your love. From that secure foundation, help us to reach out to those around us, to remember that in spite of differences, we are all Your children and therefore brothers and sisters in Christ.

Be with all those, civilian and military alike, who are caught up in the hostilities, both in the Persian Gulf and elsewhere in this fragile world. Strengthen them and keep them safe, we pray. Help them to know that we love them and support them in our prayers. Help us all to find ways by which to bring true peace there and throughout the world. Challenge us in love to rise above self-interest and complacency, to use in Your service the talents You have given us, and to pattern our lives after the example of Your Son, Jesus Christ. For it is in His name and in His spirit that we pray. Amen.