

PENTECOST 5 – June 27, 2010

Luke 9:18-24 **WHO DO YOU SAY CHRIST IS?**

Pastor Thomas Kneser

Brothers and sisters in Christ,

Last Saturday right before lunch, two gentlemen in shirts and ties came knocking at the door of my home. They said they wanted to share some religious material with me, something called, “The Watchtower.” I’m guessing you know where they were from, right? They were followers of the false religion, the Jehovah’s Witnesses. Why do I label them as a false religion, one whose adherents, if they really believe what their organization teaches, will not be welcomed into the mansions of heaven? It’s because of one of their teachings which directly contradicts the main point of our gospel reading for today. They try to paint themselves as a conservative Christian church, but they have the wrong answer when it comes to the question Jesus himself asked of his disciples here. I engaged these two men in a conversation which boiled down to this question and it was clear from their answers that they simply did not believe what the Bible says, what Jesus himself says, about who he is. That question is the most important one you will have to answer because it will determine where you spend eternity, whether in heaven or in hell. The question is this:

WHO DO YOU SAY CHRIST IS?

The events before us today take place well along in Jesus’ ministry, perhaps 5 or 6 months before his crucifixion. Right before this Jesus had fed the thousands of people with a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish. With their bellies filled, they tried to make Jesus their king. In the conversations he had with the people in the days that followed, where Jesus showed that he is the bread of life and that one must believe in him in order to have real, eternal life, it became apparent that many people just could not accept that about him. He was trying to show them that his purpose for coming into the world was not to restore Israel to a place of prominence on the world political stage. He wasn’t going to drive out the Romans and reign on David’s throne in Jerusalem.

His was a spiritual mission, to bring freedom to all mankind, but not an earthly, political freedom. He had come to bring freedom from the stranglehold of sin, from the terror of death. He had come to open the doors to God’s eternal kingdom, calling on people to believe in him as the promised Messiah, the Savior of all mankind. But that’s not the message many of his fellow Jews wanted to hear. So they turned away from him. Relatively few continued to follow him, besides his inner circle of the twelve.

So during these last months then, Jesus began to concentrate on instructing the 12. They were the ones who would have to take his message to the world because very soon he was going to be handed over to his enemies, put to death and then rise from the grave and return to heaven. They would have to carry on the work after he was gone and he wanted them to be ready. He took them away for some private instruction and he asked them the questions before us. The first was this, **Who do the crowds say I am?** It’s not that he didn’t know, but he wanted to bring his disciples to a correct understand of just who he is.

Their response shows that the crowds didn’t really have the right idea of who Jesus was. **Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life.** By these answers the people were putting Jesus in the same category as the great prophets of the distant and recent past. He was someone who had some wonderful things to say about God and the way people should live in repentance and faith. A teacher sent from God, that they couldn’t argue with. But the Son of God, the promised Mes-

siah? No way, not this fellow! He didn't want to be king. He didn't want to fight for freedom. How could he be the Messiah? That's why they had turned away from him.

So now Jesus sharpens the question and directs it to the disciples themselves, **But what about you? Who do you say I am?** Jesus was checking to see where they stood, how sure they were. Did they have the wrong impression of him? Would they become disappointed in him and also turn away? Just what did they believe about this man they had been following for those 2½ years? He was going to be gone soon, so what were their beliefs about him?

As usual, the bold and daring Peter takes the initiative and speaks for the group, **You are the Christ of God.** You can't get any simpler or more direct than that. His answer went against the prevailing notions about Jesus. But what a strong and beautiful confession of faith! With these few words Peter was saying exactly who Jesus is. He is the Christ, the anointed one, the chosen one of God. Peter is saying that Jesus is the great king who was promised for all those years. Jesus isn't just another man who had some fine things to say. He was the true son of the living God. He is the Savior who was to come, the one the true followers of God had been looking for over the centuries. This Jesus, Peter is saying, is someone special, the very Son of God.

What surprises us now is what Jesus next tells them, **Jesus strictly warned them not to tell this to anyone.** Why would he give such a command? We would think that it's something that should be told, something Jesus would want people to know. But they had already been told. They had seen evidence of that fact. But they had not believed. They had turned away.

Now, what about you? Who do you say Jesus is? We have to look into our hearts, search our souls and answer that question. How do you feel about Jesus? What does he mean to 21st century Americans? For all of us who are confirmed there was that one time in our lives when we stood before the people of God and we confessed that Jesus is the Son of God. Seven adults will/have made that confession again this weekend. We promised to believe and confess his name to the world. Do we still believe that, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God?

Those men who came to my door on Saturday would not say that. They will admit that Jesus is divine, a god, but not equal to the Father in every respect. They refuse to honor the Son as they honor the Father, something Jesus says his true followers will do. The Jehovah's Witnesses, along with the Mormons, would not agree with the apostle Paul who says that **in Christ all the fullness of the deity lives in bodily form.** To them, and to many Americans today, Jesus is a fine teacher, a man who had some wonderful things to say about love and sacrifice, and was even willing to die for the sake of his teachings. But to confess that he is the Christ, the Son of the living God, that is too much for them to swallow. But doesn't that then drag Christianity and Christ down to the level of all the other religions of the world, make of Jesus another moral philosopher, make Christianity just one of many paths to God? That's the prevailing belief for lots of people in our world. But it's a belief that will not get people into heaven.

Who is this Jesus? He is God the Son, come into his world, who took on human flesh and blood to be our Savior. He is the Son of Man and the Son of God, who was able to live the perfect life demanded by his heavenly Father. And yet suffered and died because of sin, not his own, but because he willingly shouldered the burden of sin and guilt that we sinful human beings piled up in our lives. Out of his love and compassion for us he gave up his life on the cross to pay the penalty to bring us true spiritual freedom, from the oppression of sin, from the terror of death. He triumphantly rose from the grave to assure us that it was all completed, that there is nothing left for us to do. It's all a free gift of his love for us. That's what we believe when we confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, our only Savior from sin. Peter's words about Jesus should be our words as well.

And if that is the case, thank God for that. That's not an answer you will find out in the world of nature, as beautiful a display of God that it is. It's not an answer that the rational mind of man will come up with. That only leads to self-righteousness, that it's all up to the individual

to make himself right with God. No, such a faith and confession about Jesus can only come about through the power of the Holy Spirit. Through the gospel, as it is preached and taught, as it is used in our homes and churches, as it is displayed in a very real way in baptism and the Lord's Supper, only through those tools does God go to work in our hearts so that we do believe these things about Jesus, that he is our loving Savior, that he is the only way for us and others to enter heaven. Only through him do we have the complete assurance that our sins are forgiven and that we will live with him forever in heaven. That joy is ours, just as it was for Peter, because we believe with our hearts and confess with our lips that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

II.

As Jesus goes on, we see that he's not just looking for an outward confession of our lips, but also a commitment to him with our lives, **If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.** How do we act after making our confession? Do we follow it up by doing the things Jesus wants us to do, the things that show our confession is genuine?

It's not going to be an easy road to follow. We have to deny ourselves. Over the last several weeks our Bible classes have been studying what that all involves – putting the brakes on our sinful nature, curbing our natural appetite for fame and fortune, for power and leisure. It means being ready to fight our sinful nature and the attractions of the sinful world and the temptations of Satan. It means that we will daily repent of all those times when we cave in, when self wins out. We look only to Jesus for guidance and direction, for strength and forgiveness.

That may put us in opposition to the people around us. For example, people at work may be cool and indifferent toward you when you don't slough off or when you don't along with the shoddy work that's being done. Maybe you'll have to leave certain friends behind because you can't agree with the pleasure-seeking way of life they follow, indulging in sex and drugs and alcohol. The world can be very cruel when you show that you not only say you believe in Jesus but also live according to his word. That's what it means to bear a cross, being a disciple of Jesus, ready to face anything rather than to deny being his follower.

So where are your priorities? Are you one for whom this life is what it's all about? When those trials come up that a Christian might face, do you turn tail and find security in the ways of the world, or in the arms of your Savior? Do you lose your life in him, dedicate yourself totally and confess your allegiance to him? For all too many people Christianity is a straightjacket that seems to rob them of the pleasures and opportunities of life. They see following Jesus as a loss, not a gain. But that choice turns out to be the real loser. They lose everything when it comes to eternity. They forfeit their souls. For them Judgment Day will be sad and horrifying event. As those Jehovah's Witnesses left my house last week, I simply said, May God have mercy on your soul.

But for those who do follow what Christ says in his word, those who continue to confess him as the Son of God, their only Savior from sin, that day will be one of great joy. The question will be asked of us, Who do you say Christ is? The unbeliever won't know what to answer. You and I and all true Christians will know the answer. We will have confessed it. We will have shown it by following him, taking up our crosses, denying our sinful self. We will say with Peter, You are the Christ of God, and that will mean eternity with him in heaven. AMEN.