

# CHRIST THE LORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH      PINOLE, CA

The Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost      August 23, 2020

*“But who do you say that I am?”*

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Good Morning everyone, I am hoping you and yours are safe. There is so much going on in the world, and the continuing pounding of negative news doesn't seem to help. So, since we all know what is going on in the world, and as we struggle to find our place in all this, I offer you respite today. I offer you a studied, slightly academic reflection of our Lord Jesus Christ. I ask that you leave your worries and thoughts for a moment and enjoy a walk through the very simple question our Gospel raises today when Jesus asks, “But who do you say that I am?”

In academic terms, I present to you what is sometimes referred to as an *apologetic*. An apologetic is a rigorous argument defending spiritual or religious doctrine. So let us begin. I have done the research, enjoy.

If I never attended church, and maybe stumbled across a movie entitled, “Jesus Christ Superstar” I might want to find out who Jesus is. If I was unsure about the Bible for historic facts because accepting a book inspired by God leaves me with too many questions, I would want to begin my search with history. What I, in this century, would consider history, not myth or some spiritually channeled story.

Historically, where do I look? Did you know there are many ancient texts that answer the question “Who is Jesus?” Likely the disciples did not keep it to themselves very well as you will see. Here we go.

The first-century Roman named Tacitus is considered one of the more accurate historians of the ancient world. In his writings in *Annals* he mentioned superstitious “Christians” (from *Christus*, which is Latin for Christ), who suffered under Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius. Suetonius, the chief secretary to

Emperor Hadrian, wrote that there was a man named Chrestus (or Christ) who lived during the first century (*Annals* 15.44).

We must understand that “Christ”, or” Messiah” meant the anointed one, the blessed one, the savior, leading to questions, hope and also fear.

Next we can consider Flavius Josephus a famous Jewish historian. His work *Antiquities* refers to James, “the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ.” There is also a controversial verse in his writings (18:3) that says, “Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man. For he was one who wrought surprising feats....He was [the] Christ...he appeared to them alive again the third day, as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him.”

Another version reads, “At this time there was a wise man named Jesus. His conduct was good and [he] was known to be virtuous. And many people from among the Jews and the other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die. But those who became his disciples did not abandon his discipleship. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion, and that he was alive; accordingly he was perhaps the Messiah, concerning whom the prophets have recounted wonders.”

Please note, none of these quotes I am reading here today are from the Bible.

Julius Africanus quotes the historian Thallus in a discussion of the darkness that followed the crucifixion of Christ in a work called *Extant Writings*.

Pliny the Younger, in *Letters* 10:96, recorded early Christian worship practices including the fact that Christians worshiped Jesus as God and were very ethical, and he has also included a reference to the love feast and Lord's Supper.

*The Babylonian Talmud* (Sanhedrin 43a) confirms Jesus' crucifixion on the eve of Passover and the accusations against Christ of practicing sorcery and encouraging Jewish apostasy.

Lucian of Samosata was a second-century Greek writer who admits that Jesus was worshiped by Christians, and because he introduced new teachings, he was crucified for them. He said that Jesus' teachings included the brotherhood of believers, the importance of conversion, and the importance of denying other gods. Christians lived according to Jesus' laws, believed themselves to be immortal, and were characterized by contempt for death, as well as the renunciation of material goods.

Mara Bar-Serapion confirms that Jesus was thought to be a wise and virtuous man, was considered by many to be the king of Israel, was put to death by the Jews, and lived on in the teachings of His followers.

In fact, we can almost reconstruct the gospel just from early non-Christian sources. Some even confirm the miracles as Josephus stated: Jesus was called the Christ because he did "magic."

So considering New Testament sources, or non-Biblical references, we have a historical Jesus. So yes, we have a human being, but that reference to magic, the miracles strewn throughout the Gospels, what of the Divine? Even non-Biblical sources seem to bring Divinity into the picture.

I still have a tendency to cringe when I hear the words, “have you accepted Jesus as your personal savior?” The funny thing is my personal answer is truly, I have, but then a little voice in the back of my mind says, but not exactly like you think. My Jesus tends to be personal but also Universal in his salvation power.

Being the reflective person I am, I started to wonder about this. Did I want to model my life after Jesus’ life? Did I want to be compassionate, forgiving, not stuck focusing on material things? Do I want to honor God’s creation of nature? Do I want love in my life in all the different ways it can express itself? Do I want community? Do I put God above all?

These are the true teachings of Jesus. This is who Jesus is.

Do I want to advocate for those who have lost their voice; do I want to strive for justice; do I want the little children to come to me, or the weary to find respite in my company? Do I want to search and find those who are lost or downtrodden? Yes, I do. These are the true teaching of Jesus. This is who Jesus is.

Does changing my life to focus more and more on living into this way of life mean it's going to be easy? Not when you have an example of a man who died for these teachings. A man who bucked the social norms and questioned people’s moral values. This is who Jesus is.

I believe that to strive to be a true follower of Jesus I will have to accept personal change. This leaves Jesus at the heart of my life, or as my personal savior. And again, I cringe at those words. Then I realized, the awkwardness around the personal savior vocabulary was more about the people who often toted those words

around with their true focus on scam, or nothing more than a quick admittance to penance before going back to whatever their deal was before.

None of those positions are reflective of who Jesus is. His name and the name of God have often been used to do more harm than good. Invoking His name for things that would leave him turning tables upside down, leaves out a lot of “so called” Christians. But that is not where I want to focus. Instead, the servant leadership I get from study and prayer with Jesus opens up a whole new way of being. Interestingly, I am now part of a church named Christ the Lord. When we are discussing who Jesus is, well, isn't He Christ the Lord and isn't that what I have just been saying.

I began my very early ministry at a church called St. Stephen in the Field, the perfect name for a forty year old woman going through a tough time in search of a servant ministry. There I found safety, in a church named after the first deacon willing to give his life for Christ's message of love and inclusion.

Interestingly I then happened to move on to a church called Epiphany, which was when I felt called to ordained ministry, a church named for the “aha” moment of realizing Jesus' royalty. This was where I began serious consideration on worship and glorifying God. This led me to intern at Holy Innocents, where I was the innocent and naïve postulant-in-training. A church that brought to my education the collateral damage that happens in the world as God does his work.

Next I was a supply priest at practically every church around the diocese, experiencing Jesus as Redeemer, Shepherd, Lord, and represented by various saints. Only to end up finally at Christ the Lord. Believe it or not, I have been with you for a whole year. Strange year, but here we are.

Interestingly as the various churches' names state, their call to mission on their version of Jesus' story focused my own journey. Who Jesus is, depends a lot on who you are at the moment.

The answer to who Jesus is, is personal, communal, based on culture and context. Who Jesus is, is based on where I myself am on my spiritual journey. Who Jesus is depends on how close I can follow his lead, and how much I depend on his forgiveness. Who Jesus is, is dependent on my relationship with the Divine.

Jesus asks, "But who do you say that I am?" We here today can answer Jesus with: "Christ the Lord". But let us not answer the question with words or titles alone. Let us strive to the call of love that Jesus has put forth – in scripture and in history. Even the historians knew Jesus was special, the story so amazing that even the history books proclaim His Divinity.

Leaving you also with today's question. Who do you think Jesus is?

According to our epistle today, "We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness." These are gifts given by God, by Jesus. Gifts that continually call us to ask, "Who is Jesus to you?"

Is he for you, Christ the Lord? Don't worry about the answer, we are all working on it. It is ok to take a breath. Amen