

October 30, 2016

National Presbyterian Church, Washington DC

What Jesus Said: Asking The Right Questions

Mark 8:27-38

David A. Renwick

In our sermons through the fall, we're thinking together about words and sayings spoken by Jesus: "***What Jesus said.***"

And today I want us to think about two questions he posed to his followers, each of which focused on himself. Jesus (in Mark 8: 27-29) asked: "Who do PEOPLE say that I am?" And then he added, "But who do YOU say that I am?"

Now, these are good questions! In fact, asking questions – asking good questions – is an essential component of critical thinking on any subject.

On one occasion Nobel laureate Isidor Rabi (whose work lay behind both the invention of the MRI and the microwave oven!), was asked why he became a scientist. To which he replied:

"My mother made me a scientist without ever intending it. Every other Jewish mother in Brooklyn would ask her child after school: 'So? Did you learn anything new today?' But not my mother. She always asked me a different question. 'Izzy,' she would say, 'Did you ask a good question today?' That difference - asking good questions -made me become a scientist!"

Donald Sheff NYT Jan 12, 1988

Or (I think, more accurately), made him into a great scientist! Every scientist asks questions! But asking the right question makes all the difference when it comes to finding the right answers, the answers that make a real difference

As David Sturt and Todd Nordstrom put it in Forbes Magazine a few years ago (October 2013)

The right question can be a disruptive agent, cutting through years of complacency to redirect a team or a company's focus. It serves as a pointer, aiming us in the direction of the answer. As Einstein put it (they write): "If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on it, I would use the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask, for once I know the proper question, I could solve the problem in less than five minutes."

Unfortunately, in some parts of Christian faith over the past 100 years, there's been a movement to shut down the questions – an anti-intellectual strain, whether about God, Jesus, the Bible, or science: as if, by ignoring the questions that people are asking – whether those people are believers or unbelievers – you somehow are doing a greater service to truth.

Whereas, the Presbyterian side of the Christian family at least has always said that one of our duties as followers of Jesus has been (as Jesus himself said – e.g., Luke 11:27), "To love the Lord our God not only with all our heart, and soul and strength, but with our minds"! And you cannot really exercise the mind without asking those pesky questions.

And there are many good questions to pursue.

With regard to God, for example, you've got the question of evil:

Why is there so much evil in the world if God is so good and powerful? Or to put it another way, why does a good and powerful God, who could stop evil at any moment, allow it to bring such pain and suffering to so many?

This is a really important question (and the Bible addresses it in many places, especially in the Book of Job). Though I'd add that one way to deal with it is actually by changing the question, and focusing on the opposite side of the coin. Let me put it like this:

- If all there is, is random, is chance – if there is no God, then why is there so much good in the world?
- Or how is it that so much good repeatedly rises out of evil?
- And (to ask a question that C.S. Lewis raises in his classic book, *Mere Christianity*) why do we even feel that there is such a thing as “good and evil”? Where does this sense of good and evil come from?

And then, beyond the question of good and evil, there are a whole slew of other good questions, like:

Why is there something rather than nothing? – How is it that we are here at all?

And,

Why do we have a hunger to be loved – to be significant to someone else?

[To which the answer that has always made most sense to me, is that at the heart of the universe we were made this way, made to be loved by someone else – by an “infinite lover,” (as Francis Schaeffer said, especially in his *Death in the City*); by an infinite lover who (as St Augustine said) “made us for himself,” and without whom, without a significant relationship to this maker, we as human beings will always have a profound restlessness in our souls.]

And then, of course, there are the questions, not just about God the Father, but about Jesus too.

Starting with the most basic one: **“Did Jesus really live?”**

For which, importantly there's evidence not just inside the Bible (which might be deemed to be biased in a certain direction!) but outside the Bible; evidence that points not only to his existence – but to the credibility of the Biblical account. The Roman historian, Tacitus (*Annals* 15:44) writes at the beginning of the second century, within 80 years of Jesus' life, and describes Jesus as a historical figure, “executed as a criminal by Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius!!” This linkage to Pontius Pilate, is not only made in the Scripture, but as you may remember, in the Apostles' Creed.

And as for the general historical value of the Gospels themselves as a whole, F.F. Bruce, for many years professor at the University of Manchester, and a classical scholar before he became a great New Testament scholar, reminds us that the abundance of New Testament manuscripts and their age provide a surer foundation for their accuracy by far, than any other ancient manuscripts on which scholars rely

- The oldest manuscript for Caesar's Gallic Wars is roughly 900 years after Caesar's day.
- The two oldest manuscripts of Tacitus are 800 and 1,000 years later, than the original.
- The earliest copies of Homer's *Iliad* date from about 1,000 years after the original was authored around 800 B.C.

But with the New Testament, we have complete manuscripts from only 300 hundred years later.

Most of the New Testament is preserved in manuscripts fewer than 200 years after the original, with some books dating from a little more than 100 years after their composition and one fragment surviving within a generation of its authorship. --

No other book from the ancient world has as small a time gap between composition and earliest manuscript copies as the New Testament.

The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable, p.16

So we have all these good questions – about God, Jesus, and the Bible, and much else, and as Christians we need to pursue them, loving God not just with heart and soul and strength, but with our minds.

And Jesus himself gives us warrant to do this when he asks his own disciples, his own followers, these two great questions:

- The first is this: Who do PEOPLE say that I am?
- And the second, this: Who do YOU say that I am?

Now the location of these questions – where Jesus asks them – is not irrelevant here. Mark tells us that Jesus and his closest followers are at a place called Caesarea Philippi, which to this day has some remarkable ruins. It was a center of religious pluralism, with statues to the Greek God Pan, and a gleaming temple of white marble built for the worship of the Roman emperor as a god! This was a place that forced a person to deal with questions not only of truth but of allegiance:

- both, “what did one believe in a world of many choices and powerful voices?”
- and “who did one follow?”

And Jesus picks up on the pluralistic nature of the place as he asks the first question – an objective, intellectual question; just the facts: “Who do people say that I am?” To which the response comes, “Some say John the Baptist, other Elijah, others -- one of the prophets”

BUT then He follows up with the second question, which is no less intellectual, but involves a component that is inescapably personal, and requires a response of action and commitment and allegiance, “BUT who do YOU say that I am?”

To which Peter responds “The Messiah!” A word which – perhaps because we use it so casually often obscures from us, the deeper meaning:

Messiah means KING, God’s King on Earth -- the ultimate Boss! It’s a word that is inescapably personal! It’s about control and authority over our lives, and William Barclay (in his commentary on Mark) catches the stunning nature of the question and answer -- given in this location -- when he writes:

It is an amazing thing that it was here at Caesarea Philippi of all places that Peter saw in a homeless Galilean carpenter the son of God.

- The ancient religion of Palestine was in the air, and the memories of false god Baal clustered around.
- The gods of classical Greece brooded over the place,
- The Jordan would bring back to memory episode after episode in the history of Israel and the conquest of the land.
- And clear in the eastern sun gleamed and glistened the marble of the holy place which reminded all people that Caesar was a god.

Here, against this background of all religions and all history, Peter named this wandering teacher from Nazareth the Messiah

Jesus: the Boss!! Peter's Boss. And Jesus immediately picks up on this answer by naming the implications (Mark 8:31-38): the Boss is going to suffer, he says, and if the boss suffers, then his followers need to be willing to suffer too:

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. 36For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?"

To begin with – Peter doesn't get it

- Yes, he gets the answer right – intellectually!!
- Yes, he wants to call Jesus "Messiah, King, Boss", give him the right title.
- But, at the same time, Peter still somehow wants to control Jesus; put him in his pocket, and use him as a talisman, a source of spiritual comfort and safety: call him King, but not allow him to BE king!

BUT Jesus will have none of it! And let's Peter know that you cannot call him Messiah (Boss, King)

- You cannot merely answer the question about Jesus objectively and intellectually –
- And not allow the answer to sink into you personally, still living as if nothing had changed

The question always moves –GOD always moves – from the objective and factual, to the subjective and intensely personal --

- IF Jesus is the Messiah, OUR Messiah
- THEN like calling a person "MY SPOUSE," there's a new relationship that changes the shape of life. .

From time to time, I like reading and watching mysteries. One of them is the Inspector Montalbano series, set in Sicily. One of the repeated themes is the love that Inspector Montalbano has for his girlfriend, Livia

They both want to get married, but there's only one problem: he lives in Sicily, and she lives in the north of Italy. And they are both tied to their places more than to each other. They both love each other, and they want a family together – but not quite enough to change their way (and place) of life – not quite enough to get married!

What you say to me about who I am, implies Jesus – if you call me "Messiah" or "Son of God," requires nothing less than a commitment to get married!

Some years ago, author Paul Little was on a college campus talking to students about Jesus. And one student was listening quite intently to the debate, to the questions and the answers. And at the end of the discussion, Paul Little turned to the student and asked him, "Have I answered all your questions?" And the student said, "Yes, you have."

To which Paul said, "So, are you going to become a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ?" To which the student replied, "No, I'm not."

Which left Paul Little rather confused! – he'd answered all the questions, but the student still said "No, I'm not going to change!"

So Paul followed up: "Why not?" And he received an answer that was simple, remarkable, and brutally honest. The student replied, "Well, because if I become a Christian, it will mess up my life."

Paul Little, Know Why you Believe, IVP, p.4.

To which Jesus, himself, I think, would respond by saying: “*You get It!! I want to mess up your life!*” Or, to put it another way, “*As your Messiah, your king, your boss, I want to turn your upside down and inside out (even if it’s painful) until we can put it back together again, like a jigsaw puzzle (like resurrection!), right side up, with all the pieces in the best of all possible places!*”

I know that in my own life, I’d never let anyone do that unless I’d checked them out thoroughly – asked my questions, starting with the intellectual ones, the objective ones, and then going through references, asking “what do other people say?”

And this is where some of us are, today in life: maybe we know there are questions to be asked, but we’ve been putting off asking them. Maybe it’s easier not to get in the messy business of asking questions, or maybe it’s easier to accept the standard answers, given by the skeptics in secular society – so we never get around to doffing deeper, when we need to!

And maybe today is the day when that needs to change!

BUT – for others of us here: we’re in a different place. Maybe we’ve invested hours of our time days and months digging deep into the intellectual questions that surround faith, and that surround Christian faith in particular. But now the issue for us is different: we’ve reached the point where enough is enough, and we have to come down on one side or another. And for some of us, that’s what our spiritual business is today: to take our questions and our answers, and to speak to Jesus directly, and to say – *I know enough to know that it’s you I need! Help me let go of whatever I’m holding on to, and let you in!*

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As Einstein put it (they write): “If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on it, I would use the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask, for once I know the proper question, I could solve the problem in less than five minutes.”

“***Who do people say that I am?***” asked Jesus! Good question!

But then one that’s far more important: “***Who do YOU – say that I am?***”

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