

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

CROSSROADS

Matthew 16:13-20

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Analysis by Ron Starenko

13Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" 14And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." 15He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" 16Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." 17And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. 18And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. 19I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." 20Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Author's note about terms: At all times we are a people who move through life betwixt-and-between, always and at the same time, under judgment (crisis) and under the cross (crux) in grace, embracing the new, to use a New Testament word "kairos," as St. Paul described it, how we "are treated as impostors, and yet are true, as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying and see – we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything" (2 Cor. 6:8b-10), always

at a crossroads.

DIAGNOSIS: Crisis

Step 1: Internal Diagnosis (External Problem) : Cruising

For nearly three years Jesus and his disciples have been on a roll. The crowds following them are whooping it up, swept away by the feeding and healing miracles, enjoying the after-glow of Jesus' fame. Jesus, however, is aware that the marauding scribes and Pharisees, also the elders and the chief priests (16:6 and 21), are moving in for the kill. We, too, are hardly up to speed, moving along on cruise-control, unaware that the storm clouds are building—churches dying, communities crumbling, the young and the old intoxicated with the pursuit of pleasure, government stalemated by ineptness and injustice, as the wolves here-and-now are about to strike.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : Confounded

Meanwhile, the crowds, along with the disciples, are lulled into denial, content to follow “flesh-and-blood” (v. 17) gods, held up then by the religious power-brokers providing momentary escape in the sanctuary of the temple and the synagogue, today peddled by demagogue preachers extolling prosperity, success, and good sex. Without knowing it, the hucksters that push idol worship lead their followers down a destructive path, unaware not only that their idols will let them down in the end, but also will trap them in their treachery and deicide, only to be crushed by “the stone that the builders rejected” (Matt. 21:42-44; 1 Peter 2:7-8).

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : Cremated

To our dismay, we have unlocked “the gates of Hades” (v. 18) or hell, which refers not only to some kind of fiery afterlife, but is part of our existence in the here-and-now, what Jesus

referred to in Matthew's gospel (13: 42, 50; 22:13), as the burning garbage and rubbish smoldering outside the city of Jerusalem. This is the hell we create, the hell we deserve for defying or dismissing the creator, hell-bent on making God's creation into our own disfigured image, finally buried under the rocks of God's judgment. Not a pretty sight, as the marauders are not only the scribes and Pharisees or the peddlers of false religious or no-religion, nipping at our heels, but also the God to be feared (Luke 12:4-5), who ultimately holds the keys to life and death.

PROGNOSIS: Crux

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Christ*

What will it take to avert a crisis of eternal dimensions? To be sure, "flesh and blood," the likes of you and me, including John the Baptist and Jeremiah and Elijah, can not save us from God. Ironically and paradoxically, only God can save us from God's Self, and God will do it by coming among us as the One who is both "the Son of the living God" (v. 16) and who is also "flesh and blood" (v. 17) like us (John 1:14; 6:47, 51, 58), "the Messiah" (v. 16}, the Christ, the one the Hebrew title, the other Greek, both meaning "God's anointed." This is the key, the crux of all Christian teaching, how God "crossed over" to us, uniting with us, not only taking our sinful flesh and blood into God's self, by means of Jesus' suffering and death, but also at the same time offering us a new body, a new existence, in the likeness of Jesus' flesh-and-blood resurrection. Jesus, the Christ, is the good news, the guarantee, that "the gates of Hades" have been smashed forever, opening the kingdom of heaven to us all, bringing together heaven and earth, the divine and the human into one, creating an eternal reality we already have in the here-and-now (John 5:24; 6:68-69), the Rock of Ages for this and all ages to come.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : Confessed

All this, that we might confess, along with Peter and the apostles and the whole Christian church, that Jesus is “the Son of the living God,” that believing in him we receive everything he is and gives. Incredibly, by our faith we have become more than “flesh and blood,” already part of the Rock himself, washed in our baptism, fed at his table, as the kingdom of heaven is now unlocked for all to enter. Having Jesus, the Christ, we have the key to all life and truth and joy.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : Churched

Surely, all such good is not only for ourselves to have and to hold. When Jesus “ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah” (v. 20), he wanted then no premature announcement or celebration until he had already undergone great suffering for us, been killed and raised from the death (Matt. 16:21). Now, therefore, there is no holding back, as we get to live and work and worship and witness as his living body in the here-and-now. We have been given the keys, the opportunity and the authority (v. 19; Matt.28:18-19) to unlock the riches of God’s mercy and forgiveness, setting one another free from the prisons (Luke 4:18-19) that enslave us-our demons of fear, doubt, greed, addiction, ambition, and self-absorption. Jesus has created the church now to be the interim sign between his resurrection and his return, straddling crisis and cross, a people ever getting up to speed, renouncing business as usual, bearing our Lord to the world, thus bridging heaven and earth, at a crossroads, having the word of life, still in crisis, yet always embracing the new.