

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost – 2023

Isaiah 51:1-6

Romans 11:33—12:8

Matthew 16:13-20

I saw a boatload of preschoolers this week, kindergarteners too. Before we start the year in chapel for our school, I make a visit to each classroom to greet everyone, to have some fun and to convey a simple but profound message. I saw about 180 kids. I visited nine classrooms some of which are 5 day classes and some of which have one crew on Monday, Wednesday, Friday and an entirely different tribe on Tuesday, Thursday. I chatted with them all. The lesson was on creation. We talked about the cosmos, the animal kingdom, and things that we could see right then and there and then I asked a critical question: “The sun and the moon and the stars and the sky and the ocean and the sharks and the whales and the giraffes and the lions and the skunks and the grass and the flowers and the trees and the turtles and the bananas and the apples and the mountains – where did all that stuff come from?” And the kids are totally locked in, fascinated by the discussion, and eager to offer an answer. Invariably, one perky whippersnapper would pipe up and say: “Jesus!”

Brilliant! Then we move on. What’s the best thing that God has made? I offer a few alternatives. Is a pony the best thing that God has made? The girls are tempted to agree with that one. A rainbow, a rose, watermelon, a big bull alligator – what’s the best thing that God has made? It’s us. Then I ask: “Why did God make us?” He made us so that He could love us. He gives us life and He gives us His love, His Son. And then they confessed the First Article of the Creed with me. “I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.” The expressions on their faces, their enthusiasm at being visited by the pastor, and the beautiful combination of innocence and faith and intelligence – it’s wonderful. I visited a 91-year-old man on Friday, to bring him communion. Bill Nye; I hadn’t seen him in a while. He is faithful and tender of heart. I told him briefly about my day with the children and remarked appreciatively about God’s gifts – life and His love, His Son, Jesus. I could see the simple truthfulness of the words wash over his mind and his heart – his face relaxed as he thought to himself of God’s gifts. Bill’s eyes grew wide, he bowed his head and he started sobbing. Gratitude brought him to tears. It was beautiful.

I am catechizing a young lad, Roger Kiss, who came to me somewhat out of the blue. I know this 17-year-old from the Redlands Racquet Club. He’s smart, polite, and an exceptionally strong tennis player. I asked him why? Why Christ the King, why now, why take the relatively unusual step to dive into the theological deep end and study with me? And Roger said this: “If Jesus is the Son of God, if Jesus is who He says He is, if Jesus is who the Bible says that He is, if Jesus died and rose again then I better pay attention.” Yep; that young lad is onto something.

Jesus was in teaching mode. “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” (Matthew 16:13). The Lord Christ doesn’t need information from the disciples. He is leading them to discover something and He is using the people’s inability to identify Him as a foil, a contrast, a gateway. The disciples give their Master the word on the street. It’s not materially different from the National Enquirer or the word on the street where you live. Who do people say that the Son of Man is? What would today’s answers be? Jesus is a figment of the imagination, religious opium

for the masses. Jesus was a good teacher, a teacher of morals, ethics, but that's it. Jesus is a symbol of hope and we all need hope, but He's just a symbol. Jesus was a self-actualized individual who made the most of his talents, a powerful leader, and one who was in tune with his times, in tune with his audience, nothing more. There's just one word for all of that: unbelief. By his own reason and strength, man is incapable of discovering who Jesus is; man will always misidentify the Lord Christ on his own (1 Corinthians 2:14).

Jesus hones in on the disciples and He extracts from them a confession which will be the foundation of His church. "But who do you say that I am?" (Matthew 16:15). Freeze frame; what's at stake here? Who do you say that I am? St. Paul wrote this: "For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved" (Romans 10:9-10). Those are two aspects of a single reality – believing and confessing what you believe. Who do you say that I am? Saying about Jesus what you know to be true – sometimes it is not as easy as it sounds. Fear, mixed allegiance, lukewarm faith, anxiety over the repercussions, love of the world, adherence to some competing ideology, some competing *political* loyalty – the reasons for not confessing Christ are legion. Christianity is predicated on identifying who Jesus is. Who do you say that I am? Were the disciples conflicted? He looks so ordinary, so common place, so non-descript. Yet they saw Him walk on water, they saw Him feed the multitudes, they saw Him heal the sick, calm a storm, and change water into wine. Peter's not waiting. He charges ahead with His mouth: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16).

"Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 16:17). Our school children, Bill Nye, Roger Kiss, St. Peter and you; the eyes of your heart have been enlightened so that you see precisely who Jesus of Nazareth is (Ephesians 1:18-20). Joy, courage and trust have been embedded in your soul because you know that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. God's Word is living and active (Hebrews 4:12). God's Word and God's Spirit have enlightened the eyes of your heart. Sin and death and Satan have been conquered by the Champion of the Cross and His tomb is empty. You KNOW it! You see Him giving up His life for you, hanging in Triumph but also in shame, in great power but also in great weakness. You know the glory of His sacrifice for you have felt it, heard of it, had it impressed up you with magnum force. Your sin is great and He took it away. The holy Son of God loved you and gave Himself up for you (Ephesians 5:2). He asks the question: "Who do you say that I am?" and His church responds: You are the King of the Universe, You are our eternal Savior, You are God of God and Light and Light. You are the Christ; you are the Son of the Living God.

Jesus was elated when Peter confessed the Truth and the Lord saw His kingdom, His church, His rule and His reign. Jesus doesn't *praise* Peter. Peter was pronounced "blessed." Blessedness is not an achievement, but a gift. In John's Gospel, Jesus said: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day" (John 6:44). So here Jesus says: "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:17). Peter is not the first pope, contrary to our Roman Catholic friends. Peter's *confession* is what the Lord refers as a "rock." The truth is a rock that does not move. Christ is the rock that we stand on in the midst of a relentless cultural storm. We confess the Truth and the Truth sets us free. Our school children, Bill Nye, Roger Kiss and the saints of Christ the King – we are free. The blood of Christ has set us free and we are unwilling to submit

to a yoke of slavery (Galatians 5:1). No legalism will bind us. No satanic lie about our sins still being on us will bind us. No cancel culture will keep our mouths from confessing that Jesus is the crucified and risen Savior of humanity (who for us men and for our salvation).

The man y'all know as Hawk died a week ago. He lost his sight in 2001. But He saw Christ; throughout his life, Hawk fixed his eyes on Jesus and followed Him (Hebrews 12:2). Hawk was blessed in this life. Through a multitude of storms, Hawk persevered in faith and was part of the Church Militant. The gates of hell will not prevail against Christ's church. Gates are not an offensive weapon but a defensive boundary. Confessing the Truth is a battering ram against the kingdom of Satan. Keep that image in your mind. Christ's church is on the march, gaining those who have been liberated from darkness and brought into the realm of eternal light. Joy, courage, and trust animated Hawk in this life. His faith has now been realized. Hawk is part of the Church Triumphant. He walks by sight now. Hawk sees the Kingdom of Heaven precisely as it is and He is blessed. Life and God's Son – God has given them to you and you are blessed. “But who do you say that I am?” The saints of Christ the King reply: “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”