
Confessing Christ in the Shadow of Empire

A sermon by the Rev. Canon Julia Mitchener
The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 16, Year A

The last time I can recall anyone asking me to say point-blank who Jesus Christ is, I was wearing a Laura Ashley dress with shoulder pads and had my hair cut in the shape of an isosceles triangle. It was the 1900s—1980s, to be precise—and I was being confirmed in the Presbyterian Church. A short “exam” was part of the Confirmation service; I had practiced for it in our living room the night before. While my mother hemmed my skirt and emptied an entire jar of Dippity-Do onto my head in a futile attempt to keep my hair from frizzing, my dad sipped scotch and read aloud from a set of questions.

“Who is your Lord and Savior?”

“Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior,” I monotoned.

“Great,” my dad replied. “Now say it like you mean it.”

“JESUS CHRIST IS MY LORD AND SAVIOR!” I shrieked.

“Don’t get smart with me, young lady,” my father warned.

“Stand up straight!” my mother implored.

The next morning did not go according to plan. I woke with a terrible headache. My triangular hair had morphed into a stiff parallelogram. When I got to church, I freaked out. Who were all these people? Did I really have to stand in front of them and go through with this? By the time we reached the examination part of the service, I was a nervous wreck.

“Who is your Lord and Savior?” the minister asked me, more loudly than seemed necessary.

“Jesuschristismylordandsavior.”

“What?”

“Jesuschristismylordandsavior.”

“You’re mumbling, I can’t hear you!”

“Jesuschristismylordandsavior.”

“Good enough,” the pastor finally decided and moved on to the next person.

There is no hint in this morning’s gospel lesson that Peter is nervous when Jesus asks him, “Who do you say that I am?” And Peter doesn’t mumble his response, either; he speaks up, loud and clear. We don’t know how many people witness Peter making his confession. Is it just The Twelve or are some of the second-string disciples there, too? Could be—we can’t tell. There is no doubt, though, about one thing, and that is this: that just as it made a difference to me all those years ago whether I was proclaiming my faith in the living room with my parents or in front of a great congregation, so the setting in which Peter confesses Jesus to be the Messiah, the Christ, in today’s gospel reading makes a difference to this story. “When Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi,” Matthew tells us, “he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’ . . .

'Who do you say that I am?'" The location of Caesarea Philippi is important here. Why? Well, because Caesarea Philippi was not Jesus' living room. Far from it. Caesarea Philippi was the emperor's living room, or, more accurately, it was the emperor's temple. It was a place designed so that people could come and pay homage to the head of the Roman government, a place where people could come to profess Caesar as lord. So when Jesus goes to Caesarea Philippi and asks his followers who he is and Peter responds by saying that Jesus—not Caesar, but Jesus—is Lord, well, you can see why this is a big deal.

What does it mean to say that Jesus, rather than Caesar, is Lord? What does it mean to confess Jesus as the Messiah in the shadow of empire? These are questions posed by this morning's gospel lesson. Questions posed to Jesus' first disciples, yes, and questions posed to us today as well. Questions too big to be answered in the course of one sermon or even one lifetime, but questions about which this morning's gospel gives us some hints.

For starters, this morning's gospel makes clear that just because the emperor has power, this does not mean that Jesus' disciples do not have power, too. On the contrary, when Jesus tells Peter, "I will give you the keys to 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"—when Jesus tells Peter this, he is saying, in essence, Caesar may have his armies, and with them, the power to maim and to hold captive and even to kill; but you—you have the power to love and to set free and to forgive! You have the power to usher in new life! And so you do not have to give in to the forces that care more about domination than about dignity, human dignity. Forces that demand allegiance to a human being rather than to God.

This is some incredibly good news from this morning's gospel: Followers of Jesus are not helpless! Followers of Jesus are not helpless, we are equipped! We are equipped so that when we go to Caesarea Philippi or Washington or the State Capitol or to Madison Avenue or Wall Street or even home to the street where we live—when we go about our day to day business in the empire, we don't have to bow down. We don't have to participate in systems of oppression, systems that, in the words of our baptismal service, "corrupt and destroy the creatures of God."

We don't have to embrace a society that is increasingly transactional rather than relational. We don't have to stand idly by as our neighbors are rounded up and sent to camps where they may die for lack of food, water, or medication. We don't have to pretend we don't notice that no one sits with the new kid in the lunchroom or that several of our friends laugh about her behind her back. We don't have to turn a blind eye to the ever-growing number of people whose paychecks can't keep pace with their rent or to the astonishing number of Black women who lose their lives due to inadequate prenatal care. We can choose another path! We can bind up the brokenhearted, we can loose the bonds that are holding God's children captive. We can speak a word of mercy to someone who may not deserve it or simply make eye contact with someone who is longing for human connection. We can step out of our comfort zone and become an advocate for the neglected and the oppressed. These are not small things. In fact, they are great things, among the greatest things of all. To love. To serve. To set free. Even, and especially, in times in which domination and decimation and deception threaten to undo us.

You know, it's easy just to give up these days. I feel that, I really do. It's easy to disassociate from the events going on all around us, events that can cause us to think there is nothing we can do to help, nothing we can do to address the fear and the hopelessness that have become so pervasive in our society.

And yet so often, in spite of it all, I see you, the people of the Cathedral of St. Philip, seeking "a more excellent way." I see you pursuing the way of Jesus. I see you refusing to give in to inertia and cynicism. I see you resisting evil. I see you weeping because of this time in which we live but then getting up and using your God given power to love and to liberate. I see you resisting pressure to exclude people simply because they are different; pressure to treat others inhumanely because they were born in another country; pressure to measure someone else's existential worth by their net worth; pressure to pledge allegiance to an earthly ruler rather than to God.

I see this in the cathedral's ongoing commitment to an after school program that provides a haven of flourishing and belonging for children, some of whose family members have been arrested for being in the wrong place at the wrong time and then locked up at the Stewart Detention Center.

I see it in the way so many of you persist in breaking bread and studying the Bible among people with whom you disagree on pretty much everything except for the conviction that the love of Christ urges us on.

I see it in the way you sit with the lonely, the sick, and the unloved and in the way you recognize that just because you cannot "fix" another person's predicament, this doesn't mean you can't accompany them through

it.

When the government cuts SNAP benefits to those in need, you organize a free lunch every Friday in the church parking lot, a lunch that combats not only hunger but loneliness.

When you find out that children whose mothers are fleeing domestic violence don't have supplies for the new school year, you coordinate a drive to fill backpacks with crayons, scissors, pencils, and paper for the Women's Resource Center.

When society says that our elders become useless the moment they stop contributing to the GDP, you spend time building relationships with our neighbors at Parish Grove.

So carry on, people of God at the Cathedral of St. Philip! Carry on, followers of Jesus everywhere! Take heart. Stand up straight. Look up, and raise your heads. Raise your voices, too. Confess the faith of Christ crucified and proclaim his resurrection, not only with your lips, but with your lives. This is not a time to cower in fear, it is not a time to roll over. And it is not a time for mumbling. Amen.