

## PROPER 19 B 09 ~ Sunday, September 13, 2009

- In England and in some parts of the Episcopal Church, you might still see a priest wearing a cassock when out in public. Cassocks are long black gowns with buttons going all the way up and down the front. In church, they are typically worn under a white garment called a surplice. Lay people wear them in choir as well, as we can see here at Grace Church with our lay readers (and choir) this morning.
- One day, soon after a good friend of ours in mid-life was ordained as a priest in England, he was driving in heavy London traffic. He was wearing his cassock and clergy collar. Before ordination, he was a newspaper writer in the capitol city. He knew from personal experience the rough way that cab and truck drivers make their way through London streets at rush hour. Coming around a corner toward a round-a-bout, he found that three lanes suddenly squeezed down into two. He thought he was safely on the inside lane entering the round-a-bout when, suddenly, a truck raced in front of him, cutting him off. Now, our friend had a naturally impetuous personality much like St. Peter, and he reacted quickly, without thinking. Honking his horn, he raised his hand in a gesture not usually associated with the clergy! When he saw the look of shock on the truck driver's face, he suddenly remembered how he was dressed! (pause)
- I love this story both because of its obvious humor, but it also reminds us of a larger point. You will hear me say this again, in a saying I love to repeat to myself: *Sometimes, the only Gospel our neighbors will ever read, is the Gospel they read in how we live.* Clergy, as well as monks and nuns *may* have an advantage, or a disadvantage, depending on how you look at it: because of the kind of uniform we usually wear, we are walking reminders that we represent Christ and his Church in the world. It would be convenient for the rest of us if the point was limited to this. But as the Prayer Book Catechism reminds us, "the ministry of lay persons is (*also*) to represent Christ and his Church; (*and*) to bear witness to him wherever they may be..."
- And here is how we will *usually* take this point to heart: We will say to ourselves, 'I must remember to try and be a witness to Jesus, where ever I am.' But this makes being a witness to Jesus *an option!* – As if we could *choose* here and there to be a witness to Jesus or not, depending on our mood or attitude or the situation. *But the real truth is that, as Baptized persons, we are always witnesses to him, wherever we are, whatever we do, whether we mean to be or not.* All our neighbors need to know about us is that we belong to some church – that we are Christians – and they will make assumptions about Jesus and about Christian faith *based on how they see us live*, and on what they see us do. That's why I find it so helpful to remember that when my neighbors see me in town at the store, or driving down the street, they are likely to associate *everything* I do with the fact that I am a Christian and, of course in my case, with the further fact that I am ordained.
- Jesus in our Gospel today asks his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" His question prompts several answers from the disciples, and the answers are important. But *today I want to focus on the question* – for it is the question he asks *everyone* of us: *Who do you*

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say that I am? -- It may sound like a kind of test question we need to *prepare for*, because we *might* have to answer it sometime. But Jesus isn't asking us to consider what we *might* say sometime. Jesus is asking us, who we say he is *now, by the way that we live, by what we already do*, by the choices we already make, by the way that we relate with others and the things that we say. As baptized Christians, by every choice we made this past week, by every thing we did do and everything we didn't do, *every one of us was already providing an answer to that question*, "who do you say that I am?" By being here for the Eucharist this morning, we are answering his question. And by everything we say and do this coming week, we will be answering his question as well.

- *Right now, who do we say that he is*, by the way that we spend our money or allocate our time, by the way that we relate to others at church or in our neighborhood, by the way we are willing or unwilling to forgive certain other people?... *By the way that we actually live, who do we say that he is?*
- It is important to remember that *we already know how to answer this question well*: Look at the ways in which we have come together to worship this morning. On a morning on which we could be doing any number of things – we could still be sleeping, or going out for a great brunch, or stopping for pastries and the Sunday Times! And yet, we have come here to worship the Lord Jesus. We have come here for the bread of life and for *the Good News from Heaven!* And what did we find when we got here? We found a well-cared-for church, with the altar and credence table beautifully prepared, with carefully arranged flowers placed next to polished candlestands. These are signs that we place a *more-than-ordinary* value *on what* we are doing here, and on *why* we are doing it. We are showing that the Lord who calls us to have fellowship with him, is the Lord who takes precedence over everything else we *could be* doing now.
- Our liturgy this morning, and how we have prepared for it, models what are to do with the rest of our lives. If we know that it pleases God to gather in his name, and receive him in the Holy Eucharist on the *first* day of the week, it helps us see how it pleases him to give the first moments upon waking *each day* over to him *as well*. Before we even get out of bed, our first thoughts can be turned in his direction – we can call upon his name – we can say in our hearts the prayer Jesus taught us. And *if, on Sunday morning, we show by our actions we know the Lord takes precedence over everything else in the world, then we can find ways – even small ways – to show the same realization every day*. We can say a prayer of thanksgiving before meals; we can ask that his will be done as we take on other important tasks like schoolwork, our jobs, or the care of our homes and our loved ones. And we can ask *that his will be done in* each and every one of these important tasks that will occupy the days of our week.
- For centuries, the Anglican Prayer Books have had a wonderful prayer as a part of daily Morning Prayer. It is called "The General Thanksgiving." In that prayer, we say these words: "*And, we pray, give us such an awareness of your mercies, that with truly thankful hearts we may show forth your praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives, by*

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*giving up our selves to your service, and by walking before you in holiness and righteousness all our days...*" We find in these words a reminder that **there are two main ways we praise God**. We all know that we praise him with our lips in worship.

- But *we can also praise God in our lives*. And we praise God in our lives when we give up ourselves to his service, and when we walk before him in holiness and righteousness. In other words, by the way that we conduct ourselves when we are alone or with other people at work during the week, at school, or at home, we are a position to praise him to the extent that we *put second* other, lesser, goals, and *put first* God's purposes for the world. And when we make a conscious choice to do what we are doing in the spirit of holiness and righteousness, we are praising God. We are answering Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?"
- **This coming week, in all the things that we will say, and in all the things that we will do, who will be saying that he is?**