

Who Is He?
Matthew 21:1-11

“Who is this?” It wasn’t the first time He had heard this question. The gospels, the four books of the New Testament which chronicle the life and death of Jesus, are littered with stories of his encounters with people which left them asking the question: “who is this, who is he?” I can understand the question. His identity was, after all, cloaked in mystery. Everyone in town heard the whispered stories about Mary’s crazy virgin birth claims. And there was sweet Joseph, compassionate and gracious, who kept his covenant with Mary and married her anyway. And who could forget the unusual circumstances around Jesus birth: how a motley crew of shepherds working the night shift claimed that they had seen angels in the night sky telling them to go and find the baby who was born that night, that this was no ordinary baby but the Christ, the anointed one, the long ago promised and highly anticipated Messiah. Those claims might have been easily dismissed if they were just the ramblings of some lowly and socially insignificant shepherds but on the other end of the social spectrum, there were kings, scholars, astronomers who had seen a sign in the night sky and had travelled for close to 2 years to come and bow down before the toddler Jesus and to offer their gifts – gold, frankincense, a kind of incense used in the ancient tabernacle which represented the prayers of the people rising up to God, and myrrh, an oil used for anointing and setting one apart for the Lord’s service, and also one of the ingredients used to prepare a body for burial - not exactly the kind of gifts you might pick up for a child at your local Toysrus.

And then there is nothing, we hear nothing for several years, until he went with his parents who were making the pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. Jesus was now 12 years old, old enough to make the journey to the temple. But after the festivities were over and they were on the return trip home, they realized that Jesus was not with them. When they return to Jerusalem they find him at the temple asking questions and giving his own answers. And while we might say that looking at your pre-teen or teenager and asking the question, “Who are you and what have you done to my sweet little baby?” is an experience all parents have in common, here we catch a first clue that even Mary and Joseph did not fully know who Jesus

was. “Didn’t you know,” he asked, “I had to be in my Father’s house?”

And then nothing again, we hear nothing again, no reports of sightings or stories, until he was 30 years old. That seems like a coming of age time in life, a time when many of us start asking questions about who we are. But Jesus himself seems sure. He left home in Nazareth and walked out into the countryside, making his way to the Jordan River, where his cousin John was attracting quite a crowd, living off the land and eating organic long before our generation made it trendy. He was quite a sight to behold but it was what he said that caught everyone’s attention: how he preached about repentance from sin and forgiveness; how he told them about the One who was coming who would baptize them with the Holy Spirit. And Jesus stepped out from the back of the crowd and asked John to baptize him then and there and when Jesus came up out of the water God spoke, reminding Jesus exactly who he was, as if to answer the question “who are you?” “You are my son; whom I love.” He would need that strong affirmation ringing in his ears to withstand the temptations in the wilderness which followed. But the questions wouldn’t end there. Over the next three years that one question would follow him like a dog: “Who is he?” And slowly, quietly, over time, his identity would be unveiled.

The question, “who is he?” always follows an encounter. One day, Jesus and his followers decide to take a shortcut to the other side of the lake. So they hop in a boat. Jesus falls sound asleep. And while he rests, a storm blows up and begins tossing the boat, like a small toy in a rough bathtub. The disciples, utterly terrified that the boat would be consumed by the next wave, wake the sleeping Jesus by shouting: “we’re going to die!” Without drama or fanfare, Jesus told the wind and waves to settle down, and suddenly, all was calm. Astounded by what they had just seen, amazed by who they had just encountered, the disciples asked one another “Who is he? Even the wind and the waves obey him.” Who is he? Lord of wind and waves.

In Jerusalem, Jesus found himself walking among many disabled people who were lying beside a public pool of water. They spent their days lying there hoping to get into the pool when the water stirred because they believed they could be healed. Around the pool they crowded and waited day in and day out, waiting for the healing spirit to move in the pool waters. Jesus stopped there to speak to a man; a man who had been waiting everyday for 38 years. And there was Jesus, asking him a simple question: “do you want to get well?” It was such a simple question, perhaps too simple, as the man never does reply. Maybe the answer should have

seemed obvious. Rather he explains why the healing has not happened before now. In 38 years of waiting, he had never made it into the pool. No further explanation required. Jesus simply invites the man to get up and pick up his mat and walk. And he walks! And just like today there are those who would rather criticize than celebrate, those who are envious that Jesus has done what they could never do themselves. And so from the man, they demand answers. Who is he? This one who told you to pick up your mat and walk? He is healer, of disease and dis-ease.

On another day, Jesus was teaching in a house in the village. The house was crowded with other teachers who had come to hear him so that there was no room for anyone else to squeeze in. Men who heard he was in the community, brought their paralyzed friend, carried him to the house on a stretcher because they believed that Jesus could heal him. But they couldn't get in the house – they couldn't get near the place. So they thought outside of the box – literally, and climbed up on the roof and lowered their friend down on the stretcher through the thatched tiles of the roof. And Jesus recognized their authentic faith. And he said to the one who was paralyzed on the stretcher before him “your sins are forgiven.” But the legalists in the audience didn't like the sound of that and so they began to whisper and mutter and complain and question. “Who is he?” Who does he think he is? He is forgiveness.

Every where he went, he encountered people. And with every encounter, he revealed a little bit more of his identity. To the Samaritan woman, he was the Messiah, to Mary and Martha and Lazarus he was a beloved friend but so much more, he was the Resurrection and the Life, to the hometown crowd at Sabbath service in Nazareth he was the word fulfilled in their hearing, to the blind man he was the gift of sight, to John the Baptist, he was the one who had long been promised.

When he left Bethany, the home of his friends Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus, who up until a few days ago was dead and buried, but now was literally the life of the party, Jesus entered the small village of Bethpage and came to the hill called the Mount of Olives. He sent two disciples on ahead to make the necessary arrangements to acquire the transportation for the day: a donkey and her colt. And when they arrived back, someone put their coat on the colts back, and Jesus rode on it. And like a spontaneous display of dominoes, others began laying their coats on the road to create a kind of pathway, like a red carpet. And when they ran out of coats, they tore branches off palm trees and laid those down. Others waved the palm branches in

the air, fanning them in greeting and celebration. And while they walked they shouted, not just catchy slogans but ancient words: hosanna, literally – save us. So they shouted, Save us son of David, Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord, Hosanna in the highest, they were even inviting the angels in the highest heaven to join their songs of praise and prayer. For all intents and purposes it was a parade. And maybe when I say that word the first thing that comes to mind is when a much loved team wins the title and the trophy, say the Stanley Cup and brings it to the city streets and a celebration breaks out, not that we would know anything about that but now at least we have hope. There are certainly elements of joy and celebration, of excitement and anticipation. But maybe when I say parade, another image comes to mind, one with which we are more familiar: the protest march. Streets filled with placard waving, slogan shouting people raising their voices in solidarity with or against the issue of the day. I see them often gathered on the lawn at Queen’s Park, on my way from the subway to the U of T campus. Sometimes there are just a handful; other days the entire front lawn is filled. They are singing and shouting, trying to get the attention of the media, trying to get the attention of the bureaucrats and public servants inside the big stone buildings, trying to get the attention of the passersby.

Both groups were present in the crowd on what today is called the Hosanna Road, a cobblestone pathway down the hillside, the beautiful city of Jerusalem in the distance below. There were fans, loyal followers, those who had been following him along the way from Nazareth and Galilee and Jericho; those whose lives he touched in large and small ways. And there were protestors, revolutionaries who saw in Jesus the promise of the fulfillment of the Messiah who would save them from the oppression of the regime of the day. On that day, there were no motorcades, no armoured vehicles, no secret service, no security checkpoints. Just a man on a colt which had never been ridden. The crowd, many of whom had probably followed him since Bethany, since he called Lazarus from the grave, the crowd instinctively knew that this was a moment. There was no careful co-ordination, no posters advertising the upcoming event. But as they came to the side of the hill and overlooked Jerusalem, now was the time. Jesus himself, who had always avoided the limelight, who had snuck out before he could be formally introduced, who hushed those who wanted to praise him, to announce him, knew that this was the time he would take his place. It was both part parade and part political

announcement. It was a spontaneous celebration of praise and adoration and joy and euphoria and it was announcement, and protest and statement. It was overflowing worship and a proclamation that a new kingdom was on the horizon, that Caesar might govern the Roman empire but that the Lord reigns over heaven and earth and Caesars of all kinds.

Who is this? Who is he? The crowd answers them: This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee. And yes, this is who he is. And yes, he is healer, he is compassion, he is teacher, he is savior, he is redeemer, he is Lord over the wind and the waves, he is forgiveness. But as he enters Jerusalem, the holy city, the place where the religious establishment and the political empire meet, Jesus unveils his true identity. He is King. Humble king. But king nonetheless. Ride on, King Jesus. Ride on.