

Our scripture readings today, come to us through different centuries and through the eyes of different writers, interpreting what they saw, or what they heard from others. We have four perspectives and they form, for me two “couplets” so to speak.

We hear the beginning of the famous Moses story, who will come to liberate his people from the land of the Pharaohs where they have become slaves. Ironically, as a baby he is saved by a Princess of Pharaoh’s household. This story begins to unfold through the courageous acts of many women, who make this child’s survival possible; the midwives who refused to report his and other male babies’ births, the sister who guards him and his mother who assumes the role of his wet nurse. And, our Psalm today supports this Exodus story by way of giving testimony as to how often the Lord continued to help Israel in her times of trouble.

Our next two lessons are what I would like to focus on briefly today and these are from Paul’s letter to the Romans, written around 58 C.E. (Common Era) and Matthew’s gospel penned by someone around 80-90 C.E. We have to keep in mind that those writing or recording the sayings of other people, were impacted by their times and their memories as we are today with ours.

Paul’s letter reminds me of that old question: Are we human beings having a spiritual experience or are we spiritual beings having a human experience.? I think Paul would opt for the latter.

In his letter to the Romans, which is maybe his last letter, he uses the metaphor of the human body to explain our vital relationship to one another. He underscored the importance that each member of the church has to one another. No one, as Hooker would write in the Middle Ages, “No one can say of the other, I need thee not.” I think it is fair to say that in this letter as in many other letters of Paul, we need to view them with the glasses/lens of COMMUNITY and COMPASSION (code for love of course). This message today, shows a clear focus on how critical it is for us to VALUE one another in ALL our differences. For, it is through our collective gifts, honoured and used that we will truly become a healthy church. Here, I realize I am using the present tense. The church in Rome he is writing to, faces challenges, just as we do today and while their challenges are a bit more life threatening we too face challenges to our existence as a meaningful and active Christian practising body. This will be only be a risk, if we follow the course Jesus has laid out!

My former mentor, Bishop Bennet Sims of Atlanta, was an unabashed car lover and owned a classic Model T . He translated this story into car parts as I recall:

*We need people to be our rear view mirror as historians, recorders, photographers, to remind us of where we have been and what we should already know and be thankful for; we need people to serve as headlights (visionaries) to help us see where we are going or where we need to be going, or if we are veering off the road; we will hit some hard spots along our way (he must have driven on Gabriola) and we will need mud guards, and shock absorbers; oh and batteries which are folks with energy and cheerfulness...*

Paul adds another aspect, for whether you use the human body or a car as a metaphor for the church— we are not to run around in a closed circle. Rather, we are to work together in order to reach out to others both within and those truly outside our church family. This is not an individual effort we are making for the ‘self’ but an action *for* and *with* others. In that process, we can expand our friendships. If we develop into a community of seekers or believers or beloveds (as Borg would say) perhaps we can be there as supporters of truth tellers for one another. Then we can explore the questions raised so directly in today’s gospel. We will have one another to dialogue with then —without the fear of judgement.

The first question asked by Jesus according to Matthew, is easy: *Who do people say that the Son of Man is?* and the disciples respond with a list ranging from John the Baptist to prophets like Elijah and Jeremiah. Then a second question is posed, *Who do you say that I am?* Peter pipes up quickly, *You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God!* Of course he is praised for this and a list of benefits that the apostles will have are declared. Now, it is debatable whether or not Jesus actually asked this question (1) It is not in Jesus style from all the other pronouncements he has made and it doesn’t seem to be something he would have a need to know. However, the question itself was important to the early forming Christian Communities and I believe it is still an important question for us today. Remember, when Matthew (or whomever) wrote this gospel small Christian gatherings were forming and trying to pull together while under siege from both the Romans with their Emperor as a God and many others and their Jewish brethren who questioned this new “branch” of Judaism. So, they needed to start developing just what they believed and how to explain this new faith to other seekers.

So, what about us, we who could be labeled Jesus current friends and followers? What would you or I say to the question Jesus asks us or someone outside the church: *Who do you say Jesus is?*

Chances are that over time our answer changes as does our understanding and life experiences. Sometimes it is helpful to turn inside ourselves and find the words we used as a child. I can remember in Sunday School hearing : Jesus is our brother, He Loves me, He's my best friend... My granddaughter once told me one day what she knew about Jesus, *He's the man*, Nana, she said, *He is just the Man!* God only knows what that meant but I think to her four year old mind it meant that Jesus was pretty big stuff!

But we are older now and she is too but we all still need to get back to that intimate and perhaps even intuitive place so that we can as children so easily do, directly know at some level who Jesus is for us—in our lives—in our dreams—and in the present tense.

I suspect that much is gained by our acting and reflection on our actions, which includes our deeds and our devotions. Looking to the arts and nature will give us clues as well and inspiration. One of the joys I had years ago was seeing the film version of *Fiddler on the Roof*, and the lead character Tevye having intense conversations with God. I wonder if more of us should try that or writing a letter to Jesus. Or, how about using your imagination and give it free reign to read one of the gospel stories and put yourself in that scene. This technique is used by the Jesuits and I have found it very meaningful.

Some of us need to explore who Jesus is by first getting our minds around this issue. I recommend reading Scripture; *Who is Jesus?* by John Dominic Crossan and Richard Watts and *Convictions: How I learned what matters most*, by Marcus Borge.

When I was seventeen and in a composition class my freshman year I knew no limits so I wrote a paper on eschatology and focused on the works of Albert Schweitzer who had just been awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace. The following last paragraph from his book *The Quest of the the Historical Jesus* has stayed with me all these years:

*He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old by the lakeside. He came to those who knew him not. He speaks to us the same word: follow thou me! and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself, in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.*

1. Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover and The Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: What did Jesus Really say?* Macmillian Publishing, 1993.

