

**SERMON**  
**By: Gail Fricker**

**Who Do You Say I Am?**

**November 26<sup>th</sup>, 2017**

***Matthew 16:13-20 & Colossians 1:15-20***

**Reign of Christ Sunday**

Today we mark the church's version of New Year's Eve. Next Sunday marks the start of Advent and the beginning of a new church calendar. But today we call Reign of Christ Sunday, and we remember that Jesus is the ruler of our lives. It is not an ancient festival in the Christian calendar. In fact, it was only established by Pope Pius XI in 1925. It was established at a time when Europe was in chaos. Inflation was rampant, and colonialism was at its worst. The seeds of evil were being planted that would eventually grow into the Holocaust and World War II. And during this time, a time when respect for Christ and the Church was waning, Pope Pius XI established the Festival of Christ the King to declare that Jesus Christ is king. The Festival Day was established at a time when it was most needed.

Today, the same distrust of authority exists, but the problem has gotten worse. Individualism has been embraced to such an extreme, that for many, the only authority is the individual self. The idea of Christ as ruler is rejected in such a strongly individualistic system. Many balk at the idea of kings and queens, believing them to be antiquated and possibly oppressive. In the United Church we use the term "Reign of Christ" rather than Kingdom of Christ. We are conscious of gender neutral terminology, and we reject the titles of "lord" and "king" because they are titles borrowed from oppressive systems of government (and yes, some kings in history have been oppressive.)

But as I reflected on this special day in our liturgical calendar, I began to think that perhaps we have missed the point. Perhaps in our sometimes over zealous political correctness, we forget to ask the question – who do we say Jesus is?

It is not an easy question to answer. Oh we could come up with the "expected" answer – but deep down, who do you say Jesus is?

As we turn to scripture for an answer, it's interesting that Peter and Paul, two of the great titans of the early church, have radically different ways that they experienced and understood Jesus. And it's these differences that illustrate for us the complexity of Reign of Christ Sunday, as we remind ourselves that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Peter knew the human Jesus first; and through his experiences of walking with Jesus, learning from him, and participating in Jesus' ministry, he came to know Jesus as the Christ. In the Gospels, we are told that Peter was out fishing one day with his brother, Andrew, and Jesus called out to them, prompting the brothers to drop their nets and begin following Jesus. John's Gospel suggests that since Andrew was a follower of John the Baptist, Peter knew at least a little bit about Jesus before dropping everything to follow him.

Then for three years, Peter spent his time watching Jesus preach, listening to him teach, and watching him perform miracles – including all the miracles that we looked at in church last week when we discussed the hero qualities of Jesus. It was all these experiences that enabled Peter to answer Jesus' question:

"But what about you, Peter? Who do you say I am?" (Matthew 16:15)

Peter knew what others said about Jesus, he knew the doubts being whispered, the rumours being spread, and the questions that others had. But for Peter, there was no doubt. When Jesus asked him the question, he proclaimed

“You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God” (Matthew 16:16).

Peter knew Jesus as a human being. He had seen Jesus yawn when he got tired. He’d seen Jesus flinch when he hit his foot on a stone. He’d even seen the vein on Jesus’ forehead swell up in anger just before he lashed out at the money changers in the temple courtyard. Peter’s loyalty to Christ was rooted in his best friend, the man called Jesus. The man with whom he’d laughed, cried, walked miles, and eaten hundreds of meals. But in all Jesus’ humanness, Peter was still able to recognise Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God.

Paul, however, never knew the human Jesus. He heard all the stories about what Jesus did, but he didn’t believe them. Paul started out as Saul of Tarsus, a bright and zealous Pharisee who was determined to see this heretical movement called “The Way” wiped out. But God had other plans for him. On the way to Damascus to continue his grand inquisition, Paul was struck blind by God and told to go wait for further instructions. He was later baptized, took the name Paul, and spent the rest of his life traveling the Roman Empire, spreading the gospel—to Jews and Gentiles alike. A huge chunk of the New Testament is written by Paul.

Yet Paul never knew the human Jesus. Paul only knew the cosmic Christ: the risen Jesus to whom all authority on heaven and earth had been given. While Peter went around telling stories about the time Jesus performed this miracle or told that parable, Paul went around speaking in high-minded philosophical rhetoric. He found Old Testament metaphors to describe how God’s wondrous purposes were being fulfilled. He would preach on how the salvation of the whole world was affected through Jesus, the one that God had raised to life. Paul’s understanding of Jesus was that of the divine, cosmic redeemer. When he writes to the Colossians, he spells out very clearly who he thinks Jesus was:

*“The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church ...in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him” (Colossians 1:15-19)*

When we compare these two founders of the Early Church, you could say that although both Peter and Paul saw Jesus Christ as “fully human, and fully God”. Peter leaned toward the “fully human” part, while Paul leaned toward the “fully God part.” It’s interesting that our United Church Song of Faith also clearly recognises both the human and the divine nature of Jesus.

There’s no question this creates tension. We can’t even begin to wrap our minds around the idea that someone could be both fully God and fully human. We can only stand in wonder and awe at how amazing Jesus is to be able to fully embody both of these seemingly contradictory things.

And that’s a reason for celebrating Reign of Christ Sunday. It is fitting that this celebration of Christ’s Reign is observed right before Advent, a time when we liturgically wait for the promised Messiah. The Jewish word “messiah,” and the Greek word “Christ,” both mean “anointed one,” and we have come to refer to Advent as a time of waiting for the expected king.

We are soon entering into the expectation of Advent. As we do, let us pause, before we get caught up in all the celebration of the season, and let us take time to answer Christ question:

“Who do you say I am?”