

WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM

At 9pm on the night of February 17, 1920 a young woman jumped 20 feet from a bridge into the freezing Landwehr Canal in Berlin, Germany. A policeman saw her and rescued her. He took her to a local hospital. She had on purse, no papers, no ID of any kind.

When she recovered, she refused to say who she was, where she lived, or where she worked. When police persisted, she pulled a blanket over her head and turned her face to the wall.

After 6 weeks she was sent to Dahldorf Mental Asylum, where she would live for the next two years, as Fraulein Unbekant, which means "Miss Unknown"- what we would call a Jane Doe. She was placed in ward with fourteen other women. Upon arrival she was 5'2" and 110 lbs. Medical examination revealed that her body was covered with scars. Her teeth were in poor condition. Seven or eight teeth were extracted by the asylum dentist.

Thus began one of the most enduring mysteries of the 20th century. When I was a younger man, I once read a book on disguise techniques. I don't know why I read it; I have varied reading tastes. Anyway, one of the premises of the book was, "You are who you say you are."

No one epitomizes that statement more than this woman- Miss Unknown. For over 60 years until her death, she maintained that she was one of the most famous people in the world. She claimed she was the Grand Duchess Anastasia Romanov- the youngest daughter of Russia's final Tsar, Nicholas II, who was executed by the Bolsheviks. She claimed, in fact, that she was the only member of the family to survive the execution. She was so convincing that even some of the surviving Romanovs believed her.

Eventually, she moved to the US and took the name Anna Anderson- later Anna Manahan after she got married. However, she never gave up her claim that she was Anastasia.

You are who you say you are. That is a typical modern way of thinking. How many of you have heard someone say that they need to find themselves? That is the way we are. We look inside ourselves for our identity.

In the Ancient Mediterranean world, they had a different point of view. You were not who you said you were. People did not engage in introspective soul searching to find their identity. The community established a person's identity through their reputation, lineage. And ethnic stereotyping. You see this in the scripture. For example, Titus 1:12 says that "Cretans are always liars". Cretans are people from the Island of Crete. This is an example of ethnic stereotyping.

So, in this story it's an important question Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do the people say that I am?" Jesus is not searching for his own self-identity. He isn't suffering an identity crisis. He's asking about his communal reputation.

The Disciples answered, "Some say John the Baptist and others Elijah and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets. And he said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter said, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.'

"Jesus said, 'Blessed are you Simon Bar Jonah, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father who is heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not overpower it. And I will give you the keys of 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.'"

Well, we know what Peter answered. But to many today- even in the church- Jesus is still an enigma. The mystery of the identity of Anna Anderson has been solved through the modern miracle of DNA testing. She was not Anastasia, but rather a Polish peasant woman named Franziska Schwarzkowska. But we can't identify Jesus through DNA testing. Even today the identity of Jesus rests in the testimony of the faithful and this book.

So, what's your answer? Who do you say he is? Is he John the Baptist, who came preaching a gospel of baptism of the repentance of sins and who called us back to faithfulness? Is he Elijah, who scripture says will come to herald the coming of the Lord? Or is he a prophet, who speaks a word from God?

Well, Jesus is not John the Baptist. Jesus does preach a gospel of repentance of sins, but more than that he forgives sins with God's authority. John doesn't do that. Jesus does call us back to God, but he tells us that he is the way, he is the truth and he is the life that leads back to God. That is something that John the Baptist couldn't do.

Also, Jesus is not Elijah. Elijah was prophet who spoke with the fire of the Holy Spirit, and he dared other Gods to contend with our God. Scripture tells us that Elijah would prepare us for the great and glorious day of the Lord.

Jesus, like Elijah, spoke with the fire of the Holy Spirit, but rather than denouncing other gods, but rather those who spoke in God's name yet with sin in their hearts. Also, instead of coming to prepare us for the day of the Lord, he brought that day. He declared the Kingdom was at hand. After his resurrection, he sent the Holy Spirit to us. Elijah couldn't do that.

What about a prophet? Is Jesus a prophet like Jeremiah? A prophet is one who speaks a word from God? Does Jesus do that?

Yes. Every word that Jesus speaks is from God, but more than that- Jesus is the word. He is the word made flesh, which dwelt among us.

So, who is this Jesus? Well, you've heard my testimony, but ultimately the decision to testify is up to you. If you believe as I do, that Jesus is the Christ, testifying that will bless you and your life. I know it has mine. What's your answer? Who do you say he is?