

WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

C.S. Lewis was a 20th century British writer and professor at both Oxford and Cambridge Universities. He is well-known for his Christian writings, especially books such as *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*. In 1952, C.S. Lewis published *Mere Christianity* which has become a classic of Christian apologetics, or the defense of Christian beliefs against objections. The book is actually a collection of three radio broadcasts Lewis made during World War II when he was teaching at Oxford.

In his book, C.S. Lewis writes, ““I am trying here to prevent anyone from saying the really foolish thing that people often say about [Jesus Christ]: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with a man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse.”¹

That, in a nutshell, is what is at stake in today's gospel story. In other words, the chief priests and the elders of the people ask Jesus in the temple, “Who do you think you are?” A quick search of that phrase indicates it usually means something like, “Why do you think you can lord it over people that way?” or “Why are you so arrogant?” There's a lot on the line that day in the temple, both for the religious leaders and for Jesus.

The chief priests and the elders of the people weren't the only people, or even the first people, to have questions about Jesus and his authority. When Jesus preached in his hometown of Nazareth, his neighbors “all spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, ‘Is not this Joseph's son? Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power? Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all this?’” (Luke 4:22; Matthew 13:55-56) And the hometown folks were offended.

That's not as bad as what his own family thought about Jesus at times. We are told “then he went home . . . when his family heard it, they

went out to restrain him, for people were saying, ‘He has gone out of his mind.’” Then the religious leaders showed up from Jerusalem and accused Jesus of being in cahoots with the Devil: “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.” (Mark 3:19b-22)

And, of course, there was Peter’s great confession of faith, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16) and the high priest’s question after Jesus had been arrested, “I put you under oath before the living God, tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.” (Matthew 26:63)

So, there you have it, exactly what C.S. Lewis was talking about: “Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse.”

The religious authorities challenged Jesus’ authority and asked him “Who do you think you are?” Remember the time Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” The answers were all over the map — “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” (Matthew 16:14) Of course, that’s exactly why the chief priests and the elders of the people were afraid of Jesus. They were afraid of the people, because the people regarded Jesus as a prophet.

As usual, Jesus answered the authorities’ question about authority with a question of his own: “What do you think about John’s baptism? Where did John get his authority?” The day before, Jesus had overturned the tables of the money changers in the temple. The next day, he turned the tables on these threatened chief priests and elders of the people. They tried to trap Jesus. If he said “My authority is from God” they could kill him for blasphemy. If he said “My authority is from the Devil” they could kill him. If he said “My authority is from myself” they could expose him as a fraud and discredit him.

But Jesus turned the question back on the religious authorities. When they mumbled under their breath, “We don’t know,” the bankruptcy of their authority was exposed. Two chapters later in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus denounces the scribes and Pharisees, not for what they were teaching, but for what they were doing and not doing. “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach.” (Matthew 23:1-3) In the temple that day, when his own authority was challenged by the religious authorities, Jesus threw it back in their faces: “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.” (Matthew 21:31-32)

Interestingly, maybe in a different tone of voice and with a different motivation, John himself asked Jesus the same kind of question. When John was in prison, he sent some of his disciples to ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” Instead of giving a simple Yes or No answer, Jesus said, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.” (Matthew 11:4-6)

The religious authorities wondered where Jesus’ authority came from and refused to recognize what was right in front of their noses, but the people knew what they were hearing and seeing. Again and again, we hear that the people “were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes . . . they glorified God, who had given such authority to human beings . . . ‘What is this? A new teaching — with authority!’” (Matthew 7:28; 9:8; Mark 1:27) Just as the tax collectors and prostitutes believed John and changed their minds and had their lives changed, some of the people who saw and heard what Jesus did and said changed their minds and had their lives changed.

Earlier, I didn’t finish the entire C.S. Lewis quote. Lewis wrote, “Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse.” Then he concluded, “You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come up with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that option open to us. He did not intend to.”²

The religious authorities who were threatened by Jesus’ authority tried to shut him up as a fool, they spit at him, and killed him as a demon. But this same Jesus, who is “the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being,” still says and does the things of God in your life and mine and in the world today. So we have to make our own choice, just as the crowds and the disciples and the tax collectors and the prostitutes and the religious authorities had to do.

And, if as C.S. Lewis says, we choose to “fall at his feet and call him Lord and God,” we need to take seriously what kind of authority Jesus has in our lives. So, let me ask you the question of the day: “Who do you think **you** are?” Let me share these questions and answers from the Children’s Catechism of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.):

1. Who are you? I am a child of God.
2. What does it mean to be a child of God? That I belong to God, who loves me.
3. What makes you a child of God? Grace — God’s free gift of love that I do not deserve and cannot earn.

4. Don't you have to be good for God to love you? No. God loves me in spite of all I do wrong.

5. How do you thank God for this gift of love? I promise to love and trust God with all my heart.

6. How do you love God? By worshipping God, by loving others, and by respecting what God has created.

Who do you think you are? "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God . . . By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments." (1 John 5:1-3)

"And they'll know we are Christian by our love, by our love; yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love."

Let us pray: Merciful God, you sent your Son, Jesus Christ, to show us a different way to live, the way of deep humility and obedience. Give us courage to follow faithfully, and with integrity, with actions that bear witness to the words we speak, so that our lives will bring glory and honor to you. Amen.

NOTES

¹C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity at www.goodreads.com/quotes.

²Ibid.