

WHO IS HE?

Actor Rex Harrison and his wife Elizabeth were dining with a few friends at the "21" club. While they were preparing to order, as happens so often with actors, a handsome young man got up from a nearby table and came over to meet them. He said, "We just got in on the last flight. You've given me so much pleasure through the years, Mr. Harrison; I just had to come over to thank you."

Harrison nodded his head graciously and returned his attention to the wine list as soon as the young man had left. "What an odd fellow," Rex said later. "I don't know why he made such a fuss over his last flight. I came in on the last flight from London, but I don't go on about IT, do I?" His wife replied, "Rex that was James Lovell. He just came back from flying around the moon." Rex Harrison was embarrassed of course. If he had known who he was talking to, he might have accorded him more respect. But he shouldn't feel too bad about not recognizing James Lovell. People failed to recognize Jesus. Even those closest to him missed the whole point of his ministry until after he had died and risen again.

Once when Jesus and his disciples were traveling through Caesarea Philippi, on their way towards Jerusalem, Jesus paused to give his disciples what today might call a reality check. "Who do people say that I am?" he asked them. "They say you are John the Baptist," one of them replied. Someone else said, "Elijah," while others said that he was seen as one of the prophets. But then Jesus asked, "But what do you think? Who do you say that I am?" Now that is an interesting question. After being with him for so long, did Jesus really believe that his own disciples were not sure who he was? Or was he testing them?

It is true that even celebrities are hard to recognize sometimes. Like Billy Graham. He had just gotten back from Hawaii, and was driving home with one of his associates. But somehow they became separated at a gas station. It was well past dark, and not knowing what else to do, Graham walked to a nearby 24-hour café and ordered soup, hoping that his friend would come looking for him. The other people in the café were all locals, and they watched Graham suspiciously. It was nearly the middle the middle of winter, and he was the only one there with a tie and a tan.

After he had finished eating Dr. Graham asked the cashier if there was a taxi service in town. There wasn't, but there was a man who sometimes drove people around for a small fee. Graham called him, and he agreed to drive him the one-hundred miles to his destination. The driver was rather suspicious of Graham. Every time a car approached them from the opposite direction, this well dressed stranger would watch it as long as he could, hoping, of course to spot his associate, though the driver could not know that. When they got to their destination, they went to check Graham into a motel. The night manager recognized the world-famous evangelist. As you might imagine, the driver was quite surprised to learn the identity of his mysterious passenger. He confessed to Graham that he actually thought Graham was a fugitive hunted by the police, the way he had been surveying all the passing cars.

There are a lot of people who would not recognize Billy Graham. But surely his twelve closest aides would know him pretty well. Yet Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you think that I am?" I wonder how quickly the disciples answered this question. After all, it's always easier to say what others think than to say what we believe. It's always easier to answer such a question by saying "well my grandmother believed this, or my mother always taught this, or my pastor once said thus." It can sometimes be very difficult to voice our own opinions. Maybe that is why Jesus asked the question, "Who do YOU say that I am?" It is vital for every disciple of Christ to answer this critical question for him or herself: WHO IS JESUS TO YOU? This is the most important question in our lives. It will tell us how intense our faith really is. If Jesus was merely a good teacher, or an itinerant healer, then it would be easy to give him only half an ear. But if he is something more than this, if Jesus is truly the very revelation of God Himself, then we are going to have to take him very, very seriously.

It is said that Saint Teresa, when she was over 40 and had been in a convent for years, one day noticed a picture depicting the Lord being scourged. She had seen this same picture hundreds of times before but in that particular moment of revelation she saw it as she had never seen it before. She saw God suffering, suffering for love of her. She fell to her knees, sobbing in pain and wonder, and when she arose, she arose a new soul. This was the great divide in her life, the experience that changed everything. She said that she arose with a sense of

unpayable debt. That happens when people discover who Jesus really is. For them personally Jesus asked but who do you say that I am?

One of the disciples, Peter, had the right answer. He said You are the Messiah! How does that sound to you? Is that how you would have answered Jesus' question? Can you say with an honest and open heart, without reservation, that Jesus is the anointed one of God? It was when Peter said that Jesus was the Messiah that Jesus revealed to the disciples the plan for his ministry on Earth. He spoke plainly, and very clearly: "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again." Peter the man who had just recognized Jesus as the Messiah, was shocked by these words, and he took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. Now rebuke is a harsh word that we don't use much anymore. It basically means that Peter scolded Jesus, and told him he was wrong. It was almost as if he were saying, "Look Jesus, enough of this nonsense. Let me tell you who you are!" And that brings us to another point that we must recognize today: We must accept Christ on His terms, not ours!!!

Joni tada, whose writings and story have become such an inspiration to so many, felt her whole world collapse when she became a quadriplegic from a diving accident at the age of seventeen. She found her condition impossible to reconcile with a loving God. And for three years after the accident she was bitter and questioning. One night one of Joni's closest friends was sitting with her and trying to help her through her despair. Something must have inspired her that evening, because all at once she said, "Joni, Jesus knows exactly how you feel. You aren't alone in this. He was paralyzed too. Remember how he was nailed to the cross? His back was raw from being beaten, and he must have yearned for a way to move or redistribute his weight. But he couldn't. He was paralyzed by the nails, unable to move." That was a moment of revelation for Joni. After that she was no longer angry with God, and she felt him become incredibly close to her.

The basic nature of faith is that we accept Christ on his terms, not ours. Life is difficult, and too often we think that God ought to make our lives better for us. And in that, we are just like Simon Peter. We think we know best how God should go about his business. But Peter would soon discover that we can't do this. Jesus said to his friend, Peter, "Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind on the world, and not on the

divine.” Christ was telling Peter, rather bluntly, that he needed to get back in line, for he was trying to put himself above God. Each of us must decide for himself or herself who Christ is, and, if we proclaim him as divine, we must do so on his terms, not ours. And this leaves us with one final decision: ARE WE GOING TO LIVE FOR OURSELVES, OR WILL WE LIVE FOR HIM?

Shortly after this exchange with his disciples, Jesus spoke to the crowd that was following them on the same subject. He spoke about what it means to be a follower. “If any want to become my followers, they must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Now this is a very difficult thing for us to do. It is difficult because it goes against everything that our culture tells us is important. From the time we were toddlers we have heard, “be your own person, strive to be number one, you deserve the best.” And this has led us into all sorts of problems with people taking unfair advantage of others for their own personal gain. Allow the words of Jesus to challenge you: “What will it profit you to gain the whole world and forfeit your life?” Jesus calls us to a decision: will we live for ourselves, or will we live for him?

One person who lives for Jesus is Annie Howard. She volunteers her time at the Kentucky Correctional Institute for Women. When she arrives at the prison each day, she is usually greeted warmly by a number of the inmates who want to share the events of their lives. She walks through the prison, waving and chatting. She gives encouragement to any who are having problems. She visits the chapel, and helps in the weekly bible study. She talks with two other volunteers, Linda and Judy. Both of these women are grateful to Annie for getting them involved in such fulfilling ministry. They find it to be both rewarding and sad that the women in the prison are more excited by their ministry than the members of their own church are. These wonderful volunteers have seen many women accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior while in prison. Annie claims that her success lies in the fact that the women in the prison know that she represents Christ. His love works through her. Instead of giving them just words, she lets them see Christ’s love in action. And that love is making a difference in their lives. When we give ourselves to others, when we show others Christ-like love, we are doing what Jesus wants us to do. This is what following Christ is all about.

Who is Jesus to you? Is he your savior? Is he the Messiah, and the Son of God? Or is he just someone to hear about on the weekend? The choice is yours. But Jesus is waiting for us to accept him on his terms, and to follow his lead. Will you live only for yourself or will you live for him?