

*A sermon given on Sunday, August 21, 2011
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio,
by the Reverend Alan M. Gates, Rector*

Questioning the Rock

When is a question not just a question?

I've been reading about the late Jim Henson, creator of the Muppets, who would have been 75 next month. In the 1960's, one of Henson's earliest Muppet projects was a series of commercials for the Wilkins Coffee company. In the first Wilkins ad, a Muppet named Wilkins (who has a voice like Kermit the Frog) is standing behind a cannon. Another Muppet named Wontkins (who has a voice like the dog Rowlf) is in front of its barrel. Wilkins asks, "What do you think of Wilkins Coffee?" and Wontkins replies gruffly, "Never tasted it!" Whereupon Wilkins fires the cannon, blasts Wontkins away, and then turns the cannon directly toward the viewer, ending the ad with, "Now, what do *you* think of Wilkins?"

When is a question not just a question? When it's a threat!

The story is told of three clergy – a Lutheran, a Roman Catholic, and an Episcopalian – arriving simultaneously at the Pearly Gates. It is St. Peter's day off, so Jesus himself is administering the entrance exam. "The question is simple," he says. "Who do you say that I am?"

Knowing that Scripture is the pre-eminent authority, the Lutheran steps forward and begins, "The Bible says that ..." -- but Jesus interrupts. "I know what the Bible says; who do *you* say that I am?" The Lutheran is speechless, and after a moment, he falls through a trap door, headed for That Other Place.

The Catholic steps forward. Knowing that Tradition is the pre-eminent authority, he begins, "The Pope says that ..." – but Jesus interrupts. "I don't care what the Pope says; who do *you* say that I am?" "Surely the Holy Father ..." begins the priest again, as the trap door opens and he falls towards That Other Place.

Jesus turns to the Episcopal priest and asks, "Who do you say that I am?" The Episcopalian replies, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!" Then, just as Jesus smiled and gestured for the Pearly Gates to be opened, the broad-minded Episcopalian continues, "but then, on the other hand ..."

When is a question not just a question? When it's a test!

Today's Gospel [Mt 16:13-20], asks the familiar question: *Who do you say that I am?* Jesus asks first who the general populace imagines the Messiah to be. And then he makes the question personal: "Who do you say that I am?" So, what's going on here?

In the story of the three clergy at the Pearly Gates, Jesus is administering a test, an entrance exam, the results of which will determine one's direction forward.

For some of us it congers up the image of Monty Python's Keeper at the Bridge of Death, questioning Arthur and his companions.

KEEPER: *What is your favorite color?*

LAUNCELOT: Blue.

KEEPER: Right! Off you go.

...

KEEPER: *What is the capital of Assyria?*

ROBIN: I don't know that! *Auuuuuuuuugh!*

The question is a test, and a significant one at that!

"Who do you say that I am?" asks Jesus. For many it may seem that the question in today's Gospel is just such a test, a pop quiz. You learn the right answer, you give the right answer – and off you go with a passing grade and a blessing. But of course, if you do not have the right answer, you have faced not only a test, but a threat. Like the Muppet Wilkins, posing his question from behind a loaded cannon, some would pose Jesus' question, certain that a wrong answer warrants little short of annihilation. "Who is Jesus?" You had better answer correctly, for if your Christology is maladjusted, you are surely condemned.

Is that what is going on in today's Gospel reading? Is that what this passage is about? Is Jesus administering a doctrinal test to Peter – one with an implicit threat of condemnation lurking just behind? To answer the question, let's think about Peter, who is at the center of this Gospel moment. In this passage, Peter is moved to confess Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of the living God. And in response, Jesus assures Peter of his blessing:

"Blessed are you!" says Jesus, " ... for you are Peter, whose name means Rock, and on the Rock-solid base of your faith I will build my church, against which not Hell itself will be able to prevail!" That is Peter – the Rock! But just what kind of Rock is he?

If you were in church two weeks ago, you'll recall hearing another story, also from Matthew [14:22-33], just two chapters earlier. Peter is in a boat. Jesus is out on the water, and Peter gets out of the boat and walks towards him – but then Peter doubts himself, doubts Jesus maybe ... and he starts to sink. That's what rocks do, you know. They sink. Peter the Rock sinks, and cries out in fear. And Jesus says, "Oh, you of little faith!"

Or here's another story. It comes just after today's passage in Matthew, within the very same chapter; you'll hear it next week. [Mt 16:21-28] Jesus is explaining to the disciples that he is going to have to go to Jerusalem to die, in order to be raised. But Peter doesn't want to hear such a thing, doesn't want to contemplate such distress. And Peter says, "God forbid, Lord. We won't allow it!" And Jesus says, "Get behind me Satan! You are a stumbling block to me!" That's what rocks do, you know. They trip us up. They cause us to stumble. Five verses! Within the span of five verses, from this week's Gospel to next week's, Peter goes from "Blessed are you! You are the Rock on which I'll build my church" – to – "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block!"

So what kind of Rock is Peter? A Rock that sinks with doubt and despair? Yes. A solid Rock and basis for Faith? Yes. A stumbling block Rock, getting it completely wrong? Yes, of course! Peter is all these things. At different moments, and to different degrees, Peter is now right, now wrong; now certain, now doubting;

now clear-thinking, now muddled. And Jesus surely knows all this of Peter, because Jesus knows it of every human creature that ever was or ever will be. And because Jesus surely knows this of Peter, I am therefore certain that Jesus' question to Peter cannot possibly be either a test or a threat, with salvation or damnation hanging in the balance. "Who do you say that I am?" It's not a test, it's not a threat – it's an invitation. It's an invitation for Peter and for you and for me. An invitation delivered again and again and again, with the hope each time that we will answer as Peter did on this occasion – You are the Messiah. Because in the moment when we are clear about Jesus' identity, then we will also be clear about our own identity. That is what Jesus really wants to know. He knows fully well who he is; he doesn't need us to tell him that. What he wants to know, and wants us to know, is who we are. And who he hopes we are is disciples of Jesus, followers of Christ, children of God – striving to live as he lived, to serve as he served, to be sacrificers-of-self as was he.

Over and over again, Jesus has told Peter just who Jesus is: I am the one who can calm your storms. I am the one who expects you to forgive not seven but seventy-seven times. I am the one who will love you even after you deny me three times. I am the one who wants you to feed my sheep. When Jesus asks Peter (and us) who we say that he is, I suggest it is not a test to identify him; it is an invitation to serve him. And when we do – on the good days when we, like Peter, get it right – then are we a part of the Church's One Foundation, the Rock, which is the very Body of Christ.

When is a question not just a question? When it's an invitation.

Every week in our liturgy we recite one or the other of the church's historic Creeds – the Nicene or Apostles' Creed. They are, of course, doctrinal statements, confessions of faith, as was Peter's response: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God."

But I wonder, how would our perspective on the Creeds shift if we were to think of them each Sunday not only as the answer to a doctrinal question, and not as a test to determine orthodoxy or heresy – but rather as an invitation? An invitation to live as though we mean what we are saying. What if we saw the Creed as an invitation to make a statement not only about Jesus' identity, but about our own?

"We believe in one God the Father, ... maker of heaven and earth." If that is so, am I relating to the whole earth as God's creation, and am I treating God with the immeasurable gratitude due to the One who gave me life? Am I, really?

"We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ..." If that is so, am I truly conforming to his pattern of life, and genuinely loving my neighbor as myself? Am I, really?

"We believe in the Holy Spirit, ... who proceeds from the Father ..." If that is so, do I let the Holy Spirit work through me, following that Spirit's truest nudgings and urgings? Do I, really?

What if the Creed were an invitation to be and to do these things, which issue from what we are affirming.

"Who do you say that I am?" asks Jesus. Keep on answering the question – not as a test or a threat, but as an invitation and a promise.