

September 13, 2009

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 19b)

Mark 8:27-38

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

The Rev'd Geoffrey M. St.J. Hoare, rector

On March 24, 1820 in Putnam County, New York, a baby girl was born to a poor couple called John and Mercy Crosby. When she was six weeks old she caught a cold and developed inflammation of the eyes. The family doctor was not available for some reason and the person who came in his place recommended applying mustard plasters to the little girl's eyes, --essentially a poultice of mustard seed on a cloth. The mustard and its oils are not supposed to come in contact with the skin and should not be used for long periods of time. Somehow when this treatment was used on John and Mercy's daughter it caused her to become blind. John Crosby died a few months later and little Frances Jane was raised by her mother and grandmother in fine Methodist traditions. Later in life Fanny, as she was known became an advocate for the blind and a teacher at the New York Institute she had herself attended. It was there she had learned the guitar and piano, skills that became essential for her avocation. She was a prolific writer of hymns, in fact so much so that she often used pseudonyms because hymnal editors did not want too many hymns from the same author in a hymnal. You would recognize some of them I suspect, but none more so than "*Blessed Assurance*" with a tune by her friend from church, Phoebe Knapp. Fanny Crosby died in 1902.

I became interested in Fanny Crosby as a result of being given a most marvelous present. It is called *Goodbye Babylon* and is a collection of five CDs of vintage, mostly Southern hymns recorded from the turn of the century to the late 1950s. It includes some shape note singing and songs by the likes of The Georgia Peach, Bessie Johnson's Sanctified Singers, The Tennessee Mountain Boys and Blind Mamie Forehand. You get the idea. (There is one additional disc of recorded sermons from the same period.)¹ In a nice symmetry of fate a Texan woman in the holiness tradition who had been born blind started recording gospel songs. She was billed as Arizona Dranes and believed to be of both African-American and Mexican descent. She had a strong nasal voice and made a recording in Chicago in 1928, but she called this old hymn *Blessed Assurance* by a new name. She recorded it as *He is my Story*. "He is my story, he is my song. Sweetly I praise him all the day long..."

And so gospel music has answered the question of Caesarea Philippi, the turning point of Mark's *Gospel*, in which Jesus asks his disciples the question of the ages: "Who do you say that I am?" 'He is our story' is a pretty good answer. Biblical scholarship quite rightly makes its focus the meaning of the title 'Messiah' or 'Christ'. As a consequence, much preaching has made its focus

¹ <http://dust-digital.com/goodbye-babylon.html>

calling us to right *belief* about Jesus. That scholarship and preaching becomes just part of the whole story of the people of God: the story of Israel, the story the Church and most of all the story of Jesus, with all its blind alleys, laws and proverbs psalms and prophecy that make up the whole narrative, the story.

We have had a group meeting diligently for over a year now to help us think strategically about our common ministry in years to come. One of the themes of our conversations has been around how diversity is all very well, --in fact essential-- for our understanding of and growth in the Faith, but it leads us to ask and keep asking what holds us together. In this community while we all say the creeds, we have a wide spectrum of *belief*, opinion about doctrines and teachings as we understand them and so on. Where I find myself in answering the question as to what holds us together is that we are held together by our variety of responses to the story of Jesus. The story is the most important thing we have in common. We also bind ourselves together by choice when we commit to allowing this story of what really matters to shape our lives. The story is one of good news. It is the proclamation of peace with justice founded in love, a story of grace, the forgiveness of sin and the possibility of newness of life. Our story is about the possibility of living with absolute integrity in this world. It is the story of Jesus, his antecedents and consequence. Every one of the wonderful ministries that we celebrate this day is, --when you come right down to it-- a response to the story we hold in common and a manifestation of the community of Jesus to which we are bound by choice and commitment.

My own response to the story at this point in my life takes me a little further, and I hope that this is also true for many of you. My own response to the story leads me to the person of Jesus. We meet Jesus in the ways we tell the story around this Table who we meet around this table, seeking transformation as we take the very essence of Jesus' fully integrated and transforming life into our own. This Holy Communion is not so much a grim denial of self as it is a hopeful seeking of our true selves. It denying ourselves in order to follow a Man who makes manifest the ground of our being and the source of all that is good and true and beautiful and holy. He becomes our story, --a story we must both live and tell in positive forthright confident ways to a world in need.

And so the old song is a pretty good answer for us to Jesus' question of those who would follow him: "Who do you say that I am?"

Out from the darkness He brought me
 Up to the kingdom of love
 Into his glorious presence
 Sheltering from above
 All other love and salvation
 Honor and praise to His name.
 He is my song and my story.
 Bless His name.

He is my story, He is my song
Sweetly I praise Him all the day long

As ever, let us respond to the gospel in silenced and in prayer, hearing the question posed to us: “Who do *you* say that I am?”