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When we meet someone for the first time our conversation often begins with a question. It’s not always the same question, but it usually homes in on the other person’s identity.

“Where are you from?”, “What brings you here?”, “What’s your name?”, “What do you do for a living?”, “What team do you support?”

In most situations; such questions are asked sincerely. We want to put each another a ease establish a rapport by identifying common characteristics or shared interests.

Yet very similar questions can be intimidating when asked in a different context; at border controls, job interviews, the benefits office, making on-line applications, applying for a mortgage.

The context in which a question is asked always has a bearing on its significance. And the perceived intentions of the questioner influence the manner of our response.

So, let’s take a look at the context and intentions for when Jesus asked the question: “Who do people say the Son of Man is?”

The first thing to note is that Jesus is asking a question about his own identity. Is he asking it because he is unsure of the answer? Perhaps. Is he intrigued to know what might be being said about him behind his back or in different circles? Maybe.

Or is he asking a rhetorical question to allow those closest to him to give voice to their emerging sense of who he is? Which is made clearer with the follow up question: “Who do you say I am?”

Given the enthusiasm with which Jesus responds to Peter’s answer; it seems that Jesus was eager to know what his friends had perceived after spending a great deal of time in his company; eating, praying, and fishing with him; listening to parables, witnessing the healing miracles.

And so, when Peter answers, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”, Jesus doesn’t hesitate to affirm him. He goes further, saying that he and the Apostles are to be sharers in the oversight of God’s kingdom; custodians of the life of grace and sentinels of God’s healing mercy.

Significance is also found in *where* Jesus chose to ask this question. Caesarea Philippi is one of my favorite biblical locations. It lies in the shadow of Mount Hermon. Today, despite the bustle that come with coachloads of tourists and pilgrims, it can be a tranquil and picturesque spot.

Its primary significance comes from it being one of the major sources of the River Jordan. This probably led to it being regarded also as a sacred site. The Canaanite prophets of Baal established it as a shrine. In turn the Greeks and then Romans built temples here, primarily to the god Pan.

So it was an ideal place for Jesus to tease out his proteges’ budding faith. He could have asked these questions in Jerusalem where the disciples would have been surrounded by the atmosphere, symbols and people who shared their Jewish identity. Instead he chose a place where there were plenty of options on the table, a diversity of religious and philosophical perspectives. Not unlike our own day.

On this occasion Peter’s faith gained an A+; but like our own faith it was to wax and wane in different circumstances and under various challenges until Peter gave his final testimony at his martyrdom.

Living our own lives in company with Jesus, sitting metaphorically at his feet, sharing at the table of the Eucharist and interceding day by day for God’s kingdom to hold sway on earth; we find ourselves facing similar questions.

Our answers can be affected by where we are, by who asks the question.

Our hope is that our answers will help us discover the grace, courage and audacity to proclaim Jesus, this unfathomable person to be our Christ too.

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