

*A sermon for the Parish of the Epiphany in Winchester, Massachusetts, preached by the Reverend Thomas James Brown on 13 September 2009, his first Sunday as rector, based upon Mark 8:27-38.*

You've probably heard the old joke about the new rector. On her first Sunday morning at the church, a venerable parish with a rich history, she was getting ready in the sacristy. Her sermon was prepared. She was on her mark and she was set. The acolytes and the altar guild members were there of course, and the procession was about to form. The priest turned her microphone on, and just then, an established patriarch of the parish walked in, went right up to her, and in a booming voice said, "Young lady, you must be terribly nervous." The priest nodded affirmatively, and forgetting that the mike was on she said, "But I'm not as nervous as the search committee!"

I'm not sure I'm on my mark yet, and I know for certain that I'm not set, but we're on our way together, nonetheless. It's wonderful to be with you, finally, and to see with my own eyes the beauty of this holy space filled with you, the people of God called to be the parish of the Epiphany. What a blessing to feel anticipation giving way to actual experience.

We're filled with questions. We hear Jesus asking the disciples who he is. You have questions about me, and of course, I have questions about you. Take a moment to consider all the questions you have, the ones you think I might be asking, and the one Jesus poses: Who do you say that I am?

It was only a little more than three months ago, June 1st. The lunch was prepared and laid out on the table in the Suter Room. A few members of the search committee were there. Introductions all around and some general questions, then a tour. I was chomping at the bit to see the nave. Suzanne Owayda led the way. Somebody said "go ahead, step into the pulpit." I declined lest doing so would jinx it. At some point that day I was given Lane McGovern's book, *An Anthology of Epiphany History*. I tucked it away, but that evening, long after the dinner and the formal interviews, restless and keyed up, I read it front to back.

Many of you were here on April 10th 1988, when Mr. Ellison, your 6th rector, came back to preach for your centennial celebration. Among his recollections was the old story of a supply priest, Angus Dun, who preached here often during World War I while your then rector was in Europe serving in the army. Mr. Dun, who would later become the presiding bishop, described Epiphany as "the most beautiful middle-sized church in America." And on that morning in 1988, Jack Ellison added, "And it is!" But a beautiful building doesn't make a beautiful church; and so I'm eager to experience the spiritual beauty that surely makes your life far greater than the majesty of this edifice.

Let me venture some guesses about the questions you have. Is he going to fit with us? Will I be able to talk with him about a struggle or a question? Will he be the one to officiate at my child's baptism, my adult daughter's wedding, or my own funeral? There are other questions as well, I suspect. Is he competent? Will he support the staff? Is he a control freak who will micro manage everything, or so hands-off as to make me think he's disengaged? Will he preach and teach so that my faith is enlivened and challenged? Will he be a person of prayer?

Let me answer a few of them. First, I am ready to listen to you, and to learn from you. Over time I hope you'll discover in me one who loves you, and at that a priest and a friend who will love you fiercely. There will come a time, I trust, when you'll experience me leading you, probably in some unfamiliar or unwanted territories, but my prayer is that when that occurs you'll already know that I've listened to you, and learned from you, and that I've genuinely come to love you.

What of me? I'm a passionate follower of Jesus; relatively conservative liturgically; a little old-fashioned in the manners department; fairly irreverent in my humor; a sinner of God's own redeeming; a person who is working toward tithing 10% of my income, and who might actually get there one day. I work hard, but working too much, or defining myself by what I do or what I've accomplished, moves me farther instead of closer to God. I love hymns, and can pray as deeply with a hymnal as I can with the Prayer Book and the Bible. I'm not afraid to apologize, and I'm open to learning more truth from God and from you. And even though I'm an extrovert, I relish time away on the Saint Lawrence River; I covet a Grady-White boat; I can't wait to discover Boston; and I promise to become a Red Sox fan.

Who are you? Who am I? Those are good questions, but they're not *the* question. The question is the one Jesus asks: Who do people say that I am? The disciples' answers run the gamut. Some say you're your cousin, John; others say you're Elijah, the prophet who was to get the people back with God. Then Jesus moves from broad brushstrokes to a very fine one, and asks, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter blurts it out: You are the Messiah!" Messiah, Christ in the Greek, is a Hebrew term meaning "anointed one."

Like lightning over the Saint Lawrence River, the question Jesus asks grabs our attention. Fully human and fully divine has been one of our responses over the centuries. That rhythm is reflected in this interchange, as a very human question is posed from human curiosity, by Jesus, and the divine response is offered by the very human Peter. He's willing, this Messiah, to be vulnerable, to demonstrate his Messiahship not in acts of power, but in acts of vulnerable love—holding a child in his arms, conversing with a prostitute, sharing a meal with a tax collector, demonstrating his humanity and his divinity by asking simple questions: Who am I? Who are you? Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, tomorrow, the Bible says, but the context is ever-changing, and the needs are ever-developing. We need only look into our loved ones eyes, or into the mirror, or read Lane McGovern's history of this parish, and what do we see and read? That who Jesus is isn't always so clear. We can't overlay our experience to get the answer we seek, who do we want him to be, but rather we connect our experiences to get the answer we need, the answer that will transform, make us new, and be so far-reaching as to heal the world. We shall always ask questions of one another. And, in the end, Jesus will ask *the* question of us. On some days the answer will be brother and friend. On others it will be way and truth and life. On others it will be divine companion, teacher, physician, savior.

And so, my new sisters and brothers, we shall ask questions. So profound that they'll erase all sentimentality, and Jesus himself will go on ahead of us, himself curious, and we'll query him just as intently.

All praise to God, yesterday, today, and tomorrow.