SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, August 23, 2026 **Festal Eucharist**
The Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost 11:00 am

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Dr. Alison Turner
on
Matthew 16:13-20

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Who Do You Say That I Am?

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Many years ago, I had a Parish priest who loved to travel.

We all knew that we would hear of his latest holidays on return in his sermons (just as the Rector decided to share some of his own holiday photos in the weekly news this week!). I cannot recall the content of his preaching, but I do remember his love of visual aids including, one time, taking a full-size canoe into the pulpit on return from a recent outdoors adventure. While I have no intention of replicating that here, I do wish to share some images from my travels – and would love to hear of yours, maybe after mass during coffee hour.

Like many of you, I love visiting places of natural beauty as well as places of worship, and cathedrals and churches are a regular starting point for me on visiting a new city or town. I love to admire the architecture and the history. And if there's a gift shop...well, that is simply a bonus (though my husband doesn't always agree!).

I also love looking at the entries in the visitors books and the prayers on the bulletin board, echoing the concerns of the local people; leaflets sharing what's on, the details of various ministries, music, programs, and the images that reflect what faith means to those people building a beloved community rooted in that place. We may all believe the same, but their faith is rooted in a particular place and in a particular way.

Many of you know I have just returned from my first visit to Iceland, where both the varied and awe-inspiring landscape made a deep impression on me. That beautiful landscape was reflected in the architecture of the *Hallgrímskirkj* created from concrete hexagonal columns that echo the landscape itself – the basalt columns, created by volcanic rock, that crystalized when they hit the ice above. It is architecture that does not sit apart from creation, but seems to rise out of it. And in doing so, it speaks of its own theology: of awe, endurance, and the sense of something 'wonderful' which, together with its equally awe-inspiring organ- immediately speaks of a belief that God is to be worshipped and adored.

The church dominates the skyline. You cannot miss it. Your eyes are drawn upwards to something greater than one's self.

On another occasion, and in a completely different place, I remember visiting my friend Annie who was teaching at the time in Bangkok, Thailand. I recall being moved by the sight of the large great golden Christ in the Church of the Redeemer in Bangkok with Christ lifted high, radiant, majestic. Not unlike the gilded figures of surrounding temples. There, gold, light, and scale spoke of transcendence and the glory of the Resurrected Lord whose facial features remained unmistakably Thai. It was Christ received, reimagined, and proclaimed within a particular culture in glory and majesty. In a similar way, it contrasts with the image of the Christ Child of the Metropolitan Cathedral of Christ the King in Mexico City, who was dressed in the soccer shirt of the Mexican national team during the recent world cup.

Theologian Vincent Donovan once explored the theme of *inculturation*: where the physical and cultural identity of a given group was not abstract, but embodied in cultural expressions and images that depict the Gospel taking flesh within particular peoples, languages, places, and histories. And so, Christ is not only translated into cultures – he is encountered *within* them. They reveal what a people believe about Jesus – and sometimes what we believe about ourselves.

The golden Christ lifts our eyes to majesty.

The Christ child in a football shirt draws us into his vulnerability.

King and child; glory and weakness; transcendence and intimacy.

Our Christian faith insists that we must hold them together.

The eternal Word and the human Jesus;

The Lord of glory and the servant who washes feet.

The crucified one and the risen Lord.

One Christ – fully God, fully human, for all people, in every place, at every time. As we shall proclaim in a few months' time: Emmanuel – God with us.

And that is exactly where today's Gospel takes us.

"Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

The disciples report the opinions of others.

Asking questions throughout the gospels is Jesus' pedagogical and preaching style. He does this not so much as to test knowledge, but to draw people into encounter with him and to go deeper.

"But who do you say that I am?"

That small word **you,** changes everything.

It moves us from observation to participation; from second-hand knowledge or indoctrination about God to a personal encounter with him by knowing who Jesus is in relation to **me.**

Peter answers:

"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

It is a magnificent confession.

The same Peter who will misunderstand, resist, and even deny Jesus will, nevertheless, remain unconditionally faithful to him at the end.

Perhaps that gives us hope in the fragility of our own confession of faith.

Throughout our lifetime, we will regularly be confronted by this question of the Lord: "Who do **you** say that I am?" The question itself does not remain static; it unfolds within us over time. For Jesus meets us differently at different times and in different places during our lives. And, as he does so, so the image we have of him in our head and heart may change as he draws us ever deeper into a loving relationship with God the Father.

That is why today's Gospel is so intimate.

Jesus is not speaking into the distance.

He is speaking directly to us.

And the question is no longer abstract.

It becomes personal: **Who am I to you?**

So, our response to the question *"Who do **you** say that I am?"*

changes from belief to discipleship; where faith comes to life.

So, whenever you travel. or recall your own travels, visit the churches.

Look at the architecture.

Notice the images.

Read the prayers.

And when you return home, look again.

Look at the people around you.

Because across every place and generation, the question remains the same:

Who is Jesus?

And perhaps more importantly, he is still asking:

Who do you say that I am?

And the answer, finally, is not only spoken, it is lived.
