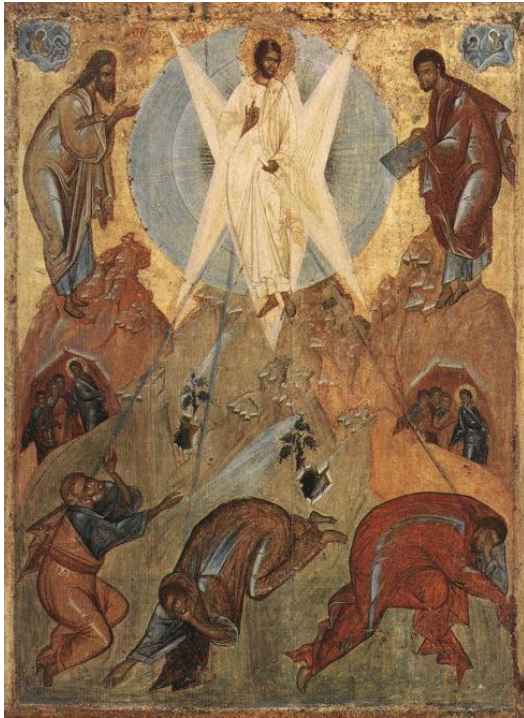


Jesus Discloses Himself as the Christ (1)

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.'

Matthew 16.13-16



In each of the Gospels written by Matthew, Mark, and Luke, there comes a point – a mid-point in the narrative: a moment of summary and intensification of focus – where Jesus asks his disciples, ‘Who is it that people say that I am?’ In *Matthew’s* version of the Gospel, we reach that point in the text which is given for us this week. The same question exists, of course, in *John’s* Gospel, but its shape and plan is very distinct in comparison with the other three, which are similar in shape and character, although with different emphases, reflecting the different

interests of the authors themselves. But the question remains the same:

‘Who do people say that I am?’

It is a question directed as much to us, the readers, as it is to the disciples themselves: having spent some considerable time *watching* Jesus and *listening* to him, hearing his preaching about the *kingdom of God* and his explanation of the meaning of *the Law and the Prophets* – what do we think the *significance* of all this really is?

It turns out that there is quite a wide variety of opinion about this question. Some people relate Jesus’ own life and witness to that of *John the Baptist* – a dynamic preacher of the need for us to take responsibility for ourselves, repent, and start again, this time talking the precepts of our faith much more seriously – being converted to the call of God upon us, but to do so within the context of existing Jewish faith and custom. In this sense, we can see that Jesus is compelling as a religious teacher and guide.

Others think that Jesus is re-articulating the *testimony of the prophets*, drawing their own words from the past (sometimes quite a long-distant past) and making them directly relevant to life as it is experienced *today*. In a slightly different sense than with John the Baptist, this represents a *reawakening* of the faith of the past, and a kind of *moral and spiritual renewal*. It is because he had been taken up into heaven in a fiery chariot instead of dying a natural death here on earth (2 Kings 2.9-12), that devout Jews anticipated the ultimate return to earth of Elijah himself – so the question is not an unreasonable one: is Jesus, in effect, the new Elijah, through whom the prophetic word will now be *made complete*?

Either of these possibilities would be *perfectly reasonable*. They are obvious and sensible things for people to think about Jesus. But the *disciples* – those who have not simply heard Jesus' teaching or witnessed his demeanour in the flesh, but who have spent *serious time* with him, and given his words the *deepest of consideration* – they are not persuaded that Jesus is simply someone new in the existing line of prophets. He is, in fact, *different* from a prophet. The disciples – here represented by Peter, their leader – begin to recognise that in Jesus they do not only hear witness to the things of God, but catch a glimpse of the *Presence of God* itself more directly. Jesus is *more* than a prophet – but, instead, the bearer of the Presence of God – hence 'the anointed one', the *Christ*; or, in Jewish terminology, 'the *Messiah*'. It is their experience that in Jesus Christ they have not only *heard* about God, but *encountered God directly*. So Peter says – at this pivotal mid-point of the Gospel, the point after which we shall see more and more signs that this is indeed true:

'You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.'

It is not hyperbole. It is not wishful thinking. It is the *rational response* to something which has gradually been becoming clearer and clearer the more they witness all that Jesus *says* and what he *does*. It is more than a prophecy. It is the very opening up to us of the vision of God, made clear to us, and brought right to our doorstep, confirmed six days later at the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor (Matthew 17.1-8). As we too ponder on Jesus and his life and his teaching, may we be ever more confident in echoing Peter in his recognition that Jesus is indeed the *Christ of God*, the one in whom we begin to *see God*, no longer distant, but now *face to face*.

The icon shows the Transfiguration in which Peter's affirmation of Jesus Christ is confirmed by the witness of Moses and Elijah.