

Mark 8:27-end

Isaiah 50:4-9a; James 3:1-12

There's been a great surge of interest in recent times in matters of identity. The popular BBC series, *Who do you think you are?*, features various well-known personalities who try to find out something about their ancestry – what makes them who they are – and it often leads them into some surprising and sometimes very emotional discoveries. Or at a more superficial level, we might simply define who we are according to the different roles we assume in life – homemaker, pensioner, mother, father, son, daughter, teacher, clergyman.....

Now when Jesus turned to his disciples and asked them the question, “.....who do you say that I am?”, on one level, the answer would have seemed obvious – he was clearly an authoritative religious teacher, a miracle worker, someone who had a particular concern for the marginalised and dispossessed in society. And all this was certainly true.

But when Jesus asked this question, he wasn't simply referring to his role as a rabbi, a teacher, a miracle worker, nor was he merely referring to his ancestral origins (even though his descent from the line of King David was in itself highly significant). No, what he was touching upon was the question of his identity in the profoundest sense possible, namely who he is in relation to God, the very Creator and Sustainer of the Universe. Many people certainly had their own ideas about who he was in this respect – there was plenty of speculation going around that maybe he's John the Baptist raised from the dead, or Elijah or one of the other prophets come back to life. But in a moment of divine inspiration, Peter declares, “You are the Messiah” – Peter identifies him as the long-expected ‘Anointed One’ of God. He's not just another forerunner of the Messiah, as John the Baptist was, but he is *the* fulfilment of Old Testament expectations. In the Old Testament, three types of people were anointed with oil and Jesus fulfils (though in a perfect way) all of these roles – he is a priest (putting people in touch with God); he is a prophet (showing people

what God is like); and he is a king (exercising God's rule over God's people, whilst at the same time being the unique Servant of the Lord).

Now that question of Jesus, ".....who do *you* say that I am?", is one that has echoed down the ages and is still as pertinent today as it ever has been. If you were to stand in Montague Street and ask passers-by who they think Jesus was or is, they'll no doubt come up with all sorts of answers – well, he was a good man who led an exemplary life; he was a great moral teacher like Buddha or Mohammed; he was someone who showed us how we should live..... But perhaps few would go any further than that.

What's more, in our multi-faith context, it's important that we don't try in any way to 'water down' the truth of Jesus' identity. In fact, it's interesting to note the significance of the place where Peter makes this great declaration about Jesus. Because Caesarea Philippi, renamed by Herod Philip in honour of the Roman emperor, was a place steeped in paganism. There were temples of classical

pagan religion all around, and towering above them was the new temple dedicated to the emperor. And it was in these surroundings that the Lord chose to ask his disciples if they really understood who he is. For it's *he* who *is* the world's *true* King, and not Caesar. Christianity was born amongst all these different faiths (our present-day situation is nothing new!), yet in the midst of these various pagan gods, the early Christians stood firm in the conviction that in Jesus Christ, the Absolute Truth had arrived. To renege on this would be to deny their Lord.

It's a lesson to us today, living as we do in a society embracing many faiths and ideologies. I often hear it said by (no doubt well-meaning) Christians that different faiths merely represent different pathways to God. But apart from the fact that different faiths are saying quite different things anyway, if we really take seriously the truth of who Jesus *is*, then how can we possibly place him on a level with other religious systems and philosophies?

So, Jesus' identity now having been revealed, the question then remained, 'well, what kind of Messiah was he to be?' 'What did he come to do?' 'What would this mean for the shape of Jesus' ministry, and what were the implications of this for his followers?' And in regard to these questions, the Lord certainly had a surprise in store for them! Because at the time, there were plenty of popular expectations floating around as to what the Messiah was to be like, not least the view that he would be some kind of a political figure who would come to liberate the people of Israel from domination by the Romans and restore the fortunes of Israel. Peter was clearly thinking in these kind of earthly terms – that's why he rebukes Jesus when he appears to him to be saying that his calling as the Messiah was quite different. But the thing is, *this* time, Peter's view *wasn't* a divine insight, but rather a deception of satan – an attempt to draw Jesus away from his *true* calling.

Because the reality was to be very different. *God's* intentions for his Son were that he would endure

suffering, he would be put to death and he would be raised on the third day. What Jesus does here is to effectively bring together two figures referred to in the Old Testament – the 'Messiah' and the 'Suffering Servant' described by Isaiah and reflected in this morning's Old Testament reading where the prophet speaks of God's servant as enduring suffering, insults and humiliation, but who will also be vindicated by God. It would no doubt have come as quite a shock to his followers – surely this wasn't what was meant to happen to the Messiah – how could someone become king through suffering and death? It shattered all their assumptions. And yet, how else could God's Son truly enter into the suffering which is the experience of every human being? How else could he defeat sin and death? It was only by dying and being raised to new life by the Father. God's liberation would come, *not* through armies and military victories, but through the death and resurrection of his Son.

Like Peter, it's so tempting for *us* to want to determine for *ourselves* the kind of Jesus we're

willing to follow, rather than seeking to follow the *real* Jesus. But the thing is that being the Suffering Servant was inseparable from Jesus' identity as Messiah. And following Jesus means following him in enduring suffering and hardship, in self-denial and forfeiting our lives for his sake. Peter, and no doubt the other disciples as well, were not too willing to accept this, and if *we're* really honest, neither do *we* find it an appealing prospect. We naturally prefer the easy way. In fact, when the Lord's disciples heard him talking about taking up their cross, it would immediately have brought to mind images of people going to their execution. In the same way, bearing *our* cross as followers of the Lord Jesus means nothing less than giving our life wholly over to following *him*. This, so to speak, is the way to total freedom. If we want to hold on to life for ourselves – seeking to live life *our* way, asserting our *own* rights, needs and privileges – then we actually lose our life, because it's not life any longer. But if we acknowledge that life is not ours by right, but a privilege – to be lived in the light of the gospel – then we do indeed possess life *in its fullness*. In the same

way, if we gain all the world's riches, but in doing so lose our inner freedom of loving and being loved by God, then what use is it? What can make up for this?

So, the key question is, 'How committed really are we to the *Lord*?' In a sense, the Lord's words here 'separate the men from the boys', as it were – who are the really committed ones and who are merely 'hangers on'? Because truly following Jesus is a costly business. What the Lord has to say here about the nature of true discipleship is indeed challenging – it's about denying ourselves, taking up our cross and following Jesus; it involves losing one's life, as it were, for the Lord's sake and for the sake of the gospel; and it means we must never be ashamed of our allegiance to him.

Peter and the first disciples eventually came to realise what this meant for their own lives. And the same is true for us, 2000 years on. Walking in the way of the Messiah – the Suffering Servant – poses a real challenge to our sense of comfortableness, and it leaves no room for compromise. As Dietrich

Bonhoeffer, the German theologian and pastor who was martyred in a concentration camp, once starkly put it, 'When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.' So, as we seek to faithfully follow Christ, may the words of the old hymn be truly reflected in *our* lives:

*All to Jesus I surrender,
Lord, I give myself to thee.*

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, we thank you that you are indeed Saviour, Lord and King. Help us to hold fast to this truth and to declare it boldly. May we surrender our lives to you. And grant us the strength and perseverance to walk faithfully in your way – the way of the Cross. Amen.