

Christ the King, Claremont
16th Sunday After Pentecost “B”

Who do you say that I am?

Mark 8:27-38

Jesus, I pray that my words and our thoughts will help us to respond to your question
“Who do you say that I am?”

In today’s Gospel we heard of an exchange between Jesus and Peter. In response to Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am”? Peter replies “You are the Messiah”. To which Jesus’ response is to order the disciples “not to tell anyone about me”, or as we might say today, ‘don’t repeat this to anyone’.

What do you make of this? Why would Jesus not want people to know He was the Messiah?

Jesus goes on to tell the disciples that he will be rejected, will suffer, and will be killed.

Peter then scolds Jesus for saying that he would be rejected, suffer and die.

Jesus then reprimands Peter: “Out of my sight, Satan! You think as men think, not as God thinks” (REB)

To appreciate this exchange, we need to reflect on the concept of Messiah at the time of Jesus.

Jewish tradition held that the Messiah:

1. Would be a descendant of King David;
2. Would be sovereign over the land of Israel;
3. Would gather the Jews into Israel from the four corners of the Earth;
4. Would restore the Jews to full observance of Torah law;
5. Would bring peace to the whole world.

From Jesus’ rebuke, “You think as men think, not as God thinks”, we understand that Peter’s notion of messiah was the traditional idea that Jesus was to become an earthly ruler, a sovereign descended from David, who would establish Israel as a Jewish State observing Torah (Jewish) Law, and that Jesus would soon bring peace to the world.

Jesus’ understanding of Messiah was very different! Jesus’ life was based on love. Love of God and love of Neighbour. He taught that if humans want peace and the rule of law, we need to make an effort to love one another. Jesus’ teaching is that an ideal world (the Kingdom of God) will be brought about by humans embracing love, and not by the appearance of a divinely sent messenger.

Peter’s vision of what the Messiah should be did not accord with Jesus talking of His rejection, suffering, and death: Jesus shattered Peter’s vision of a future based on the reign and power of Jesus, no longer made sense. A future where Peter stood next to Jesus as his right-hand man, combatting the enemies of God’s Kingdom also no longer made sense.

On one hand, Peter has shown an enormous amount of faith in Jesus, while on the other, Peter's faith is still based on his own vision of the future, on his own misunderstanding of God's plan.

We need to ask ourselves: "Is our faith also based on our personal expectations of what an ideal world—God's Kingdom—should be.?"

Sometimes, we must learn that faith requires us to relinquish our own terms, our own expectations, our own idea of God's plans. Sometimes, denying ourselves and 'taking up a cross' is required for us to develop a deeper more honest discipleship with God.

And so, the question that Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" is a question that is as relevant today as it was two thousand years ago. It is a question posed to us and to our world.

Who we believe Jesus to be, and how we live our discipleship are closely connected. There's a reason Mark narrates this scene about Jesus' identity, and then quickly reminds us that to be a disciple, is to take up our cross and follow Jesus.

It matters what kind of Messiah we have faith in!

If we think Jesus is a Messiah who will overthrow all our enemies and topple the empires of this world with the force of a military commander, we might be enticed into a discipleship that is violent and self-serving.

If we think Jesus is a Messiah who is distant and untouchable, we become disciples who build walls around us to distance ourselves from "the other" and look for security from 'our own tribe'.

If we think Jesus is a Messiah who won't expose us to death and the hardships of this life, might we also be disciples tempted into every form of escapism possible? Resisting dying to self; and being unprepared for death itself?

But if we accept Jesus for who he is, a Messiah who suffered, was rejected, killed, and then rose again – well, then, what should our own discipleship look like? If our own lives are to be moulded after his life, if we are really united to him through our baptism, how is this affecting how we live our daily lives?

We should not be surprised if and when we suffer. We should not be shocked that we will have to give up our personal ideal of a perfect world in order to find God's version.

We should not be surprised that we must stop trying to impose our will on God and let God hold us in his wounded hands. Instead, we need to be ready to take up our cross and follow Jesus: every day, in all circumstances, through the valley of the shadow of Covid, as our bodies age and viruses mutate, as we go about our daily business and work, as we grieve, when we rejoice, through losses and gains, through seasons of blessings and seasons of wanting, as we learn to give and as we learn to receive, as we are burdened and as we help others carry burdens.

For in every cross-shaped experience of our lives there is a promise. It is not a promise we can always feel or sense or appreciate at first glance. But the promise is still there. And it is a promise that your ending, my ending, our ending, the world's ending: will be a beautiful one. All of our endings find meaning in that early Easter morning when that cross of suffering lost its sting and became a sign to us that God had triumphed over sin and death. We need to accept and acknowledge that God, through Jesus, has come near and saved us, still loves us, and has promised us the perfection of His Kingdom.

To conclude: let us pray that we will strive to find the answer to Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?". Amen.

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