

Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity

Readings: [Mark 8.27-38](#) 15 September 2024

We could focus on the answer to that question – so boldly given by Peter – ‘*you are the Christ, the Messiah.*’

But I’m not going to do that. With Jesus, it is often the questions that are most powerful, most searching. Jesus was asking questions all the time – like any good teacher. So I am going to keep coming back to that question. A question from Jesus to those who followed him: *who do you say that I am?*

Apparently, Jesus in the Gospels asks a total of 135 questions. A few examples -

To what should I compare this generation? Children in the marketplace complaining that the adults are unmoved either by dancing or by a dirge.

Why are you so afraid? An unnecessary question, as the storm threatens to sink the disciples’ boat – but one to set them thinking – and us. What are we afraid of? In times of war and climate emergency, of social unrest, of deepening inequalities?

What is that you want?

What do you want me to do for you?

Questions again that seem unnecessary, because they are from someone famous as a healer, to those who cry out for help and healing. But questions to us too. What do we look to Jesus for?

Why do you ask me what is good? What is it about Jesus that makes him the person to ask these things?

What are you discussing as you walk along? What things? A beguiling question, from the risen Jesus, urging his companions on the road to express their confusion about the events of that first Easter – only then to make himself known to them at Emmaus in the breaking of the bread.

And then this one, from Mark,

*Who do **people** say I am?* then,

*Who do **you** say I am?*

Jesus is not afraid to put people on the spot. His presence, and his message, calls for a response. I am reminded of lessons at school when my attention was on something outside the classroom – and the teacher would say, ‘Macnaughton, what do you think?’ Oh, the acute embarrassment of not having anything to say because my mind had been somewhere else.

Jesus asks his disciples first - *who do people say I am?* – an easy question to answer – some were saying he was a bit like John the Baptist, calling people back to God, others saying he was a bit like Elijah the prophet, astounding people with extraordinary miracles.

But then he asks, you – *who do you say I am?*

Peter at least did have something to say. You are the Messiah. The Christ. God's anointed one. The one who will put everything right.

That was his answer – but what would yours have been? What would mine have been I wonder?

Like Peter, I would have wanted the story to go on as it has done in Mark's Gospel up to this point – Jesus taking the world by storm – bringing healing and hope where there had been despair, announcing God's Kingdom, God's justice, God's forgiveness, God's healing to all kinds of people, the victory of good over evil in the world and in each and every person Jesus had to do with.

But strangely, this question, *who do you say that I am* – somewhere near the middle of Mark's gospel, is like the fulcrum, the tipping point of the story. In a way, with a few exceptions, things seem to start to go downhill for Jesus from then on. The opposition increases. Everything gets tougher, all the way to the cross.

In Mark and Matthew and Luke this scene, '*who do you say I am?*' roughly in the middle of the Gospel, is a focal point - though there have been hints, like that other question, the disciples this time – *who is this that even the wind and the waves obey him?*

Who do you say I am?

In John's Gospel though the question doesn't get asked directly, it is the question that underlies the whole narrative, from beginning to end. The word made flesh, the lamb of God, the light of the world, the bread of God which gives life to the world, the way, the truth, and the life.

But that's what Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John say. What about you, what about me, who do you say Jesus is? We are often urged to keep an open mind about important questions, and this you might say is an important question.

Peter jumped in with his answer pretty quickly – you are the Christ! – but great moment of truth as that was, at the time it only led to further questions. What did it mean to be Christ, to be anointed by God?

Rather surprisingly, Mark tells us Jesus told Peter and the disciples not to go round saying he is the Christ but to keep that quiet.

And he goes on to say that the son of man would suffer many things, be rejected, killed, but then after three days rise again. His followers, he said, would suffer just as he did.

I don't know about you, but I am not very keen on that bit. I would prefer an easy life. I would prefer to get on with my life, to get on with doing things I enjoy, seeing family and friends, watching movies. Etc. etc. the idea of taking up my cross and following him isn't that attractive.

I know that following Jesus means taking on conflict and sacrifice and difficulty – hassle I could well do without. Getting involved with Jesus means getting involved with his Kingdom – not just praying 'thy kingdom come' but living it, doing what I can to make peace, to tackle injustice, to serve my neighbour in need, and to share the same good news of God's love in Jesus that gives me meaning and purpose.

So, I am troubled by Jesus' next question

What good is it if you win the whole world – but lose your soul?

I know how easy it is in our time to become addicted either to busy-ness or leisure activities – and that this is not necessarily life-giving in the way he invites me to live. *‘I am come that they may have life, life in all its fulness.’* (John 10.10)

Next week we are observing disability Sunday. It has been a huge privilege for me to walk with the Diocesan Disability Inclusion Action Group – working on issues of attitude, access, and agency - enabling full participation of disabled people in church and society.

One of the most significant learning points for me in all this has been having to reflect on what ‘fulness of life’ means for a person who is disabled. Last week I met someone relatively recently injured and become paraplegic. Her faith, her grace towards those she shares her life with, and her ability to reflect on life and love and meaning – this has impacted me greatly. This was holy ground. She had lost so much – but by God she has not lost her soul.

Who do you say I am? Jesus asks. There is so much more for me to learn. But I can’t sit on the fence or just close the book. I have to answer. Jesus’ question is to me – as it is to you.

Who do you say I am?

Bishop Malcolm of Repton