

Mark 8, 27-38

Pymble 25.2.18

Human from divine wisdom

In a week when we have heard the media use the term “stinging rebuke” more than once to describe the stoush at the top of the coalition parties, we read of a similarly dramatic episode between Jesus and Peter on the way to Caesarea Philippi. Jesus harshly rebukes Peter because he got it so wrong and because there is so much at stake for Jesus and how he imagines his movement. It is a tense moment – let’s have a quick look at how it unfolds.

As Jesus heads towards Jerusalem and looks back over his ministry in Galilee, he asks the disciples what people are saying about him, “*Who do people say I am?*” And he gets a few interesting answers. I always think this is a good question for us in the Church. Do we know what people are saying about Jesus? Do we understand their spiritual longings? Are we connected with their views or questions about Jesus? Not just about the Church – sadly that is often all too obvious – but about Jesus himself. Despite all the criticism of the institutional Church and various horrors committed by his followers, according to the research, most people in our day remain quite positive about Jesus himself and that has to be a good thing. The fact that outsiders can identify there is a marked difference between Jesus and his followers, surely must be one of the major tragedies for the Church today.

But Jesus doesn’t leave the questions there. As interesting as it is to know what others thought of him, Jesus asks the disciples point blank: *Who do you say that I am?* They must answer for themselves. This is also a crucial matter in the overall narrative because for the first half of this gospel that has been the underlying question, *Who is this man that the wind and waves obey him? Where does he get his authority?*

Constant references to the crowd being *amazed* at his teaching and actions.

Who is this Jesus?

Who do you say that I am?

And it is Peter who answers Jesus' question, "*You are the Messiah.*"

That is, you are the promised one from God, the anointed one of whom our Scriptures speak. You emanate from God!

Jesus' pointed "*Who do you say that I am?*"

continues to resonate down the centuries.

It is a question not only for those first followers but for any who claim to follow him, including us here today.

Who is Jesus?

Is he miracle worker? Our own personal insurance policy?

Naïve teacher? Bleeding heart do-gooder?

Or is he the One who reveals what God is like, and who shows us how life is best lived?

While Peter has correctly identified Jesus, Jesus now goes on to outline his understanding of Messiah and of his future – in words that would not have been anticipated: ***suffering, rejection and death, before new life.***

And while the Hebrew Scriptures do speak of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah, yet the idea of a suffering Messiah had never really captured the Jewish imagination or took hold in people's desperate hearts. Suffering and rejection is not what we look for in our Saviours.

That is clear when Peter mistakenly tries to mentor Jesus, and to correct his thinking.

We could imagine a patronizing arm around Jesus' shoulders as Peter tries to steer Jesus in another direction more akin to Peter's way thinking.

But the response from Jesus is sharp,

"Get behind me Satan.

You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Part of Peter's problem was that he didn't understand the way of Jesus – clearly he was a million miles away – and part of his problem was that he was telling Jesus what to do – something a *follower* clearly doesn't do.

And so Jesus begins to speak of what it is really like to be his follower: it is to *deny self, to take up the cross and to follow him.*

It is not about grasping for what you can get,
but giving up your life in order to gain something more valuable.
We are not necessarily talking about martyrdom here,
though for some in the early Church that was their lot.
We are talking about letting go of ego
and embracing paths that might be uncomfortable
but ultimately lead to life for others and ourselves.

This is Jesus' core teaching about discipleship
and as we reflect on what this means for us as
a congregation at something of a crossroads
what do we hear? what do we discern?
I hope you will ruminate on this for a while,
but let me offer a few possibilities.
Firstly, we must **get in behind** Jesus –
that is, we must seek to follow Christ's path
wherever he calls us, not chart our own course.
We must be prayerful –
not in the sense of asking God to bless our plans –
but prayerful to hear, discern and to follow the Spirit's lead.

Secondly, there may well be some **denying**
or some death to what we would individually prefer,
for the sake of a better 'Kingdom outcome', if I can call it that.
Practically I think this means listening deeply to one another and to God
and being ready to set aside our treasured hopes for the future.
So yes, these deaths can be truly painful.

And thirdly, we are to **believe in resurrection**.
In the 3 times he spoke of his future with the disciples in Mark's gospel
Jesus predicted his resurrection as much as his suffering and death,
yet they were not able to hear it.
They could only see pain and loss and death
and could not imagine anything hopeful beyond.
This is a great danger for churches faced with change;
the pain and the loss looms so large;
how can we possibly imagine resurrection?
But this is Christ's promise;
and it is deep in our Christian storehouse for times such as this:
look toward, expect, plan for, a surprising resurrection!

Perhaps I have shared this story before
but I think it is such a great illustration
of death and resurrection for a group similar to a congregation.
Decades ago in New Jersey in the US

a group of well-meaning and wealthy people
set up an orphanage for children with no one else to care for them.
I think it was as far back as the mid 1800s
The organisation was successful and grew,
opening many more homes and serving hundreds of children.
But in the 1960s and 70s societal views began to change
and the very concept of having large orphanages
was beginning to fall out of favour.
The organisation started to wonder if all their work would come to nothing.
Were they relevant? Did they have anything to offer?
But instead of simply persevering in what they knew best,
they began to explore their reason for being.
In one way their purpose was to run orphanages
as their founders had made clear,
but as they dug deeper they realized that even the orphanages
were a means to an end – and that end was to protect and nurture children
whose families could not do the whole job.
Articulating that new purpose gave them a new sense of life,
but what massive changes it would mean.
The orphanages, now on valuable land, were sold to developers
to create a massive fund, the income from which,
funded the entire operating expenses of an influential lobbying agency
for the interests of children.
I read this story in a book from 1999¹,
so I actually checked out their website last night and found,
though it had changed its name again,
this is a strong and successful group,
obviously proud of its history and of its results for children².
But what a death that original organisation had to endure:
land donated by original families – sold off;
houses named after important people in their history, razed to the ground;
annual and much-loved fundraising events, halted;
dozens of staff, terminated;
and hundreds of children moved to new settings,
all without the certainty of anything useful happening in their new venture.

What bravery in taking that step;
what loss they had to experience;
but they were able to move from something
that was no longer relevant for their community (even though they did it so well)
to something that remains vibrant and meaningful today
and ultimately true to their founder's vision.

¹ *Can Our Church Live?* – Alice Mann, The Alban Institute 1999

² <https://acnj.org>

Unbeknownst to them, I think that organisation
did a great job of following Christ's words on discipleship:
They denied themselves.
They took up their cross being willing to die.
They exercised divine, not human thinking.
All to take them to a new place of life-giving relevance
for those they serve.
May the Church be as likewise bold as we look ahead
and respond to our changing world.