

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 12 September 2021

Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life! Help us now to hear and obey what you say to us today. Through Christ, our Lord, Amen.

Mark 8:27-38

Who do you say I am?

“Who do you say I am?” If Jesus asks us today, what is your answer? Would it be the same as Peter’s reply, “You are the Messiah,”; or would it be like others’ by referring to the name of famous politicians, religious leaders? We’ll explore the theme through the two aspects. One is that in Mark’s time, recognizing and understanding who Messiah was what mattered. The other is, in this postmodern world where we live, losing sight of the Messiah is what we are concerned.

Recognizing and understanding Messiah

“Who do people say that I am?”¹ is a relatively easy question. The disciples simply report on what they have heard among the crowds. Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, and still others, one of the prophets. Indeed, Jesus’ ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing resembles the great prophets of Israel. Even though the responses are not far off the mark, they do not quite get to the heart of the matter. But when Jesus asks, “but who do you say I am?” Peter answers, “You are the Christ.” It is an astounding statement as Jesus hasn’t done anything that looks ‘Christ’-like so far. In this Jewish context, ‘the Christ’ has a significant meaning. The title ‘Messiah’ in Hebrew or ‘Christ’ in Greek was associated with an anointed king, a royal figure from the line of David expected to come and free Israel from their Gentile oppressors, purify the people, and restore Israel’s independence and glory. As such, Peter’s claim that Jesus is the Messiah seems to show his wishes to see Jesus take on this messianic role. So far, Jesus has not claimed to be the Messiah, and he certainly has shown no sign of taking on the Romans. To this, Jesus sternly orders them not to tell anyone about him as his time hasn’t come yet. Then Jesus begins to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be killed, and after three days rise again.²

¹ Mark 8:27

² Mark 8:31

As soon as Jesus begins to speak of what is to come in his career as Messiah - rejection, suffering, and death - Peter is to try to set him straight. He takes Jesus aside and rebukes him. Peter is technically saying to Jesus that suffering and death are not the Messiah's way, but glory, power, and dominion over Gentile oppressors are. Peter's reaction may be considered as the outcome of the Jewish context. If so, what is our notion of a saviour in the present context? Whenever we hear a word like a hero/heroine or a saviour, we may inadvertently imagine someone who is strong and powerful, who will rescue us from our troubles. Too often in popular evangelism, Jesus is presented in this way - as a kind of superhero who solves every problem for us, as a guarantor of prosperity and success.

But Jesus' response to Peter is harsh: "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."³ Although Jesus is God with us, we cannot tame him or make him over into our image. We would like a saviour who is a winner and one who makes us winners. But Jesus insists on identifying with the lowliest of losers. He will allow himself to be judged and condemned as a blasphemer by Jewish religious leaders. He will allow himself to be mocked, tortured, and executed as a criminal by the Romans. What we have before us is a story about a Messiah being tortured and killed by the powerful and abandoned by his closest companions. Not only does Jesus' identity include his eventual death and resurrection, but it will also finally define the lives of his followers. That is, a life of self-denial and cross-bearing is what followers of Jesus will live.

Self-denial is not primarily about squashing our desires or delaying gratification. Jesus calls us to separate ourselves from what defines us. A person in Jesus' culture was defined by those to whom he belonged - usually household or kin. Jesus calls people to embrace new understandings of identity. As such, disciples join a community defined by association with Jesus. They enter a new family comprising all of Jesus' followers. Self-denial is not self-annihilation but complete redefinition.

Likewise, cross-bearing means much more than patience or obedience. It means death. It means the resignation of one's reputation and life. Those who follow Jesus, associating with this rejected Christ, take on an identity and a way of living that threatens the world's ideologies

³ Mark 8:33

and idolatries. When recognizing and understanding the Messiah were important in Mark's time, in the postmodern era, we face a different issue - namely, losing sight of the Messiah.

Losing sight of the Messiah

Britannica defines postmodernism as follows: Postmodernism, in Western philosophy, a late 20th-century movement characterized by broad scepticism, subjectivism or relativism; a general suspicion of reason and an acute sensitivity to the role of ideology in asserting and maintaining political and economic power.⁴ For now, we don't have space to discuss it. In short, in the bible and Christian theology, the Messiah can be viewed as one of many ideologies which are considered to control people's lives. In postmodernism, individuals' ideas and ways are upheld, and any claims of holding an absolute truth is denied. The backwash is that when people seek a definite answer about something such as life, or happiness, they are left in the vast sea of information with millions of choices. In this case, they are responsible for their choices and consequences as well. But the Bible says that it was God's choice to create us and rescue us through Christ Jesus. As a result, the consequences of this intentional choice is also God's, not ours.

Mark has announced from the beginning that this story is good news (*euangelion*). How can this be? We need to read the whole story that tells us that Jesus was faithful unto death, even while all around him proved faithless. And God raised him to new life. Because of this, we know that God's life-giving power is far stronger than the worst that humans hands can do. Because of this, we know that there is no sin or failure so great that it can finally separate us from the love of God in Christ. The faith in Christ allows us to see the truth of life.

In our story time, we heard a boy who stopped drawing after receiving indifferent responses from adults. For him, the picture concealed a frightening truth as it depicted a Boa constrictor swallowed an elephant alive. Sadly, the grown-ups failed to see such things. For them, it was a plain hat. Later the boy became a pilot as he followed the grown-ups' advice. In this book - *The Little Prince*, the real story begins when he encountered the Little Prince after the emergency landing in the Sahara Desert. The question was, 'what do you think made adults fail to see things in the drawing?' The Adults seem to have lost imagination, dreams, or innocence that they may have had in their childhood. They can no longer see the mysteries and

⁴ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/postmodernism-philosophy>, retrieved on 11 September 2021

meanings embedded in things but only a skin-deep fact. What about us? Do we see the truth from the cross and the sufferings of Jesus? What is the truth?

Following Jesus is not a wandering voyage; it points a particular direction, ending up at crucifixion and resurrection. Yet as seen in Peter's confusion about Jesus' fate and authority, it reminds us of how difficult - how weird - it is to embrace a *suffering* Christ and live the same life as his followers. Following Jesus, with self-denial and cross-bearing, is a way to let people see the living Christ visible. Peter became the truthful follower of Jesus in the end. The pilot restored the long lost imagination, dreams and innocence after meeting with the Little Prince. We, too, are becoming the images of the living Christ in the world through whom the Messiah is continually proclaimed and lived. Amen.