

TALK

13th September 2015

Puy de Serre

Morning Worship

Mark 8: 27-38

James 3: 1-12

Psalm 116:1-8

'Who do you say that I am?'

Do you, like me, eat your breakfast with 'BBC Radio Four' in the background and with presenters like John Humphries bringing us the morning's news by interviewing some of the principal players- politicians, leaders of industry, leading figures in the church etc...? I'm sure I'm not alone in getting frustrated when so many of the people interviewed seem bent on deliberately not answering the questions posed to them.

Questions about action not taken or promises not fulfilled, and demanding a simple 'yes' or 'no' answer, evoke responses such as '[What we're planning to do, going forward.....](#)', ' or '[A lot of people are saying.....](#)'. When asked for reasons or details, they answer in generalised terms and find it so difficult to say what **they** think, or to take responsibility for their own words or actions. Is it, as some claim, that we feel the need to be 'politically correct' - or is it that we don't want to appear foolish by holding an opinion which is out of line with conventional wisdom?

In our reading from Mark, the disciples are used to being asked about Jesus. People knew they'd been with him and there was constant speculation as to who he was, where he got his power from, and what he was really trying to achieve. Of course, the disciples, themselves, don't have all the answers, so they only reply with some of the more acceptable theories they have picked up.

The less acceptable theories, based on the miracles and signs people had seen, included Jesus being a revolutionary, mad or possessed by demons, and the disciples were quite sure such claims were not true. So, when Jesus asks them, '[Who do people say that I am?](#)', it's easy for them to pass on the gossip. '[Some say John the Baptist \(returned from the dead\), others that you're Elijah \(returning to let people know a Messiah was coming\), or one of the prophets\(a saintly man and a worker of miracles\)](#)'.

However, Jesus doesn't leave it there. He goes on to ask them, '[But who do you say that I am?](#)' Now they're on the spot! Perhaps the first one to answer is going to look a bit of a fool if he says the wrong thing. It might sound as though he's been too heavily influenced by Jesus or, alternatively, that he's not been very impressed by him. So they hang back.

Isn't that our own experience? If we are in a group and don't understand something which is said, don't we tend to hold back, hoping someone else will risk 'showing their ignorance' by asking for clarification? And, when asked for an opinion, how often do we give the answer we think the questioner wants, rather than expressing our honestly held view?

Here, in the group of disciples, it's no surprise that Peter, with his reputation for jumping in feet-first, is the first to respond, and he says, '[You are the Messiah](#)'. He knows who he's hoping Jesus is, and he's not worried what other people make of his response. He's come to love and respect the teacher and friend he's followed for so long. He's definitely impressed.

Now, throughout the Bible, we are told that '[the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom](#)'. The theologian, Tom Wright, tells us that 'fear in this sense does not mean cowering before the Almighty, but having reverence and respect for his greatness, his kingship, and his holiness. And the promise is that we are all made in his image. We are all capable of God-like living and love. To worship him is to become more truly human, more fully what each of us was meant and made to be. Jesus had been a fine example of this holiness to the disciples.

Peter, having been with Jesus for some time and, benefitting from a long, slow process of education, realised that Jesus was someone special. He was right to say that Jesus was the Messiah, but wrong in what he thought that meant. At that time he did not understand that God's thinking was leading Jesus on the way of the cross, not to the forceful conquering of the world. The Messiah was to exercise God's greatness in a life of service and sacrifice.

While we have not had the opportunity to physically walk in the garden at Gethsemane with Jesus or to share a boat with him in Galilee, as Christians we have had **our own** experiences of Jesus. We can admire, and praise, the selfless actions of those who, through faith, devote themselves to relieving the plight of refugees, or seek to bring peace to war-torn areas.

However, if we claim Christ as Lord, do we regularly reflect on where he has been at work in our lives? For **still**, the question Jesus asks each of us is, '**Who do you say that I am**' ?

He's not looking for a summary of other peoples' ideas. It's not a question of our being knowledgeable about Christianity or being able to quote passages from what the Bible tells us about Jesus. After all, an atheist can pass exams in theology! It's all about what he means to you and me, and how he's affected **our** lives. He wants a reply from those who have spent time with him. If we are happy to call ourselves Christians, why - and do the rest of our friends and colleagues see there's been a change in us?

Jesus wants us to know him, to talk to him, and only then to talk to others about him. His invitation is always personal, '**Abide in me and I will abide in you**'. We can only be true disciples if we spend time with him, if we get to know him. Only when we get to know him personally as the Son of God, are we able to acknowledge him as our Lord and Saviour.

Such recognition is, of course, only the beginning. Jesus goes on to tell his disciples that being the Messiah was not going to be a bed of roses; he would have to suffer and be killed, but after three days he would rise again. And he went on, '**If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me**'.

Here in France, not many of us are called upon to physically die for our faith, but we are required to die to worldly temptations and excesses. By doing so, we can find ourselves shunned by some of our friends or at least misunderstood by them. By telling them about Christ, we lay ourselves open to ridicule or to being ignored. With the media full of pictures and stories of refugees, and tales of crime and corruption, we have to be clear what we do believe about God's Son. If God loves us, why is the world in such a state, we are asked.

As our creator and Father, God does not force us return his love. We have the freedom to choose how we live and how we respond to him. On a world-wide scale, wrong choices can be catastrophic. God's kingdom can seem to be a long way off.

But there is no reason to despair. The good news is that, though **we** may be called upon to suffer with Christ, he has promised that we will also triumph with him. We know that he also experienced being ridiculed or ignored, but Christ came with a message of hope and salvation to an occupied land, a corrupt world, and even overcame death to reinforce it.

That message needs to be heard by the rest of today's world. Jesus wants a loving relationship with us, and needs our help with this work. So this is personal! How are you and I going to respond, when he asks **us** that same personal question, '**Who do you say that I am**' ?

