

# Who do *you* say that I am?

Isaiah 50.4-9; James 3.1-12; Mark 8.27-38

**'Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.....'**

Another chat on a dusty road from one place to another - Jesus and his disciples - after an active day of miracles and mission. Just before this passage, they'd gathered up the baskets after feeding a multitude; just as we at All Saints' have put away tables and chairs after the Autumn Fair. Wondering what the community makes of it all; the church, God....

**Who do people say that I am?, asks Jesus. What are the rumours going around? What are the ideas people have?**

**As 21st C Christians, we rely on some of the hard won theological answers to this question for our faith; the question of who Jesus is has been prayerfully wrestled with in many church councils over many centuries.... And we are richer because of it. Who does the church say that I am?**

**But then, as now, the more personal, more urgent question arises. But you, who do YOU say that I am?**

**This is not an academic question as one might think. Jesus isn't testing the disciples ready to put a gold star on the right forehead. This is an intimate question; a question of relationship. He makes himself vulnerable by asking it...**

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

**Who am I to *you*?**

**How does my life, my presence, my message, my love, touch you? *Does it?***

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

**If you take nothing else away today; take that question. It is a question for a lifetime; it is an invitation to move from head to heart; from faith to experience. Who do *you* say that I am?**

**Peter responds with characteristic enthusiasm. You are the Messiah! It was, I believe, not only or even the answer itself - but his passion for Jesus, his spontaneity and personal openness that won him a foundational place in the building of the church. Neither is it a contradiction that it is the same boisterous Peter who later in this passage protests with equal directness that Christ should NOT suffer, as he predicts he will. He was, without doubt, voicing the complaint and fear of all the disciples that day; and indeed, our own.**

**Today's gospel is tough; and well, quite frankly I'd be rather glad to find a theoretical or theological hole to hide in; because this one searches me out and finds me terribly wanting. If any would become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. I'm with Peter here: surely not!**

And yet, despite my superficial recoil – my spirit bears witness to something of the truth of this. My soul longs for the liberty, which intuitively I know is being offered here. And I think yours does too - lest why are we all here; drawn to this strange celebration of Christ's death? The mystery draws us.

But what does it actually mean; if anyone would save his life he must lose it?

I think it's fair to say that the distortion of this has accounted for a good many of the worst versions of Christianity; moralistic, masochistic and mean-minded. The wrong meaning of this has also given me many hours of work as a psychotherapist and spiritual counsellor.

What it doesn't mean is that we should in any way deny ourselves the very best of what our creator God has, with such joy, created for us; receiving whole-hearted and whole person love; feeling really good about being who we are; knowing our talents and gifts and sharing them; showing our vulnerability and needs and being cared for; admitting our weaknesses and being forgiven. What it doesn't mean is that we live suspicious of our human nature and hating ourselves.

The Autumn Fair yesterday was a great expression of this; and certainly among other things an attempt to tell the community that we are here not as some austere life-denying religion but one that reaches out with genuine affection and friendship. One that affirms and supports our everyday life.

What then, DOES it mean; anyone who would lose his life for my sake will gain it?

I think it means that beyond what we ourselves can achieve or acquire for ourselves and in ourselves, is a God who waits to give us what we most need. It means that beyond our small efforts to reach God, or even to live an ordinary life of enjoyment is a God who waits to give us more than we can think or imagine. It means that despite our longing for freedom, we continually live captive to a life far less rich than we were made for. There is *something* we must die to in order to live.

I was talking to a member of the congregation recently who is very aware of her dying. I asked her if I could share our conversation with you. Because when I asked her how she was - daring to name the obvious - she rewarded me with this honest and profound response: 'You know, Julie, when I was first diagnosed with secondary cancer, I was shocked, angry, scared... of course. And it took some time to get used to it as you can imagine. But now, I think; what a gift it is to be alive; and every day is so wonderful. I am lucky to have this time and this awareness. In some ways I am more alive than I ever was before now.'

What an inspiration she is and what a privilege it is to have her with us. And what a painfully poignant illustration of what Jesus is saying. Dying we live?! It's completely counter-culture!

John of the Cross – a 16<sup>th</sup> C Spanish mystic puts it this way, in a beautiful passage made famous by TS Eliot;

In order to arrive at what you do not know  
You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.

In order to possess what you do not possess  
You must go by the way of dispossession.  
In order to arrive at what you are not  
You must go through the way in which you are not.  
And what you do not know is the only thing you know.

John of the Cross was a contemplative.

Contemplative prayer has a long tradition. It has been articulated and encouraged in various ways over the centuries from the desert father and mothers to the mystics; and in modern times people like Thomas Merton and John Main.

John Main was a Benedictine monk of the late 20th c. He was instrumental in reviving the contemplative tradition at a time when young people were flocking to the East for some real experience of the spiritual life. He realised that people were looking for an authentic and interior prayer life and that the Christian church was not offering it. He distilled the wisdom of people like John Cassian, John of the Cross, the anonymous author of the Cloud of Unknowing, Julian of Norwich, - and called it Christian Meditation.

In Christian Meditation, we are taught to simply sit in silence and using a sacred word or phrase to still our busy mind, we become aware of ourselves in the presence of the God who is beyond our words, our concepts, our understanding. We open ourselves to the reality of the God in whom we live and move and have our being. In contemplative prayer we simply - oh how hard it is to be simple! - we simply sit in silence and let go of all the thoughts and feelings - however holy. Let them go and let them go and let them go again. That's all.

Because what all the mystics believed is that as wonderful and as helpful as all our ideas and feelings about God might be; to enter fully into the mystery, we must let go of even our highest thoughts and our best actions. And then, of course, we can return to those same things, with renewed spirits and with hearts for God. It can only ever be contemplation AND action. But contemplation is far less talked about.

I meditate in this way because the contradictions in my life sometimes feel almost impossible to bear. I meditate not out of virtue but out of need: and because I believe that I cannot truly live out of the full abundance of God's life within me unless I open myself to it. The fruit of meditation is not instantaneous, but it is very real. I am rewarded with a glimpse of that eternal unity that reconciles all. I am rewarded with consolation and peace.

Meanwhile back at the question:  
Who do you say that I am?

Surely the very best answer to this question cannot come from our head; but only from the experience of the heart. Making room for this experience is what contemplative prayer is all about.

And as the heart, through the faithful practice of stillness and simplicity, slowly experiences its answer to 'Who is this Jesus God to me?' I believe that in equal measure it answers the question 'Who am I?'

**In contemplative prayer we are stripped of our superficial identity and attachments; and open ourselves to the gift of God's presence; before whom our truest identity is revealed: and our truest relationships.**

**And so in meditation; that most devious tongue is silenced for a time; we still our driven bodies and empty our mind. We take up the cross, in a real way; dying to our possessive and proud selves; losing, for a while, the false notion that we are really in control. And we gain many things; not least a greater capacity to truly love and to be loved; we gain, too, the Spirit to sustain the weary with an eternal word...**

**'Morning by morning he wakens, says Isaiah, 'Wakens my ear to listen ....'**

**Listen!**

**If we try to hang onto our life, we lose it. But if we let it go for God's sake! we will gain it. For what will it profit us, to gain the whole world and lose our soul?**

**In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

***JLD***  
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