

Who do you say that I am?

Please read Mark 8 v 22- 9 v 1 and pray; *“O Lord, open my eyes that I may clearly see the glorious truth about Jesus and all that he came to do through his suffering, death and resurrection. Amen!*

I set you a challenge at the beginning of Lent and I wonder if any of you have taken it up? The challenge was to read and meditate on the gospel of Mark during this important season of Christian reflection. It is not too late for you to take up this challenge and begin reading this most amazing ***gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God***. (1:1) *If you have been reading Mark’s gospel*, you may have noticed that chapter 8 is very important, and that the mood and direction of the narrative changes dramatically in this “middle” chapter of the book. The half way mark of the gospel is reached at the point where Peter makes his bold confession that **“Jesus is the Christ of God”**. This story of “Peter’s confession” at Caesarea Philippi, acts as what may be described as ***the hinge*** for this gospel.

Why would that be? Why is this the hinge story, the main turning point so to speak? The answer is this: Up until this point, the question of Jesus’s true identity has been raised again and again throughout the first half of Mark’s gospel. “Who is this?” (4:41) is the question on everyone’s lips. The authoritative kingdom teaching and powerful healing ministry of Jesus has caused amazement and wonder among the populace, and got everyone thinking and talking – especially the disciples. *Who is this?*

The reader of this gospel (hopefully you) has been made aware by Mark from the outset that Jesus is the **Son of God** (1:1). Mark introduces him as such! God the Father has also announced and declared this truth at his Son’s baptism. (1:11) Satan and his demonic forces also know who Jesus is! (1:24, 34). The forces of darkness certainly recognise that *the Holy One* has turned up on their doorstep! Yet this gospel story reaches its midpoint and initial climax when the ***first human character proclaims the truth about Jesus***. And who is that? It is the apostle Peter who makes the confession about Jesus’s true identity – although he may also be acting as spokesperson for the whole group of disciples. Peter declares from his heart, “You are the Christ”. This is a direct answer from Peter to a direct question asked by Jesus.

Up until this point, their understanding of Jesus has been a little uncertain and incomplete. The knowledge of Jesus’s true identity has come gradually, but it has been coming. Peter and the others can now **see clearly** that Jesus is the Christ – the Son of the living God. His powerful deeds and words have revealed and confirmed this. This is why this story acts as a hinge or turning point.

Bible scholars are convinced that this is the reason why the story of the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida was placed into the narrative at this point leading up to Jesus’s question and Peter’s confession. Mark is the only gospel writer to include this “two-part” healing. This is very interesting and worth noting because Mark has been emphasising the ***power and immediacy*** of all Jesus’s healings. (1:42) But suddenly, we have a story of a man who was not healed with a single touch from Lord. He required *a second touch* from Jesus. After this second touch he could then see clearly. His vision was fully restored. This story acts as a kind of illustration or parable of what was happening in the minds of Jesus’s disciples as they *gradually* began to see and to grasp who ***Jesus really was***. They did not see clearly at first. But by the time of Jesus’s questioning of them, their vision and understanding had finally become clear. The disciples were blind but now they could see – they could now see clearly that Jesus is the Christ. Like the blind man who was healed, ***the disciple’s eyes were opened and they saw everything clearly***. (8:25)

This gospel **asks us** a critical question? With regards to Jesus Christ – *do YOU see anything?* (8:23)

What do *you* see? When you read this gospel – do *you* see anything about the identity of Jesus? The first half of the gospel comes to a climax with Peter’s confession, “You are the Christ”, and the second half of the gospel comes to a climax with another confession made by a Centurion at the foot of the cross; **“Surely, this man was the Son of God!”** (15:39) Do *you* agree? Do *you* also see and believe this? Is Jesus the Christ? Is he the Son of the living God? Do *you* see this truth? The question Jesus asked his disciples about who people thought he was – is the question he asks of *you* and me? He wants an answer to his direct question! **Who do YOU say that I am?** What is *your answer*? He waits for our personal reply. A Christian is someone who *knows* who Jesus is! They have **come to see** the true identity of Jesus. A Christian is someone who can make this very significant confession;

Jesus – you are the Christ – the Son of the Living God. This is what I believe. This is what I know!

It is very important to know who Jesus is and to confess it because of what comes later in this story and I will come to that soon, but the question **for us to face right now** is this; can I and do I make this confession that Jesus is the Christ (God’s only holy, chosen and anointed One) – the Son of God? Peter’s declaration clearly came from his heart and not just his head. Our confession must also be from the heart. We must believe and confess from the heart that “Jesus is Lord.” (Romans 10:9). We have sung those words today, haven’t we? Jesus is Lord! Do we know that to be the truth, and do we live as though that is the truth we believe? Jesus is the Lord – the Christ – the Son of God! Jesus is *my* Lord! This has to be personal.

We learn from Matthew’s gospel that Peter was **only** able to make his confession because the truth about Jesus had been **revealed to him from above** – *by the Father and through the Spirit*. (Matthew 16:17). The Father through the Spirit “opens our eyes”, the eyes of our understanding (Ephesians 1:18) so that we can see clearly the truth about his Son. Do *you* thank God for the grace of true spiritual sight and understanding? Many do not possess this. They are blind and kept in the dark by Satan. (2 Corinthians 4: 4-6) Do *you* thank God that the scales have fallen from your eyes (Acts 9:18), as they fell from the eyes of Saul of Tarsus? Saul received his spiritual as well as his physical sight, and it was this that enabled him to go out and declare with boldness that **Jesus is the Son of God?** (Acts 9:20)

Chapter 8 in Mark’s gospel sheds wonderful light on **who Jesus is** and upon our need to see his true identity clearly, but secondly it also reveals **why Jesus came** into this world. After Peter had made his bold and clear confession, we read this;

He (Jesus) then began to teach them that the Son of Man of must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again” (8:31)

Why did Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the living God come into this world? Jesus came to die and to rise again for our sin and for our salvation. This was his main purpose for coming into this world. This is the *first* prediction Jesus makes about his death and resurrection. Two more will follow in due course. (9:31 and 10:33-34). Jesus came to die for our salvation! He teaches that himself – and that teaching begins here – at this point! *You know who I am, but do you know why I came? I came to die and rise!*

I do not want to say much about the centrality and significance of Jesus’s death this week, because I will focus on that next week as we come to what is often described as the most important verse in Mark’s gospel which is Mark 10:45;

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

But today's text does demand that I say some things about the death and resurrection of the Son of God which is the cornerstone of the whole gospel. This is why Easter is our key festival.

- The first thing to emphasise and to grasp is that Jesus's death and resurrection was a divine **must**. It had to happen! It was crucial in the plan of God to save the world. It was on Jesus's heart from the day he was born and even before that! Some have referred to this "must" as the divine imperative. Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man **must** suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he **must be killed** and after three days rise again. (see also Luke 24:44-46, Acts 17:3 and John 12:24)
- The second thing to say about Jesus's death is that he spoke and taught **plainly** about it to his disciples. **(8:32)** Jesus told them the plain truth about his forthcoming death in a way that could not be misunderstood, which is why Peter reacted as he did. On so many crucial issues Jesus taught his listeners plainly. He made it easy for people to understand. Only his parables had an element of mystery about them - and that was deliberate. Most of his teaching was plain and simple. Whether you liked his teaching or not was a different matter! Whether you believed and accepted it was another matter, but his teaching was not mysterious or complicated. For example, his teaching on the judgement to come and the reality of heaven and hell could not be plainer. His teaching on marriage could not be plainer or simpler; one man covenanting together with one woman to form a *one flesh* relationship for the whole of life! Likewise, Jesus taught plainly about his dying and rising again, even if it wasn't grasped or accepted by his disciples at this stage.
- The third thing to say about Jesus's teaching on his death is to note the immediate satanic reaction to that announcement which somewhat surprisingly came through Peter's protest. Peter who had just made his wonderful and commendable confession, now faces a strong rebuke by Jesus for being the unintended mouthpiece of Satan. Peter protests to Jesus and tells him not to talk about things such as **suffering and death**. That was the opposite to popular messianic thinking which was entirely triumphalist. Jesus responds by saying "Get behind me Satan". Jesus is **only** interested in God's will and God's plan for salvation, and he will not be deflected from it. He must die and rise! Trying to dissuade him from God's will is Satan's work. He will have none of it!
- Fourthly, Jesus here begins to unveil some of details about the horror and pain he will suffer before and during his death. He reveals that he will face strong rejection, he will suffer "many things" and he will be "killed". Jesus is not only going to die, but there will be much suffering, pain and distress for him to bear. As we will see next week, by using his favourite way of referring to himself – "**the Son of Man**" – Jesus was deliberately identifying himself with the **Suffering Servant** in the prophecy of Isaiah 53. "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering." (Isaiah 53:3a)

In this pivotal Chapter 8 then, we are given the identity of Jesus, and we see a need to make our own personal confession of who we believe he is; and we are given the main reason why he came into our world – to die and to rise again. We have in Mark 8 – his *person* and his *work*; who Jesus was and why he came. We have Christmas (who the baby was) and Easter (why the baby came) all together within a few verses of sacred Scripture.

But now, one huge question remains. In the light of who Jesus is, and why He came, what are **we** called to do about it? How do **we** respond to this good news? Yes, we make our confession from the

heart as Peter did, and yes, we believe and accept that Jesus came to die and rise again for us and for our salvation, but **what do we actually do** with our lives? Jesus tells **us** as he told **the crowds** (8:34), what we have to do. Here it is. **(read Mark 8: 34-38)**

This is the clarion call from the lips of Jesus Christ to any would-be disciple.

There is no way of denying or skirting around the fact that this is a tough challenge – a challenge from Jesus that demands **everything** of those who would want to follow him. There is the threefold challenge and invitation which **must** be taken up and embraced;

- **Deny yourself.** This means that a disciple, a follower of Christ, must live primarily for Jesus's will, **his** kingdom, **his** glory, honour and acclaim. The follower must be prepared to lay aside their own ambitions, self-centred desires and comforts. The disciple lives for Jesus not for himself/herself. They **must** deny themselves "many things" just as Jesus suffered "many things" for the sake of those for whom he gave up his life. (Galatians 2:20) Certain habits and patterns of behaviour must be put to death. (Colossians 3:5, Romans 8: 12-14)
- **Take up your cross.** This is the first time that "a cross" has been mentioned in this gospel and it is the followers cross not Jesus's which is in view. Jesus himself will have to face and endure persecution, suffering and crucifixion. He calls his disciples to also be ready and willing to suffer, and even to die for him. What a challenge!
- **Follow Christ.** Christ bids disciples to follow him – all the way to death if necessary, but then on to certain resurrection and glory. "Following" Christ means learning from him and submitting to his teaching; it means "imitating him" and his behaviour, the pattern of his life. For example – Christ forgave and prayed for his enemies. Those who follow him must do the same. Christ welcomed outcasts. Followers must do likewise. And as we see later, the disciple must **never** be ashamed or disown Jesus or *his words* – his plain teaching on any matter or subject. Whatever the pressures and criticism from "this adulterous and sinful generation", disciples must stand up for the person and words of Jesus – whatever the cost. **(8:38)**

By "giving up" their own lives, followers of Christ gain eternal and abundant life. The gains far outweigh any losses – even if that truth may seem hard to understand or accept. All this will be revealed as followers accept the challenge and step out in faith and trust. They will see that the new way of life even with its self-denial, persecution and obedience comes with a joy unspeakable, magnificent fellowship and peace with God, the power of the Kingdom itself, and the faithful daily provision of a most generous and caring heavenly Father. Nothing will compare to *this life of faith and following*, but Jesus does not dilute or tone down the potential hardship of what it will mean for those who decide to follow him. His teaching once again is plain. No-one can claim in the future that they didn't realise that following Christ would mean personal hardship, suffering and sacrificial service. No servant can be above his master.

Decades later, when Peter was about to be crucified upside down in Rome, if you had asked him before his death, "Was it worth it?" He would have answered – "Yes, every second of my walk with Christ was worth it, and now I go to be with him in glory! As Paul wrote; "For me to live is Christ – and to die is gain." (Philippians 1:21) Infinite and eternal gain with eternal love! As religious freedoms are withdrawn or trampled upon in our world, Christ's true followers can expect a hard time – perhaps even death for his sake. The suppression of true religious freedom and expression may be coming to the UK. We must be alert to this and ready to face the consequences for Christ's sake and glory.

When Winston Churchill became Prime Minister in May 1940, he was honest with our citizens at the time and shared openly that there would be “sweat, toil, tears and blood.” Jesus presented the same reality to the crowds on the day of Peter’s confession. Rico Tice in the book “One life”, a book which expounds Mark’s presentation of the gospel, uses the following helpful and clear illustration;

The explorer Ernest Shackleton, when he was looking for people to go with him on his exploration of the Antarctic, reportedly placed an ad in a newspaper. It simply read: Men wanted for hazardous journey. Low wages, bitter cold, long hours of complete darkness. Safe return doubtful. Honour and recognition in event of success.

So, there you have it. What a chapter this is in Mark’s impassioned gospel about Jesus Christ. In it we see that a Christian is someone who KNOWS who Jesus is, and makes his own confession of the truth – that Jesus is the Christ of God – the only Son of God who came into this world to suffer, die and rise again on the third day.

And because of WHO Jesus is, and because **we know** WHO He is, and what he has suffered and done for us through his passion, death and resurrection, we can now see and understand why in the words of the Christian martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer, we **must** “Come and die.” We can see why we must deny self, take up our own cross and closely follow him and his teaching. Love so amazing, so divine, DEMANDS my soul, my life, my all. Thanks be to God that he has *opened our eyes to see* these glorious truths.

Amen

Revd Peter J Clarkson (March 7 2021)