

Reflection for Pentecost 16 by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

'Who do people say that I am?' A question of identity.

Who is the Son of Man? Who really is Jesus? What difference does the answer to the question make?

The reality is - all the difference in the world.

The question of someone's identity is crucial for so many aspects of life. Identity theft and the resulting fraud are big issues in the digital world in which we live. To know someone's identity helps you to understand their status and place in society: it also helps with self-confidence. To know who you are, or who others perceive you to be, is important.

For a politician, their identity, or perceived identity, is one of the main factors that lies at the heart of their chances of being elected. Why is it that so many leading politicians surround themselves with spin-doctors or image consultants? Simply to create the right perceived identity.

The same idea, of perceived identity, lies at the centre of our gospel reading.

The way Peter and the other disciples answered the identity question "Who do people say that I am?" would tell Jesus how far he had got in terms of teaching and revealing the purpose of his earthly ministry.

Here, in Mark's gospel, this passage provides a pivot point around which the whole of the gospel revolves. Let us reflect for moment on the gospel passage.

Firstly – the context.

Where would you expect Jesus' identity to be revealed in a clear unambiguous way for the first time? I would suspect that most of us would say Jerusalem, or by the lake of Galilee, where so much of his ministry took place. But no, Jesus and the disciples have travelled twenty-five miles north of Galilee into the foothills of Mount Hermon in search of peace. This is a place where he will not be recognised, and he can teach his disciples in relative privacy. It is almost as if Jesus and his disciples have gone away for weekend break or a retreat.

There is also something fascinating about the location which Jesus puts this key question to disciples, and it's a place that, in many ways, symbolises new beginnings.

Caesarea Philippi, which is now known by its more ancient name, Banias, has several claims to fame, Firstly, Herod the Great, the master builder of the 1st Century BC, began its reconstruction with his son Philip completing the work and re-naming it in honour of Caesarea. So, it was a new Roman centre. In ancient pagan thinking it was believed to be the birthplace of the god Pan; even today, the remains of the temple to Pan can be seen. But thirdly and more importantly in Christian terms, it is one of the sources of the river Jordan - the place where the river breaks surface close to the temple of Pan. The Jordan, which symbolises so much about baptism, about cleansing, washing, and renewing, begins its flow at this point.

It is in this place that Jesus asks his question: not surrounded by his own people but in a centre of paganism. This is the place where Peter makes the first Christian profession of faith.

Place and setting so often play an important part in our spiritual growth. Immersing ourselves week by week in worship is vital but, so often, the key steps, those forward movements in our faith journey, occur in other settings. Jesus, for example, knew that by going to a pagan area the disciples would have a freedom to speak in a way they may well have found impossible in the communities around the lake of Galilee. The same is often true for us; there are times when a change in location, to retreat, to think, to reflect, can help us to take the next important step forward in our journey of faith.

So often as Christians we like to remain safe and comfortable. Maybe there are times when we should move out of that comfort zone in order to move forward.

Secondly, we have the disciples replies

And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' Yes, some may call me those things, Jesus replies "But who do you say that I am?" to which Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah.'

Peter saw Jesus not just as the carpenter turned teacher but, with remarkable insight, he also used the highest image he could think of - that of Messiah: the one who will save his people, the very Son of God. His profession is clear, bold, and unambiguous. Jesus' response, though, is interesting "And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him."

Jesus was acknowledging that such moments of faith, such understanding, does not come from Peter's own efforts but through the power of the Holy Spirit at work in people's hearts and lives, revealing who Jesus is. Yet he was also aware the disciples still had a great deal to learn about his messiahship. "Let me now teach you some more", Jesus was saying, "before you go broadcasting it."

Thirdly, in many ways this was, in faith terms, "lift off" point for Peter and the other disciples. The penny had dropped; his confession and his faith are very real and vibrant, but Peter still had so much to learn. Yes, he had recognised Jesus as the Messiah but what did he understand the Messiah to be?

And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

The same is true on our faith journey, each of us has so much to learn, so many new things for God to teach us. Each of us needs to be open to these lessons. Peter was to learn that the Messiah was not a conquering king, but a suffering servant: a suffering servant through whom God's love for his creation would be seen at its most profound.

The message for each of us is that it is important to proclaim our faith and do so with boldness, by both word and deed, but at the same time to be aware that we are on a journey, with God, in which he will show us new and wonderful things. We will struggle at times, just as Peter, did but we are walking with God.

How would we answer Jesus' question this morning?

"Who do you say that I am?"

If we answer as Peter did "You are the Messiah", are we prepared for the reality of what that means in terms of our lives, even if we do not at first fully understand its true meaning.