

OT: Isaiah 50.4-9a
NT: James 3.1-12
G: Mark 8.27-end

“Who do people say that I am?”

“Who am I?” gets at the heart of one of our most basic needs: our need for identity.

We, as living beings, search for and find comfort in a solid sense of identity. It grounds us. It gives us confidence; our sense of identity affects every single thing in our lives – from the choices we make to the values we live by.

The “answer” to “who am I” is our identity and shapes all that we are.

So, to our reading from Mark chapter eight, this chapter represents a pivotal point in the gospel, for although at the very beginning of his book, Mark has stated that it is about the good news of Jesus Christ, it is only at this halfway point that the question of who Jesus really is gets explicitly stated. And hence Jesus asks two similar questions. To the disciples he asks, “Who do people say that I am?” and to Peter he asks, “Who do you say that I am?”. The disciples note that people have understood Jesus in various ways – as John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the prophets. All good attempts to understand Jesus but all missing the crucial point made by Peter that he is in fact the Messiah, the Christ, the promised saviour from God. And yet his answer would have shocked many people for Jesus then goes on to say that he must undergo great suffering, be killed, and three days later rise from the dead.

This was not the kind of Messiah that many Jews were expecting, a Messiah who would triumphantly conquer the Romans and establish God’s kingdom in

Israel. But they were forgetting that the Old Testament prophets foresaw not only a triumphant Messiah but also a suffering Messiah, the suffering servant of Isaiah chapter fifty three. Perhaps this is why Jesus strictly orders his disciples not to tell anyone who he really is, since the people's idea of Messiahship was the wrong one, and he didn't want the wrong idea to be spread to others. Peter, of course, was one of those Jews who failed to understand what Jesus as the Messiah really meant and hence he rebuked Jesus for talking of his suffering and death. However, in a reference back to the earlier temptation narrative, Jesus rebukes him sharply with the words, "Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Strong words indeed.

Jesus then goes on to tell his disciples of the suffering and death which lies ahead of him as the Son of Man, a reference to the fact of Jesus' humanity as well as his divinity that is acknowledged elsewhere in this gospel. Unsurprisingly, the disciples do not understand what Jesus is saying and they are also too afraid to ask him.

The picture that Jesus paints is stark. The crowds around him would have been used to seeing someone carrying a cross. They would have known where they were headed – to an agonizing death. Followers of Jesus are called to live with a similar disregard for personal safety and comfort. Our own progress and achievements, our enjoyment, and our success: those things aren't to be our priority. Of course, they have their place, but we're not asked to make them the object of all our energy and attention. Rather, we're to set out hearts and minds

on God; on worship and service, on loving our neighbour and working for justice.

In chapter 3 of his letter, James makes the point that both blessing and cursing come from our mouths. We praise and glorify God with our lips, yet we also curse those made in God's image. It struck me that Peter's words to Jesus illustrate this description of our speech. Sometimes we say the right thing, and sometimes we get it horribly wrong. One moment Peter makes the wonderful statement about who Jesus is - the Messiah, the anointed one - but his next comment completely undermines that as he rebukes Jesus for speaking of suffering and death. We need to recognise when we wander off the path of true discipleship, when we shy away from the challenge to deny ourselves and take up our cross.

James next turns to the question of wisdom, insisting that wisdom is as wisdom does. This echoes the points from chapter 2, where he indicated that what a person does is a strong indication of what they believe. More specifically, in this chapter, James says wise people lead lives full of good works done in the humility of wisdom. James agrees with Solomon – in Proverbs – that wisdom always requires humility.

The wisdom of the world is built on an entirely different perspective. Instead of humility, worldly wisdom leads everyone to make their lives about themselves. This mindset tells us to look at what other people have, and to decide what we want and then make a plan to get it for ourselves. Success according to the world, then, is getting what you want in life.

James tells us that this is a misleading point of view. Believing in such a way of life leads to all the chaos, confusion, and evil we see in the world. The wisdom of heaven offers us a quite different strategy for living and leads us to quite different results. Because we trust God to provide what we need, we can let go of envy and selfish ambitions. We can lead lives of peace, gentleness, reasonableness, kindness, and more. We can help plant peace and help bring in a harvest of righteousness.

And we struggle for words – or perhaps we struggle to control our words. So we reach for what we can find, for words and images that are familiar and comforting. And that's fine. We aren't meant to give a full, comprehensive answer. We can't do that – it's impossible. Instead, we might go to the riches of Christian tradition, to a favourite hymn or poem or book. To a selection of well-loved and remembered Bible verses. To those words and ideas and practices that the church has agreed and passed down throughout long ages and across countries and continents, now given to us in our liturgy and in the creeds; which serve as a reminder that although there is not one single right answer to Jesus' question, there are plenty of wrong answers. God is who and what God is; but God is not necessarily who we think, or hope, or wish God is.

However good our answers, though, however beautiful our words, they will all, always, end up falling short. Our limited words, our limited brains, will never be able to describe our unlimited God. We cannot say conclusively what God is. We cannot describe God in God's glory and in God's fullness. We can never say enough. We can never properly speak or write the answer to that question. But our lives, my brothers and sisters, our lives...if a picture is worth a thousand

words, how many words is a whole human life worth? Every single thing that we say and do is a constant answer to that question. Our lives are a constant testimony, a continual witness about God to the world, and a continual confession to God about ourselves. Everything we do out there in the world, everything we do here in church, what we do and how we do it, and what we don't do – every last detail about us says something about who and what we think God is. In every building and timing, in every action and inaction, in every word and silence, ask yourself: what does this say about God? Because God's question to us is very simple, and very important: who do you say that I am?

Amen.

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