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# “Who Do You Say I Am?”

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*Text: Mark 8:27-38*

About seven or eight years ago, a couple of researchers in sociology and psychology published a book with the title “The First Four Minutes”. It was the thesis of these authors that all relationships are completely determined in the four minutes after people first meet. In four minutes we decide whether a person we have just met will become a casual acquaintance, a close friend, our husband or wife, a bitter enemy; or we decide to let that person walk through our life, and out of it, never to be seen again!

If that is correct, then it puts clergy like me, taking their first service and preaching their first sermon in a new parish, under great pressure. After all, I want my relationship with you to go well. According to this theory, I've got about three minutes left, if you count from the start of the sermon, or it's already too late, if you count from the beginning of the service. Thus it's very tempting to turn this sermon into an advertisement for myself. I could tell you what a fine fellow I am, ever so subtly and discreetly of course. Or I could tell you of the vision I have for myself in this parish, tell you the great things we will accomplish together, tell you how wonderful the next several years are going to be for us all. That would be wrong; that would be preaching myself, and as St. Paul reminds preachers, we are to preach Christ, and only Christ, and so perhaps I should just get on with that. But, who is Christ, that I am to preach to you?

## I

That's not a new question, of course! Over nearly twenty centuries much ink, and much blood, has been spilled trying to come to a satisfactory and agreed upon answer. Today's Gospel reading from St. Mark probably records the first occasion that the question was debated, at that time between Jesus and the disciples. The questions that Jesus asks then, and the answers given then, are still relevant to us today, because they are the same questions that are continually asked of us in our Christian journey. Our answers are as important as those of the disciples, because they determine the very heart of our faith.

Jesus asks, "Who do they say that I am?" Jesus begins by questioning what the disciples have learned about him by listening to others. That is the starting point for beginning to understand who Jesus is; considering what others have said about him. It's easy to say that isn't good enough, and rightly so, and move on to the second of Jesus' questions. But I'd like to suggest that even in the disciples' times, and more so today, a true understanding of who Jesus is requires knowing who others have thought him to be. True knowledge of Jesus begins with at least a small understanding of what nearly twenty centuries of thinking and reflecting and meditating about Jesus have produced.

Our Anglican church gives great importance to past thinking in the way it develops its theology, by giving tradition, the opinions of the church in the past, equal weight with the Holy Scriptures and our own human reason. Thus in developing our understanding of who Jesus is, we cannot ignore the writings about him in the past, nor can we ignore the research of scholars past and present. I don't mean to suggest that you need to become familiar with twenty centuries of writings about Jesus. I do want to say that our Church's understanding of Jesus, expressed in the way we worship in our liturgies, and by what our church teaches in its dogmas and official statements, does contain a large measure of past answers to the question, "Who do they say that I am?" Anglicans do not lightly reject the answers of the past in favour of some attractive, modern, and preferably easy theology, although I hope that we are also open to change and do not cling to traditional thinking at all costs.

But, all that is *not* enough! No amount of gathering of opinions about Jesus, past or present, no amount of historical

exploration, no amount of general knowledge, valuable as all that is, can be a substitute for a personal opinion, a personal verdict, a personal statement of faith. We can do all the reading we want, all the listening to others that we want, and out of that we can put together a picture of Jesus, but ultimately Jesus asks each of us, as he asked the disciples, "Who do *you* say that I am?" An academic thesis, a term paper concluding, "And therefore these are everyone else's opinions of Jesus" will not do. The question is a personal one. "Who do you say that he is? Who do I say that he is?"

## II

In our Gospel reading Peter answers the question with "You are the Christ." To understand what Peter meant we cannot use our own understanding of what it means to be "the Christ", because our understanding is coloured by twenty centuries of tradition. Rather, we have to understand what that word meant to Peter. What Peter confessed was that he believed that Jesus was the promised Messiah, the one anointed by God to deliver Israel from the yoke of Roman domination, the one sent by God to restore Israel to the status of God's chosen people living in the promised land free from foreigners. It was widely believed in first century Israel that such a Messiah, such a Christ (the two words mean the same thing) would rally the people into an uprising, and with God's help push the Romans out of Palestine, and then reign over a restored Israel from the throne of David in Jerusalem.

From what follows in our reading it is clear that Peter's answer was the wrong one! First, Jesus tells the disciples in very strong language to tell this to no one. Jesus is not the kind of Christ that everyone is expecting, and there is no point in arousing the wrong expectations among the people. And then Jesus tells the disciples just exactly who he is. He does not use the title "Christ" of himself, preferring instead the term "the Son of humanity", and goes on to describe that he must suffer and be rejected, and be killed, and that he then would rise again. Peter of course prefers his own answer, namely, that Jesus is the conquering, glorious, liberating Messiah who will lead the insurrection, to Jesus' rather depressing description, and argues with Jesus. And then Peter is told off in very harsh

terms, being called Satan, the arch-tempter, the arch-deceiver! No, Jesus is not the kind of Christ that Peter has in mind!

### III

We too confess that Jesus is the Christ, every week in the creed. What sort of Christ do we have in mind? Do we fall into the same trap Peter fell into?

We don't have to look too far to find theologies of glory, ways of thinking about Jesus that see him as the conquering hero, the one who will make all things right, rather than as the suffering servant who is persecuted and who dies. It is all too easy, and all too common, to see the Gospel of Jesus only in terms of Easter and Pentecost, with Christmas thrown in for sentimental reasons, and ignore Passiontide and Good Friday completely. It is easy to become overly fond of empty crosses as the Christian symbol, and to forget that there were three hours on a Friday long ago when the one we confess as the Christ, God in the world, and Lord of all, hung suffering, nailed to a cross!

Or, we can take Christ, and make him into a poetic idealist, a great moral teacher, a beautiful sentimental figure, someone living in another time and another place, completely out of touch with our changed, modern world. That's been done! Or we can take Christ, and turn him into a picture to hang inside churches, or to be made into stained glass, and to be safely kept there, never to enter the real world of our lives. That too has been done! Or we can take Christ, and turn him into a social crusader, a liberator, someone who accepts and encourages violence in the pursuit of liberty and social justice and fairness and equality. And that too has been done! Or we can turn Christ into an inspiring leader and great teacher, but not, no never, the revelation and incarnation of the ultimate God. That, too, has been done! Or, we can turn Christ into a dear companion for the home and family, a personal friend and inspiration, an example for the children, someone to guide one's private inner life, but never one's master for business, work, politics, or anything in the "real" world. And that has also been done!

Who do we, you and I, say that he is? And more importantly than what we say with our mouths, what do our lives,

our attitudes, our sense of values, say that he is? Do we say that Jesus is Christ, Jesus is Lord, Jesus is the incarnation and revelation of God, the master of our lives and all that we are and have, only on Sunday, for an hour or so, and the rest of the time we really act as if he were something else, something less, something weaker? Do our lips whisper one thing, and our actions shout something else? Jesus himself tells us what it means really to understand who he is, what it means to give the *right* answer to his question, "Who do you say that I am?"

#### IV

"If any would follow me, let them deny themselves, and take up their cross." Notice that in our Gospel reading Jesus says this not only to the disciples, but also to the multitudes he has summoned. This saying of Jesus is clearly intended for all his followers, and thus is very much addressed to us.

Self-denial is one of the hardest things to do. This is not some foggy idea, easy to work around. Self-denial is appallingly sharp and clear. It is far more than refusing to give things to ourselves, or giving up things that we enjoy. In fact, self-denial may have nothing to do with these. Not giving ourselves something we want, or giving up something we enjoy, may bring with it much self-satisfaction as we tell ourselves, secretly and inwardly, "Look how good I am!"

Denying self is far deeper than this. It means lowering the priority of ourselves, our total fascination with "I" and "me" and "mine", and giving priority only to God. It means giving up ourselves, our needs, and wants, and wishes, if these conflict with the demands of God, not as spiritual exercise to prove just how excellent we can be at denying self, but only for God's sake. It simply means becoming Christlike; becoming submissive to the will of God.

And the prospect of taking up a cross is difficult to face. It is so difficult that we have come up with all sorts of definitions for taking up a cross that avoid the real issue. We speak of an accidental calamity as a cross that we must bear. But a calamity is not a cross, even though it may be tragic. We speak of loss or sorrow as a cross. But these are not a cross, even though they may be heavy burdens. We even speak of our own shortcomings, our tempers, weaknesses, faults, as crosses we

bear. We can get quite pious about the many things that afflict us, the many supposed crosses we bear. But let's remember one thing. These things may be tragic, and heavy to endure, but the incarnate God does not die on them!

The cross for Jesus was his deliberate choice of giving up his life, to die the cruel death of a rejected criminal, in order to break the power of sin over all humanity. It was a freely made choice to bring to us the truth about God, and about God's love, and it was a choice made out of love and in obedience to God's will. The cross was the ultimate act of ministry to all humanity. So for us, as disciples of Jesus, the cross means a deliberate choice of something we could evade, the taking up of a burden that we are not required to lift, simply because we love God, and because God wants it. Taking up our cross means taking upon ourselves the responsibility for the lives of our neighbours, no matter where they are, and putting ourselves without reservation at the service of Jesus in preparing the way of the reign of God. Taking up our cross means joining in the struggle against evil, whatever that may demand from us. Only by being willing, freely, to lose all, including our lives, in the service of God, will we gain life eternal.

## V

I started by telling about a book called "The First Four Minutes". Fortunately for us, the thesis of that book does not apply to our relationship with Jesus Christ. No matter what our relationship with Christ has been in the past, it can always change. Over and over we are asked, "Who do they say that I am?" and "Who do you say that I am?" I expect that our answers will change, and probably should change, from day to day and over a lifetime. What is important to remember is that our relationship with Jesus is not something that is fixed forever by something that happened in the first four minutes, or even everything that has happened up to right now. Our relationship with Jesus is *always* open to change. And with God's grace, there may be a time when we can say "You are the Christ, and yes, I will deny myself, and yes, I will take up my cross, and I will follow you."

I also hope that this concept of the first four minutes determining all relationships does not apply to Christians, at least

not within the church. If we believe in anything at all we believe in crucifixion and rising again, in dying and in resurrection, in sin and forgiveness. That means in our relationships with one another we need to be always open to change, always open to new beginnings, always be ready to start over again. That too is being Christ-like.

“Who do we, you and I, say that he is?” The answer ought to come not only from our mouths, but from within our lives. In a few moments we will meet the risen Christ in the bread and wine of holy communion. It is my prayer for us that as we eat and drink Christ he will feed and strengthen us, so that with his grace our lives and our actions and our values answer, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God, and I will follow you.”