

Church of St Edward the Confessor, Lugano

A Sermon preached by Bishop Michael Langrish on 12 Sept 2021 - Trinity 15



The Perpetual question: Who do you say that I am?

Tell me about Jesus. Who is Jesus for you? For nearly 50 years this is a question I have posed to those being prepared for confirmation, to candidates for ordination, and applicants for various posts in the church.

Who is Jesus? That is the question Mark poses to all who hear his Gospel. We are in the middle of a sequence of gospel readings taken from Mark and so far in this Gospel narrative we have heard suggestions and ideas in answer to that question— from the disciples, from the crowds, from a demoniac – but today Jesus asks his followers directly – ‘Who do **you** say that I am’. And it was Peter who with divine insight, saw right into the heart of things – ‘*You are the Messiah, the Christ*’, he says. Matthew adds ‘*the Son of the living God*’. That confession of faith is a break-through, a turning point for Peter, and for the Gospel story as a whole. But what does this confession of Peter really mean? – Jesus is then very explicit – this vocation as Messiah – saviour, rescuer, mediator, is not about power, military might, human status, nationalistic dominance and pride, not about **forcing** people to **do** anything, but rather **helping** them to **see** things differently, even when this comes, to him, at very great cost. What lay ahead - entering the lion’s den that was Jerusalem; braving opposition, conflict, and rejection; facing the real possibility of desertion isolation, intense suffering; a path leading towards a cross, to the crisis of death – all this has a purpose, to help poor, sinful humanity to see, through experience – to see in Jesus - a way of being human very different from the way of the world.

He began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³²He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But 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.’

And isn't that so extraordinary? The one person who had seemed to grasp the true significance of Jesus, is now the one who, from Jesus, receives a rebuke. But note what the text says – It was in turning and looking at **all** the disciples, that Jesus rebuked Peter, and in such strong terms too - calling him 'Satan' no less. It doesn't come much stronger than that. Having only just had the insight to answer the question once: *Who do you say I am?* Peter is now forced to face it and answer it again, as the circumstance ahead become a bit clearer, and not to his taste. But it is evident that this question is not for Peter alone – it is for **all** the disciples, you and me too.

'You are the Christ' – the words may come easily enough, but in any particular circumstances, especially those we may find uncomfortable or not like, then what does the answer mean then, what is its cash value, now?

I love the Peter of the Gospels. I love his decisiveness, his big-heartedness, his impetuosity. When Jesus walked on the water, Peter got out of the boat to go to him – I think that's brilliant, even if he did take his eye off the ball as I suspect many of us would have done too. On the Mount of Transfiguration, it was Peter who responded to the vision of Jesus with Moses and Elijah with that spontaneous – *'Lord, how good it is to be here'*, even if in then trying to perpetuate the moment with the suggestion of building little huts, he was again not quite getting the point. And then in the Garden of Gethsemane he mis-understood Jesus' opaque words about taking up swords and lashed out – wrong! – and is rebuked yet again, but at least he thought he was being obedient, at least he was a man who sincerely tried!

Peter had to learn that discipleship, which begins with a turning from self to follow Jesus, doesn't stop at that point. It goes on; it continues with turning afresh to Christ, constantly over and over again; in different circumstances, facing and answering that same crucial question. *'Peter who do you say that I am? – **Now?*** What do I mean for you here, in this place, at this moment, in these relationships, right now?

And so it is also with you and me. We make statements about our faith in Jesus; then we blow it in how we behave: the mistakes we make, the promises we forget, the times we show just how little we really understand. But Jesus is still there, gently, but insistently, pressing the question over and over again. *'Who do you say I am?'* It's time to take stock and turn back to me once more.

And of course, it is often said that the longest and darkest hour is the one just before the first ray of dawn. So, Peter, in the courtyard of the High Priest experiences that

fateful moment, in his three-fold denial of Jesus, the final words passing his lips as a cock crows. It is the harbinger of dawn, but Peter cannot see the light for tears. Do you remember how at the Last Supper Jesus had predicted this, but concluded, *'And Peter, when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers and sisters'*. And so, only days later, after that dreadful betrayal on crucifixion's morn, Peter at the start of another day experienced that magnificent yet searching restoration, and a firmly putting back on the path of faith once more. On the beach by the sea of Galilee, again comes a question: *Simon do you love me?* Who do you **now** say that I am? And then that marvellous trust by Jesus in this constantly falling man: *'Feed my lambs', 'Tend my sheep', 'Feed my sheep'*, and then he repeats the first words Peter heard at the beginning in Galilee, *'Follow me'* and Peter turns yet again, from failed disciple in a broken and scattered band, to take his place as new leader of the resurrection community filled with faith and hope.

And so Peter's story and his constantly having to face the question the all important question still went on. In the Acts of the Apostles Peter, now filled with the Holy Spirit of Pentecost, was arrested and flogged three times. The Acts of the Apostles records 9 of his sermons, a sign surely of his magnificent preaching ability; and yes, there were disputes, and Peter is still far from perfect, and yet he gave such sacrificial, magnificent, whole-hearted leadership, and each time answering, in the reality of his life, that same echoing question: *Peter who do you **at this moment** say that I am?*

And in this he gives us a clue to all Christian discipleship – yours and mine. The invitation *'Follow me'* comes to each and everyone of us. And we follow because like Peter we recognise that Jesus has the words of eternal life. We are here this morning, presumably, because we have experienced his light, tasted his goodness, as we do in each Eucharist, and we too have heard in our hearts his voice, as I hope we expect to do week by week too. And yet, in many little ways, and sometimes in pretty big ways, we too get it wrong, mess it up, fail to listen and so misunderstand, turn away from him who is our life and joy and crown, and prefer the easy life, and the ways of the world, to the path of the cross. Yet still over and over again the question comes. *'Who do you say I am?'* – *in these circumstances right now?* And *how is your answer reflected, for others to see, in the way you are living your life, conducting your affairs, relating to other Christians, and working – or not – for the Common Good?*

So much in the normal Christian life is, or at least ought to be, about developing the habits and patterns that enable us to go on giving this answer: *'Despite everything, Jesus, despite all my failure, you still are the Messiah, my Saviour, my friend, my Lord. And with your grace I too – like Peter - will be turned again'*. The Scriptures, the life of prayer, being together in Church and in worship, the training of our minds and wills in godliness, these should all help us to 'turn away from sin, and be faithful to Christ'- as we pray on Ash Wednesday, but in reality, have to live out every day.

There is a beautiful traditional story from the Early Church. In about AD 64 in Rome, a terrible persecution of the Church broke out under the Emperor Nero. Many houses of believers were burned, and the Christians begged their Leader and Apostle to leave the city for his own safety. Peter, now an old man, and perhaps reluctantly, trudged out of the city along the Appian Way. Suddenly, he met Jesus, walking towards the city. He said the famous words now immortalised by a Church building, *Quo vadis, Domine?* Where are you going, Lord? *'I am going to Rome'*, said Jesus, *'to die for you – once more'*. In effect Peter is being asked yet again: *'Who do you say that I am now?'* According to the story: Peter right then turned, and returned to Rome, there to die a martyr's death, tradition telling us - by crucifixion, although he asked to be crucified upside down, as a sign of his unworthiness – but what an amazing answer to the question that had so formed his life. *'Follow me'* was therefore entirely fulfilled. The meaning is in the turning. *'Who do you say I am?'* The answer is in the living.

Let me end where I began. A few weeks ago, I was asked to give a talk to a group of people in training as church pastoral assistants. At the end, as usual, I asked if they had any questions. I then said: Now I have a question too. Who is Jesus for you? There was a long silence. Eventually someone timidly replied: "He's my Saviour". Alright then, I said, tell me a story from your own life which illustrates just what that means?

Whatever we say when we come to church week by week: Jesus is Lord; Jesus is Saviour; Jesus is guide; Jesus is friend; there will come a time when we meet him face to face and he will ask: *'Was I really? What did that mean? Tell me a story – about what those words have really meant for you'*. For in the end, it is in our daily lives that the answer – No, the answers - to the question *'Who do you say that I am?'* will really be found.

Mark 8.27-end

²⁷ Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' ²⁸And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' ²⁹He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.' ³⁰And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

³¹ Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³²He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But 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.'

³⁴ He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. ³⁶For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'