

A Sermon by Bishop Ross Bay for worship on Sunday 12th September 2021,
preached by video recording during COVID-19 Level 4 restrictions.

The sermon is based on Mark 8:27-38

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?' And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.' And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

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. He said all this quite openly. 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.'

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. For 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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those 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.'

Sermon

I have a favourite story about mistaken identity, so please forgive me if some of you have heard me tell it before.

A few years ago I had been at the Cathedral for Evensong one night and was chatting to people at the door. An English visitor came up to me and said "it sounds like I'll be getting home before you." I said that I didn't have far to go as I only lived across the road. And he said, "No I mean that I'll be flying back to the UK tomorrow."

I thought he had mistaken my very cultured kiwi accent, and so I explained that I wasn't from the UK but was the local bishop. He said "Oh I'm sorry, I thought the Dean said that you were the Archbishop of York."

So this was while the completion project was going on. John Sentamu, who was then the Archbishop of York, was in the country and had offered to do an afternoon tea as a fundraiser for the project. The Dean announced this during the service and this gentleman misheard what she had said.

Now for any of you who have ever seen Archbishop John Sentamu, you will know that he is a very Ugandan-looking Ugandan, so in normal circumstances it would be hard to mix us up.

I knew it would be wrong to try out an African accent to explain the confusion to the man, so I set him right and wished him a good trip home.

‘Who do people say that I am?’ Jesus asked the disciples.

The obvious answer was Jesus of Nazareth, because that is who Jesus was. But of course the question was being asked to see what perceptions people have begun to make about the identity of Jesus beyond a given name and a town of origin, and so to address the possibility of mistaken identity.

This question comes a reasonable way into Jesus’ public ministry. All the way along there had been speculation about Jesus especially because of the miracles he performed and the authority of his teaching. After the feeding miracle in John’s gospel people declared that “this is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.” When John the Baptist was in prison, he sent some of his disciples to Jesus to ask “Are you the one who is to come?” And most explicitly, again in John’s gospel, the woman at Sychar asks her neighbours “He cannot be the Messiah, can he?”

There has been something of a theme of a messianic secret up until this point in Mark’s gospel. Jesus has been at pains to make no declarations about himself and to avoid widespread public speculation. He wanted to avoid the problem of mistaken identity and perhaps especially to avoid becoming the focus of popular political movements and thus his ministry and destiny to become subverted and misunderstood.

But also, Jesus’ constant focus was on the kingdom of God coming into the world, rather than on himself. Jesus acts as the agent for that coming kingdom. All that he did and taught are signs of the kingdom, clues to its presence.

Jesus allowed his life and ministry to act as a parable, that those who had eyes to see and ears to hear could discern how the kingdom was coming into effect through him.

So it was not just about Jesus being identified as the Messiah, but what people understood the nature and role of the Messiah to be. The point at this stage in Jesus’ ministry is where all of that needs to come into sharper focus. So Jesus is interested to know what people are perceiving, but most particularly what the disciples themselves are thinking.

‘But who do you say that I am?’

Peter makes the response on their behalf. No doubt this has often been the focus of private korero among them, what we might in our day call the carpark conversations. They are convinced – Jesus is the Messiah.

This is a watershed moment in the gospel, a turning point in its focus. While still having a public profile to his ministry, Jesus increasingly works with the disciples to help them understand what kind of Messiah he is, explaining to them that suffering, death and resurrection lie ahead. And for a wider audience, teaching begins to include a call to self-denial and cross-carrying as what it means to become a follower of such a Messiah.

Christian faith then seeks from us more than just that we can name Jesus as Saviour, but to understand what is the nature of this salvation, and what does it mean to be the follower of such a Saviour. For it is easy to misunderstand who someone is, and to set wrong expectations about them, and so to fail to relate and respond well to them. And we heard in the gospel how Peter immediately did that.

The “Who do you say that I am?” question is one that needs our ongoing consideration to understand what it means for developing discipleship. How are we following Jesus through a pandemic? What does self-denying, cross-carrying discipleship look like in such a time?

The Missions Board “Get one, Give one” campaign has offered us the opportunity to respond to the gift of a free covid vaccine in our country by giving to assist the vaccination programmes in other countries where they will not be so universally available.

Do we know who in our neighbourhood may be struggling with isolation or not be able to get out and provide for essential needs?

What are the faith messages that we have to proclaim in such a time, words that speak of the hope that we have in Christ, what the peace of God that passes all understanding means, and how people might experience these things in a time of massive uncertainty.

Who do I say that Jesus is? What are my expectations of him? And what does it mean for me to follow, so that with Jesus I might point to the coming kingdom of God?

May God continue to bless us in these times with grace and perseverance that we may yet show ourselves to be true followers of Jesus the Saviour.