

16 after Trinity - Mark 8:27-end

Firstly, may I say how lovely it is to be back with you all after 3 months away! Although I have not been on holiday all of this time (!) and geographically have been working in Cirencester, it has not been within our Parish ministry - I have missed my colleagues and all of you. So it's great to be back here today.

I've been on placement with Cirencester's Signpost and Upper Room Community, meeting all sorts of vulnerable people who are clearly very precious in the sight of those who minister to them, and of course to God also. The experience has taken me across the threshold of our parish churches, and right out of my comfort zone. It's been a time of formation for me; I have both learned a great deal and come away with many questions for reflection. If you want to know more, there's an article about it in this month's Parish magazine.

However, another part of the time away has been spent conducting research for and writing a dissertation. How amazing, then, on my return to this pulpit for the first time in 3 months to be faced with the very text that is the subject of that dissertation: *Who do you say that I am?* As one of my sons would say, *Now is that chance, or God-planned?*

On Sunday afternoons for 6 weeks over the summer I've been meeting with a small group of regular churchgoers that has been addressing precisely the question Jesus poses to his disciples. As you might expect we've been looking at various answers to the question offered by Scripture, with its many titles for Jesus, each with a different significance; and the answer given by the Church,

in statements of faith such as the Creed that we shall all say together in a moment.

But we have also been looking at answers offered by academic theologians who, particularly over the last two hundred years or so, have really wrestled with this question. The orthodox belief that within the one person of Jesus Christ, who walked this earth, there were and are two natures - one human and one divine - has come under increasing pressure. How are we to understand this belief in an age when reason reigns supreme, and such belief is contrary to general human experience?

There's a broader context to consider too. The Church of England nationally is calling for its disciples, that's all of us both lay and ordained, to become missionaries, not in the old sense of travelling overseas to convert the heathen, but in a more contemporary sense of just speaking to those we meet every day about our faith, about **our** understanding of who Jesus is, that others might come to know him too.

I suspect that most of us are happy to live out our faith in practical ways, through personal moral responsibility, in service to our community, and so on. But the call to speak about our faith to others is more challenging. If we are to respond to this call, it seems to me we need to know what we actually think about our faith in order to know what to say.

During my placement I met leaders who were clearly responding to the call to be missional disciples, speaking about who Jesus is for them, often through their deeds certainly, but also through their words. They have taken their Christian faith out into our wider community, reaching out to those who either had not heard

about Jesus, or who had been so damaged in life that they thought Jesus could not possibly want them as his disciples.

And this work of mission was bearing fruit: I attended a service at our own St Lawrence Church in which people I had come to know over the placement were baptised and confirmed. They trusted their leaders enough to receive from them not only the practical care they desperately needed, but also spiritual care. They were prepared to listen to what those leaders had to say about who Jesus is because of who those leaders were for them.

To have an answer to Jesus question seems to me to be very important. It may take us out of our comfort zone to really address this question, but our Gospel reading suggests that that is what Jesus really wants each of us to do. He is not content to have us repeat back to him *who men say that he is*. He listens, but immediately challenges his disciples, and by extension all of us too, saying: *But who do **you** say that I am?*

I suggest that the importance of forming our own answer lies in more than one area of our Christian lives. Yes, orthodox belief is about the content of our faith, and we need to be able to say the Creed with integrity. A study to which my dissertation will respond found that the majority of a research sample of regular churchgoers found it very difficult to say the creed, that is to affirm both the divine and the human natures of Christ. There was a considerable gap between what they professed to believe and what they actually believed.

You might then say that they had experienced a failure in Christian education, that those who had taught them were less than adequate. It is somewhat alarming to hear in the letter of James this morning that *Not many should become teachers,*

Those who teach *will be judged with greater strictness. For all of us make many mistakes!* (and I guess that goes for preachers too!). But I don't think it's all about education.

Yes, we do all make mistakes; not only those who preach and teach, but also those who listen. But we all also long to be good disciples, to be able to 'turn to Christ', as the baptism service so beautifully puts it, to live out our baptism vows with honesty and integrity throughout our lives.

I think it's more than interesting to note that in the early days of the Church the preparation for baptism was Christian education offered not over a few weeks but a few years. That may be longer than is practical for most young parents today, but it emphasises the importance of good Christian teaching. However, more importantly, it allows time for the recipient to reflect on that teaching, and so begin the journey of Christian formation.

It seems to me that the issue, and not just for baptism preparation, is not really **education**, but rather **formation**. True formation is not just about wrestling with the difficult questions of faith, perhaps so that we can have all the right things to say as missional disciples. More importantly it is about the lifelong journey of becoming who we truly are as disciples of Christ. I believe this is at the heart of the question Jesus poses.

The question he asks is not easy to answer, but I believe each of us has to take it seriously, and form our own answer. It doesn't have to be a highly articulate answer, but it does need to be an honest one. We may struggle to sort out what we really think; we may have to move out of our comfort zone, perhaps saying to ourselves, *It is no longer ok for me to just cross my fingers behind*

my back during bits of the Creed I find difficult. Instead I actually need to think about this more. Who is Jesus Christ for me?

And I further believe this is a question we must ask not just individually, but corporately too as the Body of Christ; not just for our own sakes but for the sake of those beyond church walls. Together with our wider community, we need to ask, in the words of the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Who is Jesus Christ for us today?* I suspect that many in our communities admire the historical Jesus of Nazareth as a preacher and teacher, even as a moral exemplar, but have no idea how he can also be their friend, and redeemer.

As you individually and we collectively try to answer Jesus' question, I am convinced that, in that same moment, we will be turning towards him who asks it, not away from him. He wants **your** answer: *Who do you say that he is?* And as you put together your answer, even if that means a struggle that takes you right out of your comfort zone, he who asks it of you will, in that same moment, be forming you into the wonderful disciple he calls you to be.

And so let us pray again the Collect for today:

O Lord, we beseech you mercifully to hear the prayers of your people who call upon you; and grant that they may both perceive and know what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to fulfil them; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen