

21st Sunday Ordinary Time 2017

Fr Jarred Mercer

Isaiah 22.19-23

Psalms 138.1-2, 2-3, 6, 8

Romans 11.33-36

Matthew 16.13-20

+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

'Who do you say that I am?' This question of Jesus is at the core of our faith and life. However, it can be quite difficult for us to answer. One reason is that there is a great temporal distance between us and Jesus: two thousand years of history, in fact. But there is also a sense in which there is no real distance at all, as Jesus is not only a man from first century Palestine, he is someone encountered today.

Part of the issue in thinking about who Jesus is, is that we look back with hindsight, and as the saying

goes, 'hindsight is twenty-twenty'. Looking back at the life of Jesus, it is easy for us to think we have it all figured out—it is all set in stone, easy to manoeuvre. We know the story, we memorise the creeds, we confess the faith in Jesus that has been handed down to us, and in the process it is far too easy to associate our knowing of Jesus with what we can say about him: 'I believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God', etc.

Jesus is 'good news', yes, but also quite frankly 'old news' to many of us. When we forget about that aspect of *encounter*, Jesus becomes simply what we have always known about him, the familiar, the expected.

Matthew hints at the manner in which we should be approaching the question of who Jesus is at the beginning of today's Gospel reading: 'And *on the way* Jesus asked his disciples'. This 'on the way' is of course in one sense simply a geographical itinerary: they are on their way to Jerusalem, and will pass through Galilee, Capernaum and Jericho to get there. But

Christ's words in these verses take us on a spiritual itinerary as well—to be 'on the way' with Jesus, on the way to Jerusalem, is to follow him to the mystery of the cross. And this is where we meet him. This is where we find the answer to the question of his identity.

The people making a claim on Jesus' identity in Matthew's Gospel seem to be seeking after him, seeking answers, seeking the truth. But they sought after him from within the boundaries of their preconceived categories—from within the expected.

'Who do people say that I am?' Jesus asked. 'John the Baptist, and others Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets'. Some of these may have had contact with John the Baptist, and they knew the stories of Elijah and the prophets. These were familiar reference points for confronting the reality of Jesus. But the people failed to recognise the full identity of Christ because they judged him on their own terms, in their known categories, in terms of the predictable and the possible:

they didn't recognise the impossible newness that was before them—as perhaps we don't.

The people all see Christ as a prophet of God. And there is something in this. Prophets were interpretive keys to understand God's revelation, to understand God's 'way' for us. But Jesus is much more than an interpretive key to understand God. He is God himself entering into and inhabiting human space. He is God himself fully interpreted, fully translated into human life.

But even in Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah and Son of the living God, which Jesus calls a revelation from the Father, we see in the following verses that there is still no recognition of the *unexpected* and shocking nature of this declaration.

In fact, when Jesus goes on to explain what it means for him to be the Messiah—'he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering . . . and be killed, and on the third day be raised'—, Peter rebukes Jesus for his

scandalous statement. ‘God forbid’, he says, ‘This shall never happen to you’.

Here is Emmanuel, God-with-us—a temporal, historical, deployment of perfect divine love—, and he declares that the definition of his Messiahship is the humility and agony of suffering and dying. This is extraordinary. Not honour and glory, but defeat and powerlessness reveal our Christ to us, reveal our God to us.

This seems impossible. But it seems impossible to us, because just like the people who judged Jesus according to their own expectations, just like Peter who rebuked Christ, we think we already know who Jesus is. We think we already know what true love means.

But the life and teachings of Jesus force us to rethink everything we think we know about everything: power, mercy, forgiveness, otherness, death, and, of course, love. Love according to Jesus Christ is giving all that

we have to the poor, caring for orphans and widows, always receiving the stranger, visiting prisoners and the housebound, and even laying down our lives for others.

But we're not comfortable with a love that daily places us in the midst of brokenness and despair. A love that links us intimately with the sorrow we see around us. We like to think of love as something that makes us feel warm and happy inside, not something that breaks our hearts.

The demands of Jesus' love on our lives might be impossible for us to live perfectly, but that does not give us the right to pretend like they do not exist. If we want to refuse to live our lives as a continual gift on offer to the poorest among us; if we want to continue to go on living in a society in which there are parentless children when we might be able to provide a loving home for them; if we want to stand by and be silent, and therefore complicit, in response to racism and oppression that have become so normal and cliché that

you probably inwardly roll your eyes as I mention them, then we just need to admit that we are not willing to follow Jesus and so have invented our own religion instead. One the beauty of which touches us and the historical resonance of which satisfies something within us but one which is not willing to live 'on the way' with Jesus: on the way to Jerusalem, on the way to the cross.

But the beauty of following Jesus, the glorious beauty of living 'on the way' is that the way of Christ that places us always smack in the middle of the world's pain and brokenness does not end there but forges a new path.

Because encountering Jesus necessarily changes things. At each point of the gospel narratives when someone truly encounters Jesus they are transformed: blindness to vision, deafness healed, the dead raised, sins forgiven. For those who moved beyond their tired expectations, their frameworks of what they perceived as possible, the *impossible* happened.

There is a saying attributed to GK Chesterton: 'It is not that Christianity has failed, it is just that it has never been lived'. The encounter with Jesus moves us beyond definitions and propositions about who Jesus is or was. It brings us to the place of laying down our life, of living out his divine self-giving love, this impossible, heart-breaking love in the world today.

Paul in his letter to the Romans is right: God's judgments are unsearchable. God's ways are inscrutable. We cannot answer the question of who Jesus is, we cannot know who God is from the restrictions of our pre-conceived categories and expectations. God cannot be known within the confines of our human *minds*. But in Jesus, God is met and touched with human *hands*. We meet God as we follow Jesus on the way to the cross, on the way to glory, and always and only on the way of love.

To answer Jesus' question, 'Who do you say that I am' is to meet God among us, and in return to discover

who we truly are in Christ—to enter into this glorious, beautiful, perpetual newness where all our brokenness is transformed, transfigured, toward glory.