

**“WHO DO YOU SAY I AM?”**

*Mark 8:29*

Come with me for a few moments on a journey into your imagination. It's a warm day and you're part of a crowd that's gathered to hear the travelling preacher. He's come to town as part of his tour of the country. There's nowhere quite big enough to contain the crowd, which is why you're out in the open air. Everyone has been talking about him – his preaching, his apparent miracle cures, his arguments with the establishment (both the religious hierarchy and the occupying military powers). Everyone has their own ideas about who he is, what he is – word has filtered through ahead of him, rumours are rife, passions are running high.

You've become pretty interested yourself. That's why you've been following him around for a few weeks now. There's something in it all, something you've never really seen before. This man is different. His message is different. His life is different. So, although you're part of the curious crowd, you're close to him. He speaks to you. He smiles at you. You're close enough to him to hear what he says to his inner circle, the motley group of twelve men who seem to be his closest friends and helpers.

And as you've followed him round – watching, listening, picking up the buzz – you've started to see something of his character, just a glimpse of the kind of person he is. There's an air of authority about him, something that exudes confidence, that refuses to be put down. It's as if he's always calling the shots, he's in charge, whatever anyone else might try to do. He's humble, of course: no doubt about that. He has time for anyone who needs him. He's prepared to take a detour to speak to a beggar or to help someone who's down on their luck. He'll even answer the questions of those whom he knows are out to make him look a fool. They never succeed, of course, but he never really rubs it in: just moves on and leaves people to think.

You've seen him transform lives. People who had no confidence are suddenly filled with hope after they've been with him. Those whose lives were plagued with doubt find themselves able to trust again, have something to put their faith in. Those who seemed to be struggling with their inner demons are given a new freedom, a peace and serenity. People *you* know, who have told stories of such hope, such joy even. In fact, that's why you came along in the first place, wanting to get closer to this man, hoping that some of it might rub off on you.

You've seen him heal people, reach out and physically touch those whom no-one else would even go near. You've seen people who had been blind suddenly able to see again. You've heard others talking about cures for cancer, for illnesses that seemed to be inoperable – all because of him. There's a power there. You can't explain it, but it seems to work. Sometimes the touch does it; sometimes a word; sometimes there's some kind of symbolic action – he rubbed mud on the eyes of one blind man; sometimes he is able to heal even at a distance, like he did for the army officer who came to him to ask about his batman.

You've seen his own lifestyle, the integrity of his actions. For much of it you've had to go on the reports of others, but some of it you've experienced yourself. Here's a man who seems to side with the poor and disadvantaged, but doesn't do it in any kind of patronising way. It appears he's poor himself. He doesn't have a settled home. He has no money to speak of. He doesn't put his undoubted gifts to work in order to make anything for himself. He keeps to the law, but sometimes interprets it in a different way from the lawyers and politicians – but his way always seems to be a better way to interpret it, almost as if that's what the law was meant to be in the first place.

And you've heard his words. He's a wonderful story teller – all kinds of tales about farmers and fishermen and travellers and judges, things you can relate to. But there's always a twist in the ending – and he jolly well makes you think. There was the story about the man who was beaten up on the road,

and it was a foreigner who finally helped him, a Samaritan! Or the one about a son who fleeced his dad, and when he'd squandered all the money, his dad actually welcomed him back into the family.

It wasn't always stories, though. You sat on a hillside once and listened to the preacher talking about how life should really be lived. The people who are really blessed are the ones who look out for peace, who don't spend all their time worrying about whether they've got enough money, or whether their wardrobe's up to date, or what they're going to eat next week. He talked about attitudes and priorities – it was as if he'd been the one who made us, so he knew what was best for us. Most of the people who were there said that that sermon on the mountainside was the best one they'd ever heard. You certainly felt that way and thought it would be a pretty good guide to life.

You've heard his challenges, too. Usually they've been directed at someone else – often the holier-than-thou religious types – but you've felt the keenness of his words as they've struck home. It's almost as if he knew what you were thinking before you'd even opened your mouth. As you've said, they came with such a weight of authority that they couldn't be ignored and you felt you just had to do something about them. Like that time they dragged some woman up to him whom they'd caught in bed with someone who wasn't her husband. His words sliced through the hypocrisy of the folk who wanted her punished. And he was pretty firm with her, too. “Never do it again,” he said to her – and you can be sure she won't.

But that's the thing. You've heard his challenge, but you've heard his words of comfort and encouragement, too. He told her not to do it again, but he also said he wasn't going to condemn her. There's no doubt he disapproved of what she'd done, but you heard that softness in his voice, that tone of encouragement, like when the prostitute tried the aromatherapy on his feet round at Simon's house, or when he called out to the tax man at the customs post and asked him to come along with him. Words full of gentleness and compassion. And they're words that have touched you, too.

And now he's here, here where you live. And he turns to speak. His voice isn't loud enough for the whole crowd to hear. He's speaking almost confidentially to those of you who are close to him, the inner circle and the few of you who've been following out of a desire to find out more. “You've got your ears to the ground,” he's saying. “What are folk saying about me?” Well, you've heard all kinds of answers to that question over the past few weeks. Some people are putting him on a level with the great preachers of the past. He's got something worthwhile to say, according to most of them. He's a prophet, on a par with other great prophets. He's a great teacher, with some wonderful stories and aphorisms. He's a good man, kind and gentle.

Of course, you've heard a lot of other stuff about him, too. He's a charlatan, a deceiver. He's a trouble maker trying to destabilise the country. He's a rabble-rouser, a quack – even a dabbler in the occult (that's why he's so successful with the demons, they say). But you don't tell him those things. You don't want to hurt him, for one thing. Anyway, you suspect he already knows what they're saying. But most of all, you want to believe the good things too. You think he's a good man, a special man. In fact, you think he's unique.

And then he looks at you – at least, that's the way it seems. There you are, someone who's heard his teaching, who's seen his impact on the lives of others, who's felt his growing influence on your life, and he seems to be talking just to you. In all that crowd of people, he's looking directly at you, speaking to you alone. “So what about you, then? Who do you say that I am?”

And before you can reply, someone else jumps in, the mouthy one, the one who always wants to answer the question first. Usually he makes a real fool of himself, but this time he seems to have got it right. “You're the Christ,” says Peter. “You're the one God's chosen, the one he has appointed to carry out his plan.” Of course, as soon as he says the word “Christ”, you all know what he means. It's a word that has so many resonances, that contains so much meaning. Some people still use the old word, “Messiah”. Others use phrases like “the Anointed One”. Like Peter says, this preacher, this Jesus is God's Son. He's

here as Saviour, to make a difference in this messy old world and in your messy old life. He's come to bring and to make peace. He's here to point you back to God, to restore that long-lost and long-desired relationship with God that has got so messed up by all the wrong things in your life. He's going to accomplish all that by dying and then being brought back to life: it's hard to understand, but he's saying it with that same old authority again.

And the Christ, the Messiah is also here as Lord. You've felt increasingly drawn to him over these past few weeks. Maybe it's time to go the whole hog, to commit yourself fully to him now, to say that you'll live the rest of your life in his service. After all, it seems that he's so committed to you and to your reconciliation with God that he's prepared to die for you.

Peter's answered, but he's still looking at you – you, sitting there this morning, drawn into this situation by someone else, perhaps, or having seen an advertisement, or having remembered a snatch of Jesus' teaching from a distant Sunday School or RE lesson, or just needing to know that someone loves you. And you're curious. You're interested. You've started thinking and there's a great deal in this man Jesus that is attractive. And he's looking at you, and saying, "OK. You've heard some of what I've got to say. You've seen things happening to other people that you can't deny are changing them for the better. Now, what about *you*? Who do *you* say I am?"

And you know that he's not interested in your telling him what other people think – good or bad – he's asking *you*. This is where the rubber hits the road. This is the time for decision. Is he just another prophet, just another good teacher? Or is he who he says he is – the Son of God, the Saviour of the world? If he is, then there are some implications that you cannot ignore. You're not going to get all the answers at once. You'll never understand everything about him. You'll never fully appreciate how much he cares about you. But that shouldn't stop you responding. Jesus is asking you this morning what you think of him. Don't walk out that door without answering.