

**“THE SECRET’S OUT”**  
***Mark 8:27-30***

It was an important day at the nursing home. After months of disruption, the new wing was finished and was to be officially opened by the Prince of Wales, who was in the area for some other engagements. He made the usual speech and then stayed for a few moments to talk to the residents. As he spoke with one little elderly lady, a small heap of bones under a knitted blanket, it became obvious that she didn't have a clue what was going on. After a bit, the Prince asked, “Do you know whom I am?” “Sorry, dear,” came the reply, “Can't help you there? Ask Matron: that's what we do – she'll be able to tell you who you are.”

That's the question Jesus asks of his disciples in this crucial episode in Mark's story of his life. This short passage comes more or less exactly halfway through the book. It's clearly a watershed moment and Mark, in his skilful compilation of this story, ensures that we see the importance of it. We've been looking at this story a few verses at a time, with at least a week's gap between each section – often much longer – so we haven't been approaching it like a single book that you sit down and read (although I hope at least some of you have taken the opportunity to read it through in one go), and that means we may well have lost something of the momentum that Mark has obviously tried to build up.

Mark has drawn his readers into this story with talk of the gospel, the Kingdom of God and the developing ministry of Jesus. Jesus has come into the story with an offer of a different life, a new perspective on the world. He has begun to expose the inadequacy of the old agenda, the agenda of rules and regulations, of self-serving priorities and self-seeking attitudes, the ineffectiveness of religion to deal with the problem of evil. And he has offered a new agenda – one which requires a good deal of faith and trust, but which offers glimpses of the Kingdom of God, the sovereign rule of God over his renewed and restored creation. That has not been simply rhetoric and empty promises. Mark has described Jesus' miraculous healings and exorcisms, his power over the natural world in providing food, calming storms and walking across lakes.

Jesus has begun to make a difference as he has restored a sense of humanity to outcasts and exposed the folly of the guardians of a misplaced reliance on tradition. No longer can men and women put their faith in the external, the outwardly pious, the cultivating of the right image. Entry into the Kingdom of God is for those who are prepared to trust Jesus, who see that true freedom is to be sought beyond the narrow religious and political boundaries to which they have become accustomed. Granted, the Kingdom is by no means complete, but the first tantalising glimpses of it can be seen in the words and actions of Jesus, and there is enough there to show people that the great visions of the Hebrew prophets – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos and the rest – visions of a creation operating as it was originally meant to operate, are beginning to be realised in these words and actions.

Some people have willingly followed Jesus: there is a small core group of twelve men who are being trained up to continue Jesus and many others have gathered in different places to hear his words and see him at work. Others have been violently opposed to what Jesus has said and done – mainly those who would appear to have a great deal to lose if the people realise that their carefully constructed system of rules and regulations is an unnecessary burden on their lives. But up to this point in the gospel, we have had a story of inclusion and hope, an offer of a new life which seems almost too good to be true. As we shall soon see, from this point on the story becomes darker – it will be story of suffering and commitment, and the realisation will dawn that those who seriously want to buy into the agenda of Jesus have to be prepared for sacrifice as well as *shalom*. It is a journey which will take us into new areas of faith and belief.

And that sense of journey, of progress, is highlighted by Mark here as he describes the circumstances under which this conversation takes place. Jesus is moving on. They have arrived in the area of

Caesarea Philippi and as they make their way forward – “*on the way*” (v27) – Jesus asks them a question. After the blindness of the Pharisees and the dullness of the disciples, light begins to dawn in a way that seems to mirror the previous story of the blind man’s healing. In these few verses we see Mark setting the scene (vv22,27), mentioning partial sight or understanding (vv23/4,28), full sight and understanding (vv25,29), and a command to be silent (vv26,30).

The question to the disciples is a simple one. Jesus is interested to hear what they’ve picked up about him: what are people saying? What’s the word on the streets? It’s a fairly general question, and Mark has already given us some idea of what the answer might be – back in 6:14,15 there is a comment on the way people are describing Jesus. Remember, there was nothing like the media and information culture that we have today, so the idea that this might indeed be John the Baptist is by no means out of the ordinary. And those who knew their Scriptures well might easily have assumed that what the prophet Malachi wrote in *Malachi 3:1;4:5* is actually being fulfilled. Others, with a vaguer grasp of the Scriptures and tradition might well have believed that Jesus was acting like one of the prophets. But many of these people will never have had anything to do with Jesus and their opinions are probably based on hearsay. As one commentator, High Anderson, writes: “*The people are interested but uninvolved spectators who in effect dispose of Jesus’ claim on their lives by labelling him in advance without encountering him.*”

But after the general question, Jesus gets more personal. The Greek of v29 puts a heavy emphasis on “*You*”, and the NIV, from which we are reading this morning, manages to convey that emphasis very well. The question comes as a personal challenge to them. It’s now time for them to make up their minds. As is so often the case in the gospel stories of Jesus, it’s Peter who speaks up for them. “*You are the Christ, the Messiah, the One anointed by God.*”

Even for of us who are relatively familiar with the story, that doesn’t mean a great deal. “*Christ*” is for most people more or less a surname for Jesus. It is so often attached to his name that we don’t really think about it. We may know that it is the Greek word for the Hebrew “*Messiah*”, but in our still vaguely Christian culture Messiah simply means a special person sent by God and we assume that’s what Jesus is. For the Jewish people of the first century – and even still today – the title “*Messiah*” held all kinds of powerful ideas. The Messiah was the person they’d been waiting for for many centuries. He had been foretold by the prophets and prayed for by the priests. Many people claiming to be the Messiah had come and gone, but expectations were high. And, as I say, still are. Talk to Orthodox Jews today, read the novels of, for example, Chaim Potok, listen to the religious news from time to time and you will find that there is still a great sense of expectation that the Messiah promised by the Hebrew prophets will arrive soon.

In Mark’s day there were perhaps three main expectations of a Messiah and different groups of people put more or less emphasis on each aspect. For some, drawing on the visions of Daniel and the apocalyptic prophets, the Messiah would be a heavenly judge who would come to earth and sort out the good from the bad in order to punish those who hadn’t lived as they should have done – which was pretty well all the Gentiles. For others, this Messiah would be a “*Suffering Servant*” figure, someone who would take on himself the woes and problems of the people of Israel and enable them to live the kind of life they felt God wanted them to. The passage in *Isaiah 53* is probably the passage most people would associate with that idea.

But at the time Jesus was living and preaching in Palestine the predominant image of the Messiah that was held was of a person who would come and restore the dynasty of King David, rebuild the Temple, symbol of Israel’s religious and political heritage, and forcibly expel the enemies of Israel – at this time, the Romans. In fact, that has been the predominant view of the Messiah down through the ages and even now it is thought (by those still expecting him) that he will drive all the Gentiles from Israel and cleanse it of any non-Jews. This was a political and military figure, but one who would by his actions restore the religious heritage – and the likelihood is that this is the main image in Peter’s mind. He knows Jesus is

the Messiah, but he has mistaken what the Messiah will actually be about. It links in with comments in the other gospel stories about making Jesus King and maybe explains why Jesus had such a great welcome in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. In the section we'll look at next time, we'll see that Jesus puts Peter right on this subject.

In the mean time, Jesus tacitly accepts the title of Christ/Messiah, but yet again commands silence. Just as he has done with some of the people he has healed, Jesus warns the disciples not to tell anyone about this. And I suspect it is for this every reason – that they have got hold of the wrong end of the stick about the Messiah's mission. Jesus doesn't want them going around blabbing about the Messiah, because people will expect him to be this forceful military and political leader who is going to drive the Romans from Israel and set up a new earthly kingdom. He needs time to explain what it's all about and to spell out the implications of that for those who choose to follow him. We must wait a bit to look at that.

The challenge that comes to us from these words is the question which Jesus puts to those disciples. He asks us this morning what we think of him. It's very easy and very handy to be able to spout other people's ideas, to suggest what others have said and written about him. In that sense we are doing what Hugh Anderson suggested the people quoted by the disciples were doing – *“labelling him in advance without encountering him.”* But the question is a personal one – **You**, what do **you** think of Jesus? Have you ever tried to make up your own mind? Have you taken the trouble to read these gospel stories about him? Have you ever prayed that Jesus would make himself know to you? If you haven't, but you'd like to, why not try our *Alpha* course? That's an opportunity to gather some evidence on which to base your answer to this question.

Most of you sit here week by week listening to stories of Jesus, singing songs to and about Jesus, praying to God in the name of Jesus. But what does he really mean to you? What difference does all this make to your lives from Monday to Saturday? You can't wriggle out of answering the question by quoting other people. *“But what about you? Who do you say that I am?”* If you come to the same conclusion as Peter, then there are some pretty serious implications of that for you. We'll start to look at those next time, but don't stop thinking about it in the mean time. For Mark this was the most crucial conversation of Jesus' ministry. It's the turning point of his gospel. It's the most crucial question you will ever have to answer – and it could be the turning point of your life. If you can't wait until next time and you want to do something about it this morning, have a word with me afterwards.

### **Questions for discussion**

1. What connotations does the word “Messiah” have for you?
2. How would you summarise the story of Jesus according to Mark up to this point in the gospel?
3. What do people say about Jesus today? On what do you think their ideas are based?
4. Why do you think Jesus commands silence after Peter's confession?
5. Mention was briefly made in the sermon of “being on a journey”. Do you find that a useful way of describing the Christian life? Why/why not?
6. What is the main thing you have learned from this passage?